Expectations, Experiences, and Memories: Ecotourism and the Possibilities for Transformation

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Expectations, Experiences, and Memories: Ecotourism and the Possibilities for Transformations
Stacey K. Sowards

This essay explores how ecotourism destinations and media materials rhetorically construct ecotourists’ anticipations, experiences, and memories through ethnographic and rhetorical analyses. Using theory related to phenomenology, this study examines how expectations are formed through rhetorical tropes such as the sublime, the exotic, and the dangerous adventure. In turn, these expectations direct attentions towards specific experiences and memories. However, because ecotourism activities become critical experiences with other natural and social worlds that supersede everyday practices, these events have the potential to foster critical awareness of self, other, the natural world, and practices related to traveling, shaping the environmental self and identity.

Keywords: Ecotourism; Traveling; Environmental Identity; Phenomenology; Expectation; Memory

Ecotourism generally refers to a subgenre of the tourism industry that focuses on an appreciation for the natural world and includes activities such as trekking, hiking, wildlife watching, camping, fishing, rafting, or scuba diving (Buckley, 2004; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Such travel-related activities have become immensely popular for European and North American tourists traveling to countries such as Costa Rica, Nepal, Mexico, and Indonesia, particularly in (so-called) developing world countries (Honey, 1999). Ecotourism’s goals are to provide an experience with nature, to prevent environmental degradation, to connect with local people, and to improve cultural and environmental awareness (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Honey, 1999, 2003; Horton, 2009; Weaver, 2001). Given these goals, ecotourism can have positive benefits for conservation, local communities, and tourists, especially
when local people are involved in business development and conservation efforts (Buckley, 2004; Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996; Horton, 2009). However, ecotourism is not without its problems related to increased environmental degradation through water pollution and trash as well as cultural conflicts and misunderstandings between tourists and local people (Horton, 2009; Sowards, 2010; Stem, Lassoie, Lee, Deshler, & Schelhas, 2003).

Ecotourism activities are shaped by communicative practices in how ecotourists prepare for their travel, experience such activities, and record their memories. Ecotourists’ travel plans are shaped by the materials used to prepare for travel, which might include websites, brochures, nature-based television shows, and travel guidebooks (Crouch & McCabe, 2003; Kimmel, 1999; Patterson, 1997; Sowards, 2010; Todd, 2010). During travel, ecotourists participate in tours, visit information centers, and learn about the places they visit through local materials (Mühlhäusler & Peace, 2001; Osmanchuk, 1995; Weaver, 2002). In addition, ecotourists also discuss their experiences with other travelers and people they encounter during and after their visits (Crouch & McCabe, 2003; Stamou & Paraskevopoulos, 2004). Ecotourism activities can become powerful learning experiences given that many ecotourists seek out such experiences to learn about the environment and other cultures (Kimmel, 1999; Weaver, 2002). However, West and Carrier (2004) also 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” (p. 485). Ecotourism then, is an industry aimed at promoting cultural and environmental awareness, yet travel can also result in disruption of local people’s lives and environments.

