Communicative activities in community ecotourism in Kalimantan, Indonesia

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COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES IN COMMUNITY ECOTOURISM PROJECTS IN KALIMANTAN, INDONESIA

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Ecotourism, a term that first appeared in the 1970s to describe environmentally and culturally sustainable tourist activities (Honey, 2003), has become the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry, generating revenues between US$30 billion to US$1.2 trillion (West & Carrier, 2004). Numerous scholars have observed that the involvement of various industries, organisations, and communities demonstrate the complexities involved in ecotourism projects around the world (Honey, 1999, 2003; Patterson, 1997). Furthermore, the differences in social forces, governmental politics and regulations, marketing strategies, and accessibility shape the ways in which tourists, local communities, and national governments respond to the growing demand for ecotourism activities (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). These factors indicate a growing need to study the implications of ecotourism. Since ecotourism activities are primarily communicative events centred around educational programmes and centres, brochures and advertisements, and interpersonal communication between and among guides and tourists, understanding how such communication shapes experiences, reactions, and interactions is important for improving conservation efforts and relationships among various parties involved in ecotourism. In this essay, I outline some of the issues relating to ecotourism as a communicative-based activity in three national parks in Kalimantan, Indonesia, based on field research observations.

"While ecotourism is often used as a method to raise money for environmental protection or to create jobs, in these cases, ecotourist activities are more about the educational and communicative aspect for both the tourist and the local community. A number of studies have demonstrated that ecotourism often does not generate the types of funds or jobs expected (Bookbinder et al., 1998; Stern et al., 2003), so the primary focus on educational and communicative initiatives may be more important than actual income generated for local communities."

Overview of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is an often-used lay term to describe tourist activities that might include a number of outdoor activities, such as hunting, hiking, camping,
fishing, boating, white water rafting, motor biking, or scuba diving (Buckley, 2004; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Mossisch & Athrington, 2004; Warnken & Byrnes, 2004). However, numerous scholars have argued that this broad conception of nature-based tourism does not encapsulate the original usage of the term. For example, Weaver offers the following definition of ecotourism as:

a form of tourism that fosters learning experiences and appreciation of the natural environment, or some component thereof, within its associated cultural context. It has the appearance (in concert with best practice) of being environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable, preferably in a way that enhances the natural and cultural resource base of the destination and promotes the viability of the operation. (2001)

Goals for ecotourism endeavours generally include: 1) to provide first-hand experience with nature; 2) to promote environmental consciousness; 3) to avoid environmental degradation; 4) to foster local community involvement in conservation efforts; 5) to create opportunities for local communities; 6) to generate awareness of local cultures, and ecosystems (adapted from Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Honey, 1999, 2003; Weaver, 2001).

These objectives of ecotourism demonstrate that ecotourist activities can have a positive effect for tourists, local communities, and conservation efforts if planned, implemented, and managed effectively (Buckley, 2004). Héctor Ceballos-Lascurain observes “True ecotourism can be one of the most powerful tools for protecting the environment” (1996). On the other hand, ecotourism also has its drawbacks. Ecotourism activities can cause waste management problems, environmental degradation, introduction of exotic species, rural sprawl, erosion of cultural values, conflict between local communities and ecotourists, and finally, diminished economic opportunities, such as revenue leakage (Buckley, 2004; “Close encounters,” 2004; Liddle, 1997; Phillips, 1998; Stern, Lassio, Lee, Deshler & Schellhas, 2003; Weaver, 2001). For example, one study of ecotourism in Nepal reports that only 6 percent of 966 households surveyed earned income from activities relating directly or indirectly to ecotourism (Bockhinder, Dinerstein, Rijal, Cauley, & Rajouria, 1998).

