The ecotourism metaphor and environmental sustainability in Kenya

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The ecotourism metaphor and environmental sustainability in Kenya

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Abstract

While to some extent there is disharmony in defining the term ecotourism, most tourism research agrees that the eco prefix is a definite pointer to environmental or natural resource management as a core value to the concept. However, the inherent gap between theoretical conceptualization of ecotourism as ''green practice expected to address adverse outcomes of conventional tourism'' and actual environmental impacts of this form of tourism raises the question of whether or not ecotourism in practice complies more closely with its defining criteria. In this regard, this article explores the term ecotourism as a metaphor for pro environmental behavior, uncovering its derivatives as constructed by tourism players in Kenya. The study covered five focal areas for ecotourism identified by the Ecotourism Society of Kenya, analyzing excerpts from hypertexts that operate at the supply side of tourism to read motivations for references to the term. The readings were then compared to The International Ecotourism Society definition of ecotourism which was taken as a neutral position. The findings revealed that environmental sustainability was an insignificant concern, as compared to product promotion and corporate image in informing the concept of ecotourism in focal areas. Consequently, the ''eco prefix'' metaphor in tourism is informed by economic and social logics, serving stakeholders other interests. The authors recommend a revisit to the practical basis of the concept for actors in ecotourism focal areas, with keen considerations to linguistic adequacies of the term's use.

Introduction—Ecotourism metaphors

Kenya's geographic landscape is an environmental resource that has been a boost to the country's tourism earnings, particularly for ecotourism whose core, according to Okech (2009: 2), "remains in National parks and reserves and their buffer zones." Honey (2008) singles out Kenya as a leading African country in experimenting with community-based conservation using park and tourism revenues and adopted the earliest efforts to systematically implement ecotourism principles in its national park systems. The ecotourism sector posts a speedy growth rate; in 2004, the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2004) mentioned that the sector was growing globally three times faster than

tourism industry as a whole. Like in the case of most other developing countries where tourism is the principal foreign exchange earner (Mastny, 2001), Kenya's tourism sector posts a steady income from international visitors who are mainly attracted to nature-based attractions closely related to ecotourism.

The nature-based attractions underpinning ecotourism, as well as other environmental resources worldwide, face a number of threats including harmful effects of climate change and environmental

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degradation. The specific case for Kenya is highlighted by Dapash and Kuday (2005: 5), who contend that "there is widespread and growing environmental damage resulting from tourism, as it contributes to forest depletion, water pollution, soil erosion, habitat destruction, wildlife harassment, economic exploitation, and cultural degradation of indigenous communities." Considering Kenya's ecotourism core base in national parks and their buffer zones, damages such as habitat destruction and wildlife harassment could to some extent be attributed to the same. Tourism itself has been a predator to the environment (Kruger, 2005), exerting unnecessary pressures and overstretching a destination's carrying capacity. Locally, the worst case scenario of tourism as a predator to environmental degradation was the effects of unplanned mass tourism as witnessed in Malindi, a popular destination at the Kenyan coast for international visitors. This case is specifically pointed out by Sindiga and Kanunah (1999) who reason that the problematic case of mass tourism effects on the environment in Malindi among other destinations in Kenya is due to strains to environmental carrying capacity limits. Studies also identify ecotourism as causing specific environmental harm (Gössling et al., 2009), as it generates a larger "carbon footprint" than other more traditional forms of holiday such as resort-based tourism.

Given the possibility of environmental harm from tourism, recommendations to address the concern of environmental sustainability are urgent. One way through which this is enabled is through the word "ecotourism," viewed in this article as a linguistic root to address environmental crisis in tourism, and consequently equated to the basis for environmental discourse. However, in this cause, a challenge arises, owing to split depictions of the environment on what is publicized by the theoretical concept of ecotourism versus its actual practice. As a theoretical concept, ecotourism is a quick fix metaphor to popularize concerns for upholding environmental values in responsible travel. A metaphor through the metaphorization process discussed by Asplund (2011: 2) "makes what is unfamiliar like climate change be familiar." In tourism, the use of metaphors for environmental sustainability is apparent in the "eco" tag attached to components of the tourism system.

From tourism businesses to destinations, attraction sites, tourism products, and visitors themselves, the eco prefix is attached as a metaphorical frame in Kenya's tourism discourse (Gitobu and Njoroge, 2015). It forms a visible pattern from products like eco safaris to facilities like eco lodges, as well as references to eco tours, eco operators, and eco destinations. This label in tourism bases its roots on the need to control the current environmental crises threatening the existence of some tourism products in the tourism ecosystem. While in such instances the eco label would purport to represent an effective diagnostic measure in matters of sustainable development, the safeguarding of stakeholder's other "interests" raises questions on the referential adequacy of the ecotourism metaphor and its derivatives in playing the eco card for Kenya's tourism. In a similar approach, Mihalic (2000) is skeptic about the "exact" motivations of ecotourists, since the so-called ecotouristic activities encourage increased use of natural areas and greater penetration into sensitive environments, thereby putting the prospects of indigenous tourism industries at risk.