Since ecotourism activities are primarily communicative events and embodied experiences, understanding how such communication shapes expectations and experiences is important for improving conservation efforts and relationships among ecotourists, local communities, and others involved in the ecotourism industry. Using an autoethnographic, field research approach, I draw from my own expectations, experiences, and remembrances in my ecotourist excursions to Monteverde, Costa Rica, the Copper Canyon in Chihuahua, Mexico, and Kalimantan and Sulawesi, Indonesia. These localities were chosen because of their primary focus on developing an ecotourism industry rather than more traditional forms of tourism. I visited each location twice with different groups of people, spending several days each time taking field notes, collecting materials, and speaking with my fellow travelers and local people in each area. Such ethnographic approaches and “participant observation can enhance the ability of rhetorical critics to understand the experiential, embodied, and ephemeral aspects of place (re)construction” (Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011, p. 278). Although much could be said about whether or not ecotourism projects in these regions meet theoretical definitions of ecotourism (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996; Honey, 1999, 2003; Weaver, 2001), my concern is to explain the rhetorical implications of how ecotourists anticipate, experience, and remember ecotourism activities and to understand and problematize how ecotourists understand their environmental selves, the world around them, and their interactions with local people.
In the rest of this essay, I build on scholarship related to ecotourism and advocacy tourism (Crouch & McCabe, 2003; Milstein, 2008, 2009; Pezzullo, 2007; Rojek & Urry, 1997; Todd, 2010; Weaver, 2002; West & Carrier, 2004), by suggesting that the tourist experience is defined by expectations and memories (Crawshaw & Urry, 1997). As Blair (2001) observes, the effort put forth in touring creates an expectation of specialness, and it is when experiences exceed or disappoint that we have possibilities for transformation in how we perceive of ourselves, others, and the environment.

**Constructing Expectations, Experiences, and Memories**

Although the term expectation is used frequently in communication studies, most uses of expectation do not theorize how our expectations are shaped rhetorically or how we move from unconscious expectations to conscious anticipations that guide our experiences. To understand how these expectations are formed, I.A. Richards (1976) uses the term feedforward to describe anticipation: “Whatever we may be doing, some sort of preparation for, some design arrangement for one sort of outcome rather than another is part of our activity” (p. 247). Dennis Rohatyn (1969) further explains that “predictions furnish directives to action, or indicate the guidelines which should be followed in order to secure future pleasures” (p. 235). In the process of communicating, people develop anticipations based on prior experience and what they know about the world. Kenneth Burke (1961) notes that “If every moment in life were totally different, if there were no patterns, then you would not be able to anticipate the next moment” (p. 7). In this sense, then, feedforward is an anticipation that is a key component of our motives for interactions and experiences with both people and the natural world.

In the process of creating anticipations, we also (re)construct our experiences, memories, perceptions, and our identities. Jacqueline Martinez (2000) contends that communication processes construct consciousness of the self and the broader world: “Somewhere in this mutual construction, persons experience themselves, others, and the world. In taking up communication, in whatever context and through whatever means, persons create experience—consciousness—and have the possibility of self-consciousness” (pp. 6–7). James Cantrill et al. have described these experiences as essential for the creation of the environmental self (Cantrill, 1998, 2004; Cantrill, Thompson, Garrett, & Rochester, 2007). As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2004) further explains, perception shapes the embodiment of experience through un/sub/conscious judgments. The cyclical relationship between perception and expression is further explicated by Burke’s (1968) concept of terministic screens in which our perspectives are shaped by our reflections, selections, and deflections of reality. Discourses focus our attentions, shape our expectations and perceptions, and influence how people interact with each other and their environs (Abram, 1996).

The experience itself, while shaped by expectations, is also constructed through presence. Pezzullo observes that it is the sense of presence that attracts participation in the experience as “the structure of feeling or one’s affective experience when certain elements—and, perhaps, more importantly, relationships and communities—in
space and time appear more immediate to us” (Pezzullo, 2007, p. 9; emphasis in original). Tourists embody the experience through physical activity, sounds, smells, taste, and even physiological responses such as an adrenaline rush (Pezzullo, 2007; see also Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010) and potentially painful or uncomfortable physical experiences such as sweating, dehydration, sleep deprivation, physical discomfort, bodily injury, and strenuous movement.