**Ecotourism As Communicative Activity**

While most studies define ecotourism as activity-oriented, there are a number of ways to conceptualise ecotourism as a predominantly communicative endeavour. West and Carrier (2004) explain that ecotourism “encourages a particular way of knowing people and things in pertinent parts of the world and identifies appropriate sorts of action and inaction in a potent and even authoritative way” (2004). Ecotourists come to know the place before their trip through marketing, advertising, and educational literature (Crouch & McCabe, 2003; Kimmel, 1999; Patterson, 1997). For example, they might encounter appeals in travel books and magazines, tourist brochures, and nature-based television shows. Olatunji (2008) contends that marketing practices are essential for promoting eco and culture-based tourism in places such as Nigeria. These communicative practices influence potential tourists in their choice of destination and in how they interact once they have arrived at their chosen destination. Upon arrival, ecotourists engage in other communicative activities, such as guided tours, information centers, and park or site brochures (Omanchuk, 1995; Weaver, 2002; Mühlhäuser & Peace, 2001). Ecotourists communicate their perceptions and experiences with local people, other tourists, and upon returning home (Crouch & McCabe, 2003; Stamou & Paraskevopoulos, 2004). Ecotourism is largely a communicative activity that can have a powerful learning component, i.e., ecotourists often choose nature-based activities because they seek a learning experience about other parts of the world and ecosystems (Kimmel, 1999; Weaver, 2002). What they learn is based on communicative activities; that is, they learn from marketing and informational materials and from interactions with other people involved in ecotourism projects.

Furthermore, most definitions of ecotourism emphasise community or public participation and involvement in decision making and enactment of policies and activities (Diamantis, 2004), which are essentially communicative events among those participating in the development of policies and programmes. Learning based initiatives are also important for local people for many reasons, such as creating an environmental consciousness within local communities and providing training opportunities for park rangers and guides. Studies in Costa Rica indicate that conservation-based educational initiatives have more influence in attitude changes than do direct employment benefits alone (Stern, Lassio, Lee, & Deshler, 2003; Stern, Lassio, Lee, Deshler, & Schellhas, 2003). Vincent and Thompson (2002) conclude that ecotourism sustainability is more likely if local communities are involved in design and development of the ecotourism project and environmental programmes for the community. Thus, ecotourism revolves around communicative practices for ecotourists, local communities, and other involved parties.

**Ecotourism in Indonesia: Three Case Studies**

Indonesia, the fourth largest country in the world in terms of population, is comprised of some 17,000 islands, of which approximately 6,000 are inhabited. This island nation has numerous opportunities for ecotourism because of its ecological diversity, ranging from coral reefs, ocean ecosystems, mountains and volcanoes, tropical rain forests, and incredible species diversity, a large number of which are endangered. Given Indonesia’s size and extraordinary ecological diversity, Indonesia is an ideal location for ecotourism activities. Specifically, Kalimantan, consisting of four provinces on the Indonesian side of the island of Borneo, has vast rain forest coverage, and is home to orangutans, proboscis monkeys, gibbons, macaques, sunbears, and hornbills.
However, social unrest, poor infrastructure development, forest fires, and other causes of deforestation have discouraged visitors to this area, even though Kalimantan "has the potential to be the stronghold of Indonesian ecotourism" (Weaver, 2002).

The possibilities for ecotourism development have sparked a few groups to organise ecotourism projects that attract some visitors each year. I describe three such projects in three of Kalimantan’s most well-known national parks: Tanjung Puting National Park, Gunung Palung National Park, and Kayan Mentarang National Park. I visited each of these national parks on four different occasions from 2001-2009. Through ethnographic research approaches, participant observations, interviews, and textual analysis of promotional materials, I analyse how community organisations promote their ecotourism projects and what kinds of communication strategies they employ. Finally, I provide some general recommendations for these and other similar ecotourist projects.

**Tanjung Puting National Park**

Located in Central Kalimantan, this national park consists of approximately 415,000 hectares (1,025,487 acres) of heath and peat swamp tropical rain forest. It is the largest protected peat swamp forest in Southeast Asia (Tanjung Puting National Park Office, 1999/2000). It is estimated that there are as many as 1700 tourists per year, 90 percent of which are foreign, although forest fires and social unrest have caused a drop in visitors in recent years (Friends of the National Park Foundation, n.d.). However, Tanjung Puting National Park receives more visitors than any other national park in Kalimantan, in part because there is a considerable orangutan and proboscis monkey populations, both of which are endangered species. Other animals found in the park include clouded leopards, sun bears, civets, hornbills, crocodiles, and other species that are endangered or threatened.