Even though there are varied definitions of the term ecotourism, studies identify central and imperative issues to the concept as natural resource/environmental management, visitor satisfaction, economic empowerment, and community involvement (see Fennell 2001, 2003; Weaver and Lawton, 2007). Weaver and Lawton (2007: 1169) argue that "whereas a universal definition that everyone can subscribe to remains a distant prospect (and arguably a futile project), there is an emerging consensus of the inclusion of certain value-based dimensions such as conservation, community involvement, and social responsibility." These eco values are also enshrined in The International Ecotourism society's (TIES) (2000) definition of ecotourism as a form of responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people. For some scholars ecotourism marks out itself as a rival force to mass tourism (see Fennell, 2003; Gale and Hill, 2007), while for others nature-based tourism would pass as ecotourism (Newsome et al. 2002), manifesting in a range of environments from polar to tropical and terrestrial to aquatic (Gale and Hill, 2007).

Multiple attributions of meaning to the term in most cases would permit the delineation of ecotourism activities from their restrictive definitions and possibly put environmental resources at risk. Weaver and Lawton (2007: 1170) explain that criterion used for identifying values key to ecotourism leave ample room for interpretation, giving rise to ongoing deliberations about the appropriate parameters of each. An issue that is yet to be agreed on is the scale of operations of ecotourism (Table 1). Most tourism researchers agree that it entails small/minimal visitor numbers to a destination, but Luck (2002) comes out clear that ecotourism extends beyond that, identifying cases at the Kenyan coast where mass tourism operations fit within the description of ecotourism. Lawton and Weaver (2000: 41) also show that "ecotourism bears many close similarities to mass tourism and there is always not a clear line between ecotourists and mass

Table 1. Ecotourism definitions from various authors.

Author	Definition	Scale of operations
Lascurain (1996)	A resultant of the marriage between leisure travel to wilderness areas and the desire to protect the world's dwindling biodiversity	Small scale
Luck (2002)	Environmentally responsible travel, not limited to small-scale operations but may be possible for large ventures	Mass tourism
Cater and Lowman (1994)	A way in which increasing numbers of visitors can be accommodated whilst minimizing the cost and enhancing benefits associated with natural areas	Within confines of environmental-carrying capacity
The International ecotourism society	Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains well-being of local people	Small scale
Fenell (2003)	Concerns travel to a natural area; involves local people; feeds revenue to local environmental protection; and contributes to maintenance of local environment	Small scale
Boo (1992)	Nature tourism that promotes conservation and sustainable development	Not mentioned

Source: Authors own compilation from reviewed literature.

tourists." A contradictory remark between the two is that for Luck (2002) this mass activity involves responsible travel, while for Lawton and Weaver (2000), the mass engagement is uncontrolled.

Notwithstanding the range of meanings for the eco prefix in tourism, the Ecotourism Society of Kenya (ESOK) initiated an eco-rating criterion outlining suitable standards for certification specifically for the accommodation sector. Ideally, one has to conform to the four basic principles of sustainability: natural resource/environmental management, visitor satisfaction, economic empowerment, and community involvement. Actually, most tourism organizations consult such certification standards to measure up to ecotourism benchmarks. Font and Harris (2004) state that certification is a tool to reduce environmental impacts and gain competitive advantage. These two goals depict dueling positions of interest in chasing for certification, that of environmental management, and also that of economic interests in using certification as a tool for gaining competitive mileage. Thus, compliance to the basic principles of sustainability may prove to be a challenge if an appropriate balance is not struck between the two. Notwithstanding such a hurdle, the eco description is a worthwhile course and is up for grabs at all costs by a majority of tourism players offering accommodation services in Kenya. Indeed Font and Harris (2004) find out that assessment standards for certification are inconsistent and open to interpretation. This is a problematic issue especially with the possibility of environmental malpractices being disguised as eco-friendly when assigned eco labels. The Kenyan context is summarized by Ruhweza (2009), who questions why the certification scheme in Kenya misses on rating of

carbon offsets, yet it is an issue that poses significant environmental threats.

The eco prefix apparent in actor description in Kenya's tourism network is an indication of how the sector adapts to ecological insights. Nonetheless, the extent to which such linguistic descriptions can go in translating meaning to action has been subject to contestations (Ruhweza, 2009), with initial arguments that language is used as a code rather than a referential word put forward by (Haugen, 1966). Likewise, Fill and Muhlhausler (2001: 3) compare metaphors to searchlights that "selectively illuminate the terrain while leaving other sections in the dark." This would imply that any metaphors would have underlying meanings that relate to motives informing their conceptualization. In this regard, this article questions what the ecotourism metaphor does, engaging in eco prefix metaphors in Kenya's tourism industry. It also revisits their referential meanings as well as giving an insightful critique of particular stakeholder interests below the surface of specific ecotourism metaphors in use.