As experiences end, they become memorialized in our minds, writings, photographs, and conversations with others. Memory scholars in communication have often focused on collective and public memorialization (e.g., Irwin, 1973; Kelshaw & St. John, 2007; Phillips, 2010; Reyes, 2010; St. John & Kelshaw, 2007; Zelizer, 1995, 2004). Kelshaw and St. John (2007) observe that memory studies tend to focus on three themes in which memory is viewed as cognitive, relational, or public/cultural. This essay focuses on how individual memories contribute to collective memories in mediated texts, as our recollections are distorted and reconciliated versions of reality (Cox, 1990). Tema Milstein (2008) contends that tourists focus on the meaningfulness of the experience, even when tourists say that “there are no words” to describe their experiences (p. 181). This attention to what is meaningful is shaped by what we already know, as pre-experience or vicarious experience, which in turn shapes what we remember (Cantrill, 2004; Cantrill et al., 2007). Bowman and Pezzullo (2010) further explain that “Negotiating memory is not just about preserving history, but also about shaping the present and the future” (p. 194).

Furthermore, memory of experience and expectation shapes the environmental self, particularly when ecotourists are confronted with their own contributions to environmental degradation, pollution, and cultural conflict. As Trinh Minh-ha (1994) suggests, “Every voyage can be said to involve a re-siting of boundaries” (p. 9), since “traveling perpetuates a discontinuous state of being” (p. 21). However, some ecotourists problematically lack the ability or desire for such reflection: “status-seeking Northern ‘egotourists’ may be particularly intrusive and disruptive of local cultures precisely because they seek out more remote and ‘untouched’ travel destinations” (Horton, 2009, p. 95). At the very least, “travel is felt to be self-improving . . . Travel makes you more interesting to yourself, certainly, but not necessarily to others” (Todd, 2008, p. 58).

**Expectations of the Sublime, Exotic, and Dangerous Adventure**

Ecotourists engage in some kind of research before traveling or touring, which help potential tourists to decide where they want to go, what kinds of activities they want to participate in, where they will stay, what kind of food they will eat, how they will relate to the natural environment, and who they will encounter. Texts that I have perused before traveling to Mexico, Costa Rica, and Indonesia include the Lonely Planet guide book series, documentaries, *National Geographic*, and other travel magazines, all of which feature numerous photographs and descriptions of outdoor activities and logistical information about ecotravel. In addition to these texts, upon arrival in each location, I also acquire local brochures, magazines, and other
materials. In analyzing these texts, three primary rhetorical themes emerged: *the sublime, the exotic,* and *the dangerous adventure.* These themes serve as examples of how such tourist literature directs our attention to and constructs our desires for the consumption of distant locations, illustrated by my own travel experiences that were shaped by these texts.

*The Sublime*

One of the most prominent features in ecotourism promotional materials is the use of the sublime. DeLuca and Demo (2000) define the sublime as an image or vivid description that invokes an intense reaction inspiring astonishment related to the passions of fear or horror. When sublime images are commodified and disseminated, the sublime takes on aesthetic ideology “that transforms the very experience or event into a way of seeing” (DeLuca & Demo, 2000, p. 244). As Christine Oravec (1996) further explains, “sublime discourse, whether it is verbal or visual in its form and medium, is an integral part of the way we perceive nature, act with reference to it, and construct its relationship to ourselves” (p. 58). In the widely used travel guidebooks published by Lonely Planet that I always purchase before traveling anywhere in the world, authors use photographs and descriptions of places in sublime fashion. Lonely Planet’s *Borneo* features a photographic section on national parks in which photos show a river flowing through a rain forest, a climber at the top of Borneo’s tallest mountain, one of the authors climbing a tree, a small boat traveling on the river, and the rafflesia, “the world’s largest flower . . . emitting a stench of rotting meat to attract the flies” (Rowthorn, Cohen, & Williams, 2008, p. 8). A few pages into the *Costa Rica* guidebook, the reader finds a wildlife guide that features pictures of insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and animals (Miranda & Penland, 2004). Through these images, the viewer comes to understand that ecotravel will entail sublime experiences through wildlife or mountain climbing in locations that inspire astonishment and make those places special.