One of the biggest draws for both international and national ecotourists is the location of primatologist Biruté Galdikas’ orangutan research site, Camp Leakey. Orangutan Foundation International, founded by Galdikas, works to rehabilitate and reintroduce confiscated orangutans. Thus, Camp Leakey has a number of reintroduced orangutans, providing visitors an easy opportunity to see orangutans, since most wild orangutans are relatively solitary and difficult to see or find. Orangutan Foundation International also provides opportunities for international tourists to travel to Tanjung Puting National Park for study tours, volunteer projects, and visitor programmes (“Orangutan tours,” 2004). These tour programmes are primarily a communicative activity, in that tourists and volunteers come to know this ecosystem and local people through interpersonal communication, interaction with others involved in the project, and information provided before and during the trip, such as website information, brochures, and books about Galdikas' research site. On site at Camp Leakey, there is a visitor’s centre.

which includes photographs and information about Galdikas, the research site, orangutans and other animals found in the park, and threats to the park. Visitors can also watch a video in a separate viewing room about Galdikas’s research. Information is offered in several languages, such as English, Dutch, Italian, German and French.

Another Indonesia non-governmental organisation, Friends of the National Park Foundation, also promotes ecotourism in Tanjung Puting National Park. This organisation is involved in orangutan reintroduction, and uses ecotourism projects to raise funds for park protection and orangutan rehabilitation. Education initiatives and ecotourism are two of their primary objectives (Friends of the National Park Foundation, n.d.). These non-governmental organisation activities focus on local community participation. They have also built an education centre, located in the park, near the village of Tanjung Harapan. This centre includes information and pictures about the park location, flora and fauna of the park, the rehabilitation process for confiscated orangutans, local, nearby villages, and conservation efforts to protect the park from illegal logging, gold mining, and other threats. Visitors and local communities come to know about the park and conservation efforts through these communicative activities, such as the information center and the brochures produced by Friends of the National Park Foundation.

**Kayan Mentarang National Park**

Kayan Mentarang National Park is located in the province of East Kalimantan, along the border with the Malaysian province, Sarawak. The park, consisting of 1,38 million hectares (3,410,094 acres), is one of the largest protected park areas in Southeast Asia. It was the first park to be collaboratively managed with the indigenous people of the area (Eghenter, Labo, & Ferrari, 2003; Eghenter & Sellato, 2003; Sutedja, 2003). The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has worked with local governments and communities to establish a protected area that included the vested interest of the local people. Because there are approximately 16,000 Dayaks who live in the park itself, their participation is vital to both environmental protection and education efforts (Eghenter & Labo, 2003; Eghenter & Sellato, 2003). The park is attractive to potential visitors for its vastness and relatively pristine forests. Whereas other national parks in Kalimantan have significant deforestation due to forest fires and both legal and illegal logging, Kayan Mentarang National Park has not been effected in the same way. The park also contains significant biodiversity, being designated as one of the world’s ten biodiversity hotspots (Eghenter & Labo, 2003).

WWF in conjunction with local governments and leaders have initiated an ecotourism programme that would enable visitors to travel through the national park area and benefit local peoples through monetary income. Since many of the Dayaks of this area traditionally have had a subsistence-based economy and still have little income earning opportunities available, the
The development of ecotourism has been an appealing alternative as opposed to moving outside of the Kayan Mentarang region where more jobs are available, often in neighbouring province of Sarawak in Malaysia. Because this project is still relatively new, communicative activities mostly include access to park brochures and informal education activities, such as speaking with local people and with representatives from WWF. The park brochure includes information about the flora and fauna, ethnic groups, archeological sites, forest day hikes and climbs, and longer expeditions (“Tana’ Tam Krayan Hulu,” n.d.). Ecotourists stay with local families in their homes, and may have the opportunity to see and participate in a number of local endeavours, such as traditional dances, salt making, and harvesting activities. In essence, the major communicative activities are informal, through meeting and talking with WWF representatives, park guides, homestay families, and other local people encountered.

Gunung Palung National Park
This national park is located in West Kalimantan, consisting of 90,000 hectares (222,395 acres) of mostly mangrove forest. The park is home to orangutans, proboscis monkeys, gibbons, sun bears, deer, hornbills, and other animals. In conjunction with the local governments and Indonesian non-governmental organisations in West Kalimantan, the Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Programme has been working to protect the park from extensive illegal logging and deforestation that threatens the extinction of many species, including orangutans. One contested issue is the number of transmigrants from other parts of Indonesia who have moved to the area (Dove, 1998; Sunderland, 2002). Transmigration has been blamed for increasing population pressures that in turn increase the demand for forest products, land clearing for farms and plantations, and other employment opportunities.