Methodology

This article takes a unique approach in categorizing the different positions through which ecotourism as a metaphor for environmental sustainability is constructed by destinations in Kenya. It used perspectives from accommodation, tours, and attraction sectors within destinations to understand metaphorical references of the term. Extracts from hypertexts that operate at the supply side of tourism were used to read the diverse meanings attributed to ecotourism in the selected destinations which are focal points for

ecotourism identified by the ESOK. The readings were then compared to TIES definition of ecotourism, which was taken as a neutral position.

Hypertexts are "a form of electronic writing" (Botler, 2001: 32), and also initially defined as "electronic documents read on the screen of a computer" (Botler, 1991: 21), or a Web-based text. Text refers to "data consisting of words, and/or images which have become recorded without the intervention of a researcher" (Silverman, 2001: 119). Hypertextual devices utilized were in the form of branding, intertexts, and photographs.

An ideological analysis of the texts was done to identify practices that underpin nature of ecotourism activities in Kenya. Key organization websites and relevant journals were searched for additional information. The value of textual data adopted for this study lays its role in revealing applications of multiple definitions of ecotourism given its seeming slippery meanings open to interpretation, illuminating factors that sustain the practice, and explaining the relationship between the derivatives of ecotourism in Kenya. Such information would offer appropriate links to effectuate sustainable eco practice in specific destinations. In this regard, we argue that adopting the metaphor of ecotourism has in part directed efforts toward environmental management, and its potential is far from being exhausted.

Eco representations of Kenya's tourism

The ESOK (2005) identified focal areas for ecotourism development in Kenya, which include Taita Taveta, Laikipia—Samburu, Amboseli, South coast, and Mara. Defining features for these areas are wildlife conservancies and sanctuaries. There are also ecotourism projects outside focal areas, for example, in Arabuko Sokoke at the coast famous for the Kipepeo project. Lake Nakuru national park and its catchment is also an area with great potential for ecotourism development, even though not listed as a focal point for ESOK. The park receives about 200,000 visitors per year, attracted to its ecotourism products which include biodiversity status of forest catchments like Eastern Mau, Eburru and Dondori forests, which are home to diverse bird species, and have been accorded Important Bird Area (IBA) status; Lake Nakuru is also home to famous flamingoes, and other water bird species, and other biophysiographical features in the catchment area, including the Menengai crater and Lake Elementaita.

Extracts from hypertexts

Magical Kenya is the official marketing site for destinations in Kenya. This site was checked for descriptions of the focal points identified by ESOK. The site doesn't specifically mention ecotourism, but captures the following attractions identified as focal points by ESOK: Samburu, Maasai Mara and Amboseli National Parks, and under wilderness areas. Diani beach in South Coast is linked to coastal activities.

Branding. The national parks featured on Magical Kenya website each has a special branding. Amboseli is branded as Kilimanjaro's royal court. Maasai Mara is the jewel of Kenya's wildlife-viewing areas. Samburu is described as rich in wildlife. In south coast, Diani is featured for its beach activities. Taita Taveta focal point doesn't appear on the site. The branding doesn't specifically mention ecotourism for the attractions, but their depictions relate to natural features, for example, wildlife and geographical features. Magical Kenya thus depicts the focal points as destinations for nature-based tourism. This depiction may be one sided in focusing on promotion of nature-based tourism products in the areas, and unknowingly cutting off links to responsible travel propagated for in ecotourism. Interestingly, Amboseli and Maasai Mara have been subject to research discussions on noncompliance with ecotourism principles.

The splendid Amboseli as a focal point for ESOK initiated the Porini ecotourism project. However, Western's (1997) reflections on the Amboseli Basin in Kenya prove that Porini project ignored the importance of community benefit in ecotourism development. "...why should local communities not become the principal beneficiaries and ultimate custodians of wildlife, as they had always been, without sacrificing the larger interest of society?" The implication here is that local communities are totally excluded from participation in ecotourism developments. Rutten (2002) contemplates on the root cause of community exclusion in purported ecotourism projects. "Partnerships in community based ecotourism conservations are still top down in nature, with approaches invented at the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) headquarters" (Rutten, 2002: 22). The author makes this statement in reference to the case of Amboseli, mentioning that ecotourism proposals rely on the private sector for development of conservancies in the areas. "The KWS failed to support the Maasai of Selengei at a most crucial moment—i.e. when negotiating a contract with a foreign tour operator during the creation of the Eselenkei Conservation area. . .. The core problem that led to many of the troubles was that there was no genuine motivation by the tour operator to develop the sanctuary for the benefit of local people" (Rutten, 2002: 22). Findings of the study conclude that the wildlife ecotourism project in Eselenkei is just a loss of land for the pastoralist community in Amboseli,

with large portions of economic gains channeled to the operator. On the other hand, Lake Magadi and Shompole group ranch conservancy projects in the same area are believed to benefit local pastoralist groups by diversifying their livelihood. Achieving benefits for the community continues to be a stumbling block for ecotourism development in Kenya.