This approach, with vivid pictures and descriptions of natural scenery and wildlife, is a common practice in travel literature that constructs desire for travel. Two other examples illustrate how such texts influenced my own travel expectations: A *National Geographic* photographic essay (Kaufman, 2005) and promotional material (“Manado”) from North Sulawesi, Indonesia, feature beautiful photographs of marine ecosystems. These materials, that inspired my own travel to Bunaken National Park (field notes, June 2005), show several pictures of fish and pristine coral in a beautiful island setting with magnificent sunsets, ostensibly setting the stage for the experience of a lifetime. These examples, typical of sublime representations for ecotourism travel, suggest that visitors will easily be able to see awe-inspiring forests, experience spectacular coral reefs, and encounter numerous fish or large animals. DeLuca and Demo (2000) contend that the domesticated sublime, viewing or reading about nature from the safety of home, and technological sublime, the use of the camera to provide “a god’s eye view, presenting an image more real than real,” contribute to how audiences are
shaped through sublime ideologies (p. 248; see also Oravec, 1996; Todd, 2010). Photographs or textual descriptions direct the audience’s attention to these images that construct particular realities.

The Exotic

Although Western tourists participate in ecotourist activities in their own countries, the development of the term ecotourism to designate travel to the so-called developing countries illustrates the rhetorical shaping of the exotic in ecotourism promotional materials. As Shugart (2003) contends, the relationship between the researcher and the Other, and in the case of this study, the foreign tourist in developing countries, is fraught with the “appropriation of the experience of Other” (p. 278). The focus on the exotic also relates to what Phaedra Pezzullo calls the “counterexperience” of everyday life and embodied activities that rely on the physicality of presence: “tourism involves the visiting of someone else’s everyday life” (Pezzullo, 2007, p. 36). International ecotourism destinations intensify difference by focusing on travel not only to another country, but to another environment, such as rain forest habitat inhabited by indigenous people who speak a rare language and live a romanticized version of subsistence from forest productivity.

The connection between the natural world and exotic indigenous people is featured in many ecotravel literature and images. For example, a World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) poster says “Discover the hidden treasures of Kayan Mentarang National Park” and features “river adventures,” “trekking in wild forests,” and “village life and cultural traditions” with photographs of a gibbon, pristine forests, a waterfall, and small thatched roof houses that are home to local ethnic groups who live within this national park. Pictures also show several people dressed in traditional costumes for dance competitions and hand-made products such as baskets and a painted shield. WWF’s brochure features similar photographs and language, but with more detail about the park, the local people, and ecotourist activities:

Tourists can choose between short-distance trekking to Buduk Sia, Buduk I’rei, and long distance expeditions following the trails that connect the villages in the Krayan, and across the border to Malaysia... through primary forest, grasslands, and old village sites of the Saben people from the Upper Krayan to the Upper Bahau area, and on to Sarawak. (WWF Kayan Mentarang Office, n.d.)

Indeed, this poster and brochure that promote ecotourism through the exoticization of the local people, the primary forest, and wildlife are the very materials that sparked my own interest in visiting Kayan Mentarang National Park, in addition to a meeting with the Executive Director of WWF in Indonesia (field notes and Agus Parnomo, personal communication, December 14, 2000; field notes, August 1, 2002). The images suggest an exotic adventure in both ecotourist and cultural activities that offer a counterexperience to daily home life, which I experienced as I traveled in Kayan Mentarang National Park during the summers of 2002 and 2003.

Travel guides also consistently feature exoticization of nature and people. The Copper Canyon in Mexico offers another example, one that has been featured in
documentaries, travel literature, and guidebooks. The Copper Canyon in the Mexican state of Chihuahua is home to the Rarámuri who inhabit various villages in the canyon and along the famous the famous Chihuahua-Pacifico (Chepe) railway. The Mexican Government has produced a series of travel magazines for each of its states that are available in numerous tourist locations, which I purchased and carefully read before visiting the Copper Canyon in March 2007 and 2008. Chihuahua's travel magazine features numerous pictures of the Rarámuri and beautiful photographs of the canyon’s vistas and natural landscape. The Rarámuri, it is explained, do not live in homes, but rather live in their natural environs or in caves. The women wear colorful and full ankle length skirts as well as shawls and head scarves that make them instantly identifiable in photographs of Chihuahua’s cities and rural communities (Pomar & Cháirez Alfaro, 2002; Rodríguez Aguilar & Cháirez Alfaro, 2002).