The park has been home to major research sites for the study of the flora and fauna found in the park. Thus, there is a revolving population of foreigners who have worked to protect the park and hence their research sites. A number of foreign and local tourists visit the park each year through assistance with the national park office, in Ketapang, West Kalimantan. One major attraction is that visitors are able to see wild orangutans, since researchers track a number of orangutans, and are thus aware of their locations on a daily basis. Environmental communication activities have been more fully developed for local people, especially for students and teachers. For instance, the Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Programme sponsors communicative events that include school visits and lectures, teacher training workshops, local conservation committees, development of an educational curriculum module in conjunction with local teachers, and field trips to the national park for both teachers and students (“Program Konservasi,” n.d.). The three day field trips provide students and teachers the opportunity to learn scientific observation methods, to see various animals and plants, and to experience their (usually) first visit in the national park (“Field Trips,” n.d.). Thus, although these projects are not specifically labeled ecotourism, they are communicative activities that employ the same methods that ecotourism projects are encouraged to endorse and provide for visitors.

Lessons Learned: Positive Implications of Ecotourism
The three ecotourism projects described here have a number of lessons to offer to other start-up projects, particularly in Indonesia, but also for programmes around the world. First of all, these programmes are small-scale projects that employ ecotourism as a way to communicate to tourists and students about the flora and fauna found in each park, environmental protection issues in Kalimantan, and the local people who live in and around these parks. While ecotourism is often used as a method to raise money for environmental protection or to create jobs, in these cases, ecotourist activities are more about the educational and communicative aspect for both the tourist and the local community. A number of studies have demonstrated that ecotourism often does not generate the types of funds or jobs expected (Bookbinder et al., 1998; Stern et al., 2003), so the primary focus on educational and communicative initiatives may be more important than actual income generated for local communities. While the people involved in each of these projects may hope to generate income for local communities or environmental protection, they also recognise that small-scale ecotourism has the benefit of building up larger programmes and providing a significant adjustment period for all of the people involved. Furthermore, these projects do not target foreign tourists, but also seek to educate Indonesian tourists and local communities. Importantly, redefining the goals of ecotourism around communication strategies that educate international visitors and local communities is a key component of each of these projects in these three national parks.

A second implication from studying these projects is the inclusion of the local people on a number of levels. Too often, ecotourism is thought of as an educational benefit for the ecotourist (usually foreign) and a financial benefit for the local people. In each of these cases, there is substantial focus on including local people, ranging from collaborative management of the national park in Kayan Mentarang to educational initiatives that focus predominantly on local people in the Gunung Palung National Park area. In the latter case, local people become the ecotourists themselves. Since many ecotourism projects cater largely to foreign tourists (e.g., see Walpole, Goodwin, & Ward, 2001), a large number of Indonesian students and teachers visiting the park is significant. For foreign tourists, these projects offer the educational initiative of not only learning about tropical ecology, but also about Dayak and Indonesian cultures. The educational component of each of these programmes relies heavily on interpersonal communication through guide services and social interactions, which provides tourists an opportunity
to get to know local people in ways that are not as available in areas that are more frequented by tourists. Furthermore, each park is the focus of tourist activities; there are no other tourist attractions, so ecotourists must engage fully with the people and the park. There are few, if any, bars, alcohol, drugs, or beaches, avoiding some of the pitfalls of sun, sand, and sea tourism.

Finally, each of these projects does not use ecotourism as their primary conservation strategy in their efforts to protect the national park area and the flora and fauna within its boundaries and adjacent areas. Although numerous scholars have noted that ecotourism has much potential to offer resources and educational experiences that foster environmental protection, most of these scholars also recognise that in many cases, ecotourism has not lived up to this potential (see Honey, 1999 for further discussion). An important lesson learned from each of these projects then, is that ecotourism should not be the top priority in environmental protection, but rather one of many activities that works in conjunction with a variety of other programmes, organisations, and the government. The organisations discussed here that work for environmental protection do not see ecotourism as a solution to the problems associated with park management, deforestation, or community relationship problems, but rather part of a larger conservation programme.