From case studies of Maasai Mara Game Reserve and Amboseli National Park, Okech and Urmilla (2009) predict and warn of an incompatible future of conservation in ecotourism and economic exploitation. The authors caution on the use of visitor numbers as indicators for advances in ecotourism projects, proposing strong considerations of issues of capacity management to visitor areas. The convergence between the two contradictory terms (conservation and economic exploitation) has also been mentioned by Lawton and Weaver (2000). Instances where migratory routes of wildlife are lined up with convoys of touristic vans actualizes parks more as mass tourist destinations, as the term ecotourism destination plays just a descriptive role. Okech and Urmilla (2009) further describe a situation of impairment of ecological integrity by visitor use to the two attractions popular for their wildlife safaris and other ecotouristic activities. Arguing that "ecotourism projects lack strict management in their planning and implementation" (p. 63), they recommend appropriate mechanisms to be worked out through a multi stakeholder framework in decision-making.

Photographs. Pictures of the big five dominate marketing sites for the focal points, reinforcing the view of wilderness destinations for wildlife viewing and adventure travel. This is a calculated use of commercially viable imagery of the big five, aiming to appeal to the popular segment interested in wildlife-based tourism and maintain the high visitor numbers to parks. Game park visitation is a pull factor for many tourists to the country. Akama and Kieti (2007) estimated this number to be at 53%, while Ikiara and Okech (2002) put it at an average of 75%, ranging between 70% and 80%.

Other images document tribal cultures. Specifically, brochure links for conservancies on the site are keen on images of local cultural activities, for example, a Maasai community on Porini Amboseli brochure. It is clear that the images reinforce a message that cultural tourism and wildlife-based tourism are the key products for the focal points.

Another compelling visual symbol for responsible travel is the eco-rating badge displayed by award-winning accommodation facilities. Such facilities, for example, the Porini Mara camp and Porini Amboseli camp, are housed in the identified focal areas by ESOK. As the symbol for responsible travel rests with award badges for accommodation facilities in ESOK focal points, it is urgent to ensure that other multisectors of the tourism industry comply with principles of responsible travel. Specifically attractions for nature-based products, destination organizations, transport, and travel organizers in the destinations should spread out ecotourism beyond its confines in the badge.

Eco-rating of accommodation services is deemed to be centrifugal in diffusing eco values across the team of players in the stakeholder network. But does this centricity assure conformance to the core sustainability principles imperative to ecotourism by all stakeholders? For sure it allows for an ill-defined already-interpenetrating-meaning boundary between the derivatives of the eco metaphor. In this logic, a visitor staying in an eco facility is regarded as an ecotourist, and undertakes ecologically responsible travel activities.

Ecotourism has to be defined within the broader sense of a tourism structure, and not in a way that allows passive actors ride on eco values attached to a singular player in the network. The ecotourist should engage in responsible travel, target visits to eco destinations, where they engage in ecofriendly activities and get accommodated in eco resorts and lodges.

Intertexts. The "eco talk" is more visible in hypertexts for accommodation facilities sourced from brochures. This is the only instance where ecotourism features, through displayed ecorating labels and wildlife conservancy as related activity. Destinations are quick to market products other than ecotourism. Common activities listed by tour operators for most sites in ESOK focal points include adventure safaris, game viewing, nature walks, and camping.

For example, The Game Watchers, an eco award-winning Maasai Mara-based adventure camp, offers adventure activities that include game drives and nature walks in the Maasai Mara National Reserve. The operator was awarded by ESOK in 2010 for its dedication to responsible travel. A review by Okech (2003) shows that commitment to responsible travel has been the norm for tour operators in Mara and Amboseli, who "encourage the visitors to learn about environmental, social and economic realities faced by the locals through engaging in conservation projects" (p. 10).

Even though travel brochures do not give definitions of the word ecotourist, there is the hidden assumption that anyone visiting an eco destination or booking in an eco resort qualifies to be one. Eco destinations featured here comprise nature-based attractions, boasting of ecotours to ecological spaces and sensitive environments.

The excerpts discussed in this section, almost subtle on ecotourism, hint on varying interests in displaying the ecotourism banner. Unfortunately, the resultant view doesn't neatly fit within TIES description of ecotourism, as compromises are made in creating a balance on sustainability principles. Certainly the talks about ecotourism in Kenya are often situated in positions that are not disinterested. This is discussed in the subsequent section.

Positions in creating ecotourism

The excerpts studied from hypertexts unpack both conflicting and consistent descriptions of what ecotourism entails in focal areas. This implies external influences shaping the course taken by ecotourism in an area. Three distinct positions emerge in representations of ecotourism for the focal points identified in Kenya.

The product promotion position. This position is keen on natural imagery to sell wildlife-based attractions. The advent of ecotourism did not come with new tourism products, but rather the redefinement of existing ones. Ecotourism is also a way of rebranding a number of environment attractions that would previously appeal to tourist groups other than the responsible travel one. As such, adventure game drives are giving way to nature walks and ecotours, implying that success of the term depends on tourists' support for pro environmental behavior.