The ecotourist is often not just looking for a counterexperience, but the exotic, the place where few have traveled and people who live completely different lifestyles. The photographs of the Other rhetorically construct desire for consumption of the exotic. Ecotourism activities also help ecotourists to distinguish themselves from other kinds of tourists, as Minh-ha (1994) observes: “One among some fifty million globe-trotters, the traveller maintains his difference mostly by despising others like himself. I sneeze at organized tours, for the things I see in the wild or in the remote parts of the world, are those You can’t see when You abide by prepaid, ready-made routes” (p. 22). Minh-ha further explains that “the blindness and myopia of the tourist, whose voracity in consuming cultures as commodities has made hardship and adventure in travelling a necessary part of pre-planned excitement rather than a mere hindrance” (p. 22). It is the desire for the consumption of exotic locations and the cultural and environmental Other that shapes the anticipation of an ecotourism destination.

The Dangerous Adventure

Travel guidebooks also discuss at length the potential problems and adventures one might encounter in their travels. These issues help the reader to understand that dangers or problems exist in the areas that seem pristine in photographs, but these very dangers are part of the enticement and counterexperience to everyday life of the tourists’ home. For example, in Lonely Planet’s Indonesia guidebook, informational tips and problems a tourist might face are addressed in the “Facts for the Visitor” section at length (Turner et al., 1995, pp. 97–141) and a section called “Environmental Hazards” (Vaisutis et al., 2007, pp. 884–887). These sections include basic information about appropriate clothing, food and water safety, and dangers, such as theft, insect bites, and parasites. In addition to these safety and health concerns, the Costa Rica Lonely Planet guidebook also features dangerous nature-based activities such as white water rafting, surfing, sea kayaking, volcano climbing, and forest trekking (Miranda & Penland, 2004).

These warnings construct a set of expectations for tourists, which may facilitate their preparations in traveling. Yet, these texts also construct other places like
Indonesia as potentially dangerous, where a tourist might be victimized by crime, exposed to tropical diseases, stricken with food poisoning, or injured while participating in an ecoactivity. Lonely Planet’s Indonesia guidebook also includes a section that highlights terrorist bombings in Jakarta and Bali, the 2004 tsunami, violent conflicts in Maluku, Palu, and Papua, and problems with discontent and unrest (Vaisutis et al., 2007). This rhetorical construction of danger fosters the anticipation of travel to such a place precisely because of the seemingly inherent dangers. After all, the ecotourist almost by definition seeks adventure and counter-experience. Because the perception that Indonesia is dangerous, travelers who do travel to Indonesia are able to create a traveler identity as adventure seeker, in the simple responses of family members, friends, and colleagues who might question them for traveling to a perceived dangerous location, as has often been my experience in preparing for travel to Indonesia, Costa Rica, and Mexico.

The idea of ecotourism in much travel literature also promotes the idea of adventure, often alongside the dangerous. For example, in the documentary Orangutans with Julia Roberts, Roberts travels to Indonesia to see the rain forest; in one scene, she narrates what it feels like to be in the forest:

> It’s the sound that hit me first ... I’ve known since I was a child that forests are strange and magical places, but I hadn’t realized what hard work it all is. It’s hot and oppressive, even when the sun has to fight to get through the thick canopy a hundred feet above my head. But when I first came on this trip, one of the things I was really looking forward to was the whole idea of walking into the forest and just seeing all these animals everywhere I looked, birds and orangutans and frogs and all kinds of activity. (Jackson & Cole, 1998)

This documentary promotes a sense of adventure in following Roberts from New York City to Tanjung Puting National Park in Indonesia for her first trip to see orangutans and their rain forest habitat. After watching this documentary several times, I also visited Tanjung Puting National Park. Like Julia Roberts, I rented a houseboat and traveled in Tanjung Puting National Park, as portrayed in this documentary (field notes, June 25–29, 2001; July 2–4, 2009).