**Potential Pitfalls of Ecotourism in Kalimantan**

Although there are many positive aspects of the ecotourism projects described here, there are also a number of potential problems that new ecotourism projects should seek to avoid or address. To begin, an influx of visitors often means an increase in unanticipated activities, such as environmental degradation in the form of trash and sewage. For instance, ecotourists may desire certain items, such as bottled water, packaged food, or even toilet paper that are not used by local communities. However, many local communities in and around these three parks are not well-equipped to deal with the disposal of plastics, toilet paper, and other waste. Another potential problem is visitor impact on wildlife. Especially in the case of Tanjung Puting National Park, where there is a significant number of reintroduced orangutans, visitors can have a potentially harmful impact because these orangutans are often drawn to human visitors, climbing on them or taking their possessions and food. This constant contact with human visitors may slow the reintroduction process and could possibly introduce human diseases to this orangutan population (“The Wanariset Orangutan Reintroduction Project,” 2001), to name just a few of the issues associated with ecotourism and reintroduced wildlife. Consequently, environmental organisations and ecotourism operators should take care to communicate to tourists about the disposal of non-biodegradable waste and avoiding contact with orangutans. Yayorin, another local environmental non-governmental organisation in Pangkalan Bun, near Tanjung Puting National Park gives each tourist a list of “Dos” and “Don’ts” for visiting the park, cautioning that violations of these rules can result in the cancellation of the trip to the park. Other groups should follow their lead in preparing and informing tourists about these important guidelines to follow.

Another potential problem associated with ecotourism is the possibility for cultural conflict between local people and ecotourists. Although the extended interaction with local people is also a benefit, it can depend on the type of person who visits the local community. Generally, people who engage in ecotourism are interested in a positive learning experience, but some tourists have a flagrant disregard for local values and customs. In addition to the “ugly Westerner” syndrome, foreign tourists may be ignorant about local customs, and unintentionally disrespect local people. In communities where tourism is sporadic and not the primary means of income, the arrival of ecotourists can have the effect of disrupting the community for the length of the ecotourists’ stay (Dilly, 2003). Ecotourists also may increase the work burden for Indonesian (and Dayak) women who may be more likely to cook and clean for the visitors than the men in the communities (Husien, 2002). Other infrastructure problems relate more to the foreign tourists’ expectations for housing, sanitation, and sewage systems. While these “problems” are more related to expectations and expectations, foreign ecotourists may find that their inability to adapt to local circumstances impedes their educational activities and enjoyment of the entire experience. Advance preparation and training programs for both tourists and local community participants could greatly facilitate some of these problems that arise. WWF in the Kayan Mentarang National Park has offered training programs for its staff who live in the park; other organisations should ensure that proper training is provided for their staff who work with tourists. In addition, organisations working with tourists should also prepare tourist guidelines for not just minimising environmental impact, but also for interacting with local people in appropriate ways.

As the ecotourism activities in each of these national parks in Indonesia demonstrate, ecotourism can have profound and long lasting educational benefits for local people and foreigners, but also can have some unexpected consequences. Based on these studies, start-up ecotourism projects should plan carefully before initiating ecotourism. Ecotourism requires extensive preparation, both on the part of the people involved in a local community or national park area and by the potential tourists themselves. Organisations involved in ecotourism projects can rectify some of the pitfalls of ecotourism by creating extensive guidelines for visitors and for local communities in what they should expect in their interactions with each other. Effective communication among parties involved, such as local communities, local governments, and ecotourists, is essential in developing beneficial programmes.
Endnotes

1. The reintroduction of orangutans is the result of the large number of orangutans kept in captivity, often as pets in Indonesia and other countries around the world. ("Final report," 2001; Yeager, 1997). There are several reintroduction centers in East and Central Kalimantan, including the project associated with the Tanjung Puting National Park.

2. The term Dayak is an ethnic name used to refer to the various indigenous groups in Kalimantan. Dayak sub-groups may have different biological or social connections to other sub-groups, yet they have been linked together under this umbrella term. In the past two decades, the term itself has been more widely used among the Dayaks themselves (Dove, 1999).

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