Marketing highlights for the country's eco destinations have an insidious interest in "wildlife experience" and encounters with traditional communities. For instance, most travel brochures list expeditions to nature-based attractions, packaged as safari as the main ecotouristic activity. Eco destinations featuring here are diverse, from reef-protected beaches at the Kenyan coast to inland forests in noncoastal destinations. Veiled as travelling green, main activities in the mentioned pristine environments include bird watching safaris in forests like Mount Elgon in the western circuit, fishing safaris and snorkeling at coastal zones specifically in Malindi, and luxury safaris in game reserves like the famous Maasai Mara in the south rift region.

Given such marketing approaches, ecotourists' expectations of the exploration adventures are heightened. Worth noting is that even consumptive adventures are sanctified in a brochure's emphasis to book with an eco resort as an automatic guarantee in upholding environmental protection. Since eco resorts are positioned as offering ecofriendly safaris, it is believed that the motivations of those who book with them have the best interest of eco values at heart. The eco tag is an attention grabber, definitely attracting

business and guaranteeing favorable ratings. Unfortunately the aforementioned flexibilities of central activities to ecotourism make its use more of publicity stunt for tourism businesses and destinations, with little considerations for eco values. In such instances the word is just a mere linguistic description which fails to accomplish eco values in its operations, a validation of Haugen (1966) claim of language being used as a code rather than a referential word. Mader (2002) speaks out a solution to this, emphasizing the need to move beyond mere definitions of ecotourism and concentrate on action.

The corporate greening position. This is a corporate social responsibility strategy showing an organization's alignment to environmental concerns. For Kenya's tourism organizations, this is best emphasized by eco-rating awards. An example is that of UNIGLOBE lets go Travel, which won the ecotourism enterprise of the year award in 2014, owing to its approach to corporate social responsibility, touching on support for community projects and travelers philanthropy. The awards convey a sense of environmental responsibility and sustainability, and at the same time appeals to the greenmarkets.

Apparently, the green business coding is a strategy used by developers of tourism products and facilities in their self-description as eco operators. From the understanding that ecotourism is green tourism, tours to nature-based attractions organized by such operators are categorized as green travel. An assortment of travel information reveals green travel would consist of village immersion and cultural visits, adventure camping, wilderness adventure, game walking and camel trekking (Table 2).

The green interest position. This standpoint was taken by most conservancies that featured in the studied hypertexts. With environmental sustainability at heart, this category carves out or responds to the green market segment. A case in point for this interest is the Touristik Union International (TUI), a large-scale operator at the Kenyan Coast. Luck (2002) uses this case to show how responsible travel (ecotourism) is possible with mass activity. Luck cites the case of TUI operating within a code of conduct at Robinson Club, Baobab in Malindi, Kenya. "TUI is Europe's largest tour operator with about 12.9 million pax in 1998/1999" (p. 362). Their operations are guided by an environmental strategy as they use an environmental database for planning environmental criteria for destination, hotel and carrier. The club is situated in a tropical coastal forest and engages in nature preservation. Lerner and Hagspiel (1999) as cited in Luck (2002) explain that only 2.5% of the total area of

Table 2. Travel information on ecotourism in Kenya.

	Green travel activity	Region	Eco attraction	Eco accommodation
1.	Luxury safari	South rift	Maasai Mara	Eco lodges
2.	Bird watching safari	Western circuit	Mt. Elgon NP	Camps
3.	Fishing safari	Coastal region	Watamu beaches	Eco lodges
4.	Snorkeling	Coastal regions	Watamu beaches	Eco lodges
5.	Village immersions	Western circuit	Mt. Elgon	Home stays, camps
6.	Camel trekking	North rift	Lake Turkana	Camps
7.	Adventure camping	Western	Mt. Elgon	Camps
8.	Cultural visits	South rift	Maasai Mara	Eco lodges

Source: Researchers own compilation from hypertextual data.

250,000 meters square is built on, and the whole area has been established as a nature preservation park with endemic plants, which are already extinct in other parts of Kenya's coast.

These positions do not exist in isolation, and may from time to time interact in sketching boundaries of what ecotourism should entail for organizations on the supply side of tourism. The green interest position serves best to fulfill TIES objectives in ecotourism, as compared to the other two. However, the choice on which position should be dominant is determined by organizations interests.

A number of parameters are involved in structuring ecotourism activities in Kenya. Since it is responsible travel, it requires action from a visitor who is referred to as the ecotourist. This kind of travel calls for ecotours to environmental and nature-based attractions which are hosted in an eco destination. For such activities, it is recommended to lodge in ecofriendly accommodation. Bandas[1] and home stays are nonconventional ecofriendly accommodation for emerging rural destinations in Kenya. In most destinations, there are a number of other businesses offering services to the industry and may be run by ecofriendly operators. These include travel agencies, tour operators, and transport companies. The eco prefix indicates that eco values are upheld in all approaches defining ecotourism, and is apparent in marketing texts among other tourism information.

Despite scant representation of the eco prefix in branding, texts and photographs, the label forms a visible descriptive pattern in Kenya's tourism discourse. This article finally questions the value of this description, given the absence of ecotourism in practice and in representation for the studied focal areas.