The construction of expectations in ecotourism is illustrated through these brief examples of the sublime, the exotic, and the dangerous adventure. Although there are certainly other expectations that ecotourists develop in the process of learning about place and preparing for journey, these examples represent some of the prominent themes in ecotourist/tourist literature about ecotourism destinations, which also shaped my own desire to travel to these destinations. Texts, conversations, and programs about ecotourist destinations shape potentialities for environmental identity and self as such communication practices direct our attentions to sublime, exotic, and dangerous adventure expectations. Anne Marie Todd (2010) argues that magazines, such as National Geographic, portray landscapes and people through images and accompanying narratives that construct the armchair tourist as protagonists, experts, and heroes, creating an anthropocentric distance. Even though there is possibility for seeing the world in new ways, these texts also reduce the experience to what is on the page or screen, limiting how people respond to such
materials, making the experience itself potentially more enriching as well as more problematic when ecotourists interact with environments and people. The way the self identifies in a place is based on “past experiences and relationships with the environment [that] color the ways in which we view the world around us, influence what we attend to, and motivate us to act in typically self-serving ways” (Cantrill et al., 2007, p. 126).

**Expectations Shaping Experiences**

Presence allows the ecotourist to experience beyond expectations, in that the experience itself cannot be fully described in words or images; experiences exceed expectations through astonishment, disappointment, or surprise. It is these moments when our expectations are not met that possibilities exist for new consciousnesses, transformations, and identities as mismatched expectations and experiences create opportunities for self-reflection and awareness about the world. For example, one of my traveling companions in Indonesia attempts to explain how the camera cannot fully embody the experience of presence:

> One cannot look at a rainforest, one is enveloped within it and the senses can only absorb pieces of it at a time until a feeling of the whole is achieved. Attempting to photograph it is like trying to take a picture of an automobile from within. A hundred pictures pieced together would only show the parts from a single perspective. (Sowards, 1997, p. 18)

Paradoxically, the audience learns from this text that it is impossible to fully explain the experience, even as the author attempts to contextualize his own presence through words. As Tema Milstein (2008) explains, wildlife tourists report that they have no words to describe their experiences, resulting in speechlessness, silence, or spirituality of the experience.

Similarly, before I visited the Copper Canyon in the Mexican state of Chihuahua (March 2007 and March 2008), I had seen numerous photographs and descriptions that influenced my decision to travel there. I knew that the Copper Canyon is four times larger than the Grand Canyon in the USA (Noble et al., 2004), but when I actually saw the Copper Canyon, its expansiveness still surprised me. None of the sublime pictures or descriptions prepared me for what I actually saw and physically experienced, such as the vastness of the mountainous canyon, the cold air and high elevation, or the adrenaline rush from walking out over a lookout point (field notes, March 11, 2007). However, my perception of the vastness of the Copper Canyon was also shaped by my expectations, knowing that I was supposed to be amazed and impressed by the Copper Canyon because of the texts and images I had already seen in travel magazines. Merleau-Ponty (1958) explains that such intense experiences can have an unsettling effect that forces us to think in new ways. As this experience illustrates, sublime images and narratives cannot completely capture the experience itself, which may exceed the expectation through embodied presence.

On the other hand, as Oravec (1996) rightly notes, experiences can also disappoint: “We travel to see the sights that we have become familiar with in pictures or
descriptions, and we are less than satisfied if our preconceptions are confirmed. Oddly enough, however, it is often the scenery, not the representation, that dissatisfies