Interested motives and environmental sustainability

Even though at the narrative level the ecotourism metaphor upholds sustainable human interactions with the environment, political, economic, ideological, and social contexts are at play in the terms' construction and use. The core values of ecotourism encompass both economic and ecologic goals, given that the two feature in sustainability principles as natural resource management and economic enhancement. This attests that the ecotourism discourse serves particular interests, therefore "sticky" or resistant to change.

One way to look at the economic interpretation is through how it maps ecotourism as a market segment. For this segment, the tourism product is diversified from the popular coastal attractions to nature-based activities in inland tourist circuits. Obvious benefits to the country include a shift of tourism destinations from the unilocational coastal attractions to a discovery of nature-based attractions in other circuits. The economic logic, in search of economies of scale, usually entails a progress toward mass tourism which clashes with values of responsible travel. Caution has to be taken on the possible environmental threats of this situation that Cater (1993: 114) describes as tending toward mass tourism because it brings highly sensitive physical and cultural environments to the notice of a broader international market.

The ecologic goal is apparent the "ecotour" label attached to touristic activities which do not necessarily legitimize them as eco activities. For example, fishing expeditions constitute consumptive use of nature and may not be ecofriendly, yet they feature as eco activities promoted for destinations at the Kenyan coast. In such locations, there is also the depiction of snorkeling and scuba diving as ecologically irresponsible from critics who cite the physical damage to coral and reefs from the activities, while travel information downplays this malpractice shielding the activities under the umbrella of ecotours. The fact that similar activities do not encourage proenvironmental behaviors suggests that the ecotourism tag is basically being used to meet economic interests. Holden (2005: 130) explains that "this is achieved in most
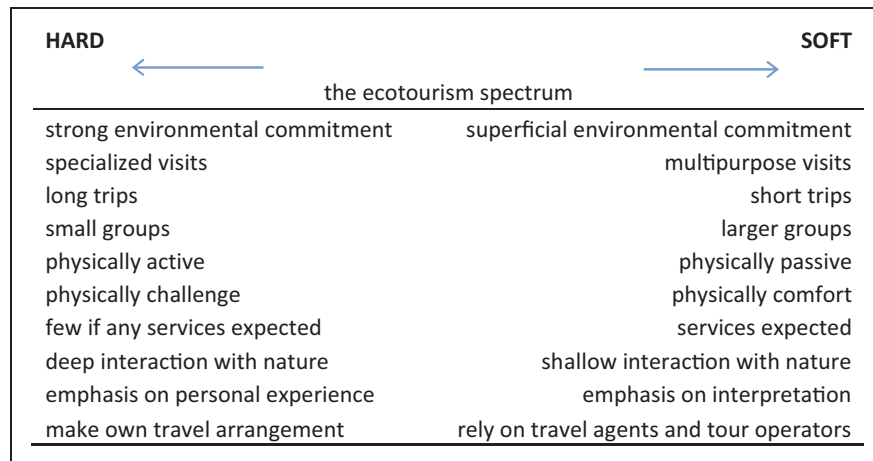
HARD	SOFT
←	→
the ecotourism spectrum	
strong environmental commitment	superficial environmental commitment
specialized visits	multipurpose visits
long trips	short trips
small groups	larger groups
physically active	physically passive
physically challenge	physically comfort
few if any services expected	services expected
deep interaction with nature	shallow interaction with nature
emphasis on personal experience	emphasis on interpretation
make own travel arrangement	rely on travel agents and tour operators

Figure 1. Characteristics of hard and soft ecotourism as ideal types.
Source: Weaver (2005).

cases by promoting the quality of the environment to attract international tourists," and not for the specific purpose of natural resource conservation.

Questions have been raised about the real motives of ecotourists, whether in their interactions with nature they support conservation. Weaver (2005) categorizes ecotourists' motivation in a soft–hard dichotomy. Motivation spelled out in marketing information for eco destinations in Kenya balances on characteristics of both hard and soft ecotourism types (See Figure 1). Echtner and Prasad (2003: 665) posits that "visitors to oriental countries are engaged in discovering, journeying, experiencing and indulging," implying that as ecotourists they relate more to the hard spectrum end. Physical activities stand out in mentions of wilderness attractions, while at the same time services are included in the adventure trips.

The social inadequacy of the ecotourism metaphor also stands out in the advancing of Kenya's ecotourism through conservancy land leases, in destinations such as the Mara ecosystem which feature predominantly in travel information. Is it ecotourism if it has gaps in eco values? Local community involvement and economic empowerment are the pillars put to question here. Taking the example of privatized land conservancies where wildlife experiences are packaged lucratively as ecotourism products, the discussion here revisits the concern put forward by Leisher et al. (2010) of elite benefit being a normal trend of conservation initiatives as in general. Indeed subdivision of Kenya's rangelands has tended to channel economic benefits to elites (Okello, 2005).

Armsworth et al. (2006) reckon that the buying or leasing of land for conservation displaces development pressure to neighboring areas, and this can destabilize conservation goals, especially if neighboring areas are of similarly high conservation value. Similar

sentiments were earlier on expressed by Sindiga (1999: 118), who observes that "local inhabitants are forced out of their traditional lands to give way to ecotourism projects such as parks." The task of ecotourism project development in most national parks and reserves in Kenya has been delegated to private investors, whose main motivation behind operations of privatized reserves are profits (Langholz et al., 2000). Rutten (2002) shows the absence of sustainability interests in discussing the case of Amboseli's ecotourism project, "The core problem that led to many of the troubles was that there was no genuine motivation by the tour operator to develop the sanctuary for the benefit of local people" (p. 22). On the contrary, Ramser (2007) shows direct economic benefits of ecotourism projects to local populations, giving the case of eco lodges in Laikipia providing employment for local people.

The interests in product promotion, corporate greening, and the green interest in Kenya reveal a very flexible definition of ecotourism. The term is redefined over and over again with priority needs given to economic gains at the expense of environmental costs and a balance in eco values evidenced by the supremacy in product promotion and corporate greening interests. Such an issue with metaphors is what Fill and Muhlhausler (2001) would term as an economically centered functional approach to language. Ecotourism is a corporate social responsibility strategy, saving the face of businesses through the greening code. This may constrain sustainability efforts, as environmental malpractices go unnoticed or cannot be questioned when cushioned with the eco tag. The ecorating logo is a booster for marketing, appealing to the unique segment of ecotourists who are high spenders.

Ecotourism is mostly sustained by visits to nature-based attractions, with wildlife safaris being among

popular activities. The positioning of ecotourism as a wildlife experience is a deliberate attention-grabbing attempt to appeal to interests of international visitors from source countries in the West. This is implicit in Rudkin and Hall (1996) view that the driving force for ecotourism in developing countries comes from "foreign donors, investors, academic institutions, consultants and conservation groups" (p. 223). Echtner and Prasad (2003: 660) confirm that "brochures for third world countries emphasize mythical patterns of unchanged, unrestrained and uncivilized, which represents a colonial form of discourse." The authors' analysis reveals that "main attractions marketed for Kenya are nature based like wildlife, parks, and landscape, and tourists are adventurous, explorers, nature lovers in atmospheres which are natural, pristine, strange, famous, or even best" (p. 664).

Ecotourism is also nourished by eco tags attached to different actors in the operator networks. The problem with ecotourism derivatives is their dissimilar focus on what values the eco label should uphold, owing to the possibility of having different stands (the product promotion interest, the corporate greening interest, or the green interest position) in conceptualizing ecotourism. Partly this is also as a result of unstable defining terms for ecotourism, which gives leeway to operators as well as tourists to promote irresponsible travel. There is room for redefining and readjusting the eco label as it moves along the derivatives, for example, from accommodation facilities to tour operators, primarily guarding individual business aims other than environmental protection. Liebert (2001) uses the everyday German metaphor "money is water" to show how metaphorical language is as a result of adjusting to different environmental conditions. Eco values have to be interwoven across all actors in the tourism network for sustainability of ecotourism. The central attachment of eco values to particular actors is not tenable given different motivations underlying the eco description.

Like the searchlights that Fill and Muhlhausler (2001) consider to selectively illuminate the terrain, ecotourism metaphor and its derivatives are strong counter statements that hide environmental costs of current practices through eco cleansing. For a country having suffered negative environmental impacts of tourism (Dapash and Kuday, 2005), the journey from irresponsible travel to a responsible one would be facilitated by metaphorization, which is a powerful tool in popularizing new concepts (Asplund, 2011). Metaphorization of ecotourism should make responsible travel familiar and recognizable for all industry players. However, with this form of tourism there are still environment sustainability threats.

There is the issue of eco certification, whose evaluation criterion doesn't entail carbon offsets for industry players. Carbon emissions and other forms of aerosol pollution from the industry are harmful to the natural environment. Care needs to be taken on such given the current worldwide concern of global warming and climate change.

What also appears to be lacking is a balance in conceptualizing eco values in ecotourism activities. Environmental protection should be given utmost priority as it leads the way to achieving other eco goals. Ecotourism projects are a response to calls for sustainable tourism practice in the country. As they strive for environmental protection, the projects are also in pursuit of economic objectives, and at the same time aiming for local community benefits. However, could the ventures be misinformed given Okech and Urmilla's (2009) prediction that economic exploitation and conservation issues pose an incompatible future?

In pursuit of economic goals, ecotourism developments put environmental resources such as land, fresh water and marine resources at risk. Increased visits to fragile environments exert pressure on natural resources and causes damage to ecosystems. Activities such as snorkeling and fishing practiced at the coastal ecotourism focal point can threaten fisheries and marine resources. Hall (2001) gives the example of anchor damage being a serious threat to coral reefs at the Caribbean Sea, as a result of the number of small boats and cruise ships sailing in the region. The same view was earlier on shared by UN (1999) about delicate ecosystems of small islands, together with their increasing reliance on tourism as a main tool of socioeconomic development, being at risk of environmental impact that would be particularly damaging since the success of tourism sector in these islands often depends on the quality of their natural environment.

The words "responsible ecotourism," as used by Neto (2003: 8), are an indication of possible deviations of ecotourism practice from environmental protection priorities. The aspect of responsible travel lacks in ecotourism, in many instances when nature tourism practices are equated to ecotourism with little or complete disregard to a balance in the eco values. Likewise, the Quebec declaration of 2002 acknowledges the possible environmental costs of ecotourism if the aspect of responsible travel is not put to keen considerations. The declaration, a 2002 consensus among tourism stakeholders, stresses that if carried out responsibly, ecotourism can be a valuable means for promoting the socioeconomic development of host communities while generating resources for preservation of natural and cultural assets. Environmental protection is of paramount importance especially with visitations to pristine environments. The life cycle of destinations for ecotourism in fragile environments is threatened, and its continuity highly dependent on environmental

protection which should be prioritized in ecotourism. Eco destinations in Kenya need to address issues of capacity management in parks, and consumptive activities in pristine environments.

For sustainability in ecotourism, action is what is needed on environmental protection and equal redistribution of economic gains, and Mader (2002) insists on projection beyond mere definitions of ecotourism. Current projects in the country have to overcome the hurdle of community benefits, and work on equal redistribution of revenue for ecotourism projects hosted in communal lands. A number of studies have pointed out to this hitch in ecotourism development in Kenya (Armsworth et al., 2006; Okello, 2005; Sindiga, 1999). Project developers should also put to question the inclusion of consumptive activities that could be detrimental to the environment in the scope of ecotourism.

The use of the word "ecotourism" in Kenya's tourism industry is informed by economic interests, given the predominant focus on corporate greening and product promotion as key thoughts in its conceptualization. Also ecotourism promises continuous supply of foreign exchange earnings to the country from visitors attracted to national parks. However, economic interests have been predicted to have an incompatible future with conservation goals (Okech and Urmilla, 2009). As such, this kind of departure for development of projects may not be sustainable in the long run. Tourism stakeholders need to rethink striking appropriate balances between key values central to the eco description in tourism.

As a metaphor, ecotourism has managed to stand out as an iconic representation for conservation initiatives in protected areas in Kenya. For ESOK's identified focal points, ecotourism is mentioned in conservancies like in Amboseli and Maasai Mara. The metaphor also informs responsible practice by operators and hotels in the industry, as it benchmarks standards to be adhered to through ecorating certification. These factors however have not enabled a solid grounding on responsible travel advocated for in ecotourism, given concerns raised on noncompliance to ecotourism principles for some focal points (see Western, 1997, and Rutten, 2002, for the case of Amboseli; Okello, 2005, and Okech and Urmilla, 2009, for the case of Maasai Mara). The term's slippery definitions facilitated by shifting positions in its conceptualization opens up space to redefine scope of activities within responsible travel.

Conclusion

The ecotourism metaphor is an environmental narrative with a face value aim of upholding eco significance in responsible travel. With a noticeable split between the green travel practice and possible environmental impacts of this form of tourism, reality dawns that the term's metaphorical references extend their meanings beyond implicated truths. An example given for this is the referential inadequacy in positioning consumptive use of nature in tourism as proenvironmental.

Possible reasons as to why eco activities do not comply to their defining criteria are identified. First, there is the issue of "interested" motives on the stakeholder's part in conceptualization and use of the term. From the supply side of tourism, ostensible economic interests may jeopardize efforts to uphold eco values through a return to activities similar to mass tourism. On the demand side, the real motives of ecotourists are put to question considering the fact that their visits to sensitive environments may disrupt existing ecosystems.

Second, the interpenetrating meaning boundary between the derivatives of the eco metaphor allows some actors to camouflage unsustainable environmental practices under the tag of an eco labeled actor. Here, the view that ecorating accommodation facilities will be centrifugal in diffusing eco values to other actors in the network misguides the fact that each of the derivatives of the eco metaphor has its unique definition.

Third, multiple attributions of meaning to the term in most cases would permit the delineation of ecotourism activities from their restrictive definitions. Travel information reveals that green travel consist visits to ecological spaces, but this doesn't necessarily imply endorsing eco values. This however does not dispute the fact that ecotourism exists in the country, with visitors engaging in responsible travel. Also unquestionable is that other related parameters conform to eco values depicted in metaphorical references of ecotourism.

Through ecotourism's derivatives, attempts are made to reach out to individual actors in the tourism network in promotion of responsible travel. However, stakeholders' other interests may guide the use and conception of the term, resulting in a high disregard for the theoretical basis of the concept of ecotourism. Moreover, the lazy accreditation of eco values to one actor for cross-diffusion to others in the network allows for self-description of eco operators in the remaining lot and misinterpretations of ecotourism's meaning. The effect of this is that eco tourism may pass as an ad hoc linguistic solution for the industry. For the country to maintain its pride as the world's best ecotourism destination there is the need to reconcile practical basis of the concept with actual references of the term.

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Note

1. Banda, is a Swahili word for shelter, or hut, adopted to refer to ecofriendly accommodation in tourism.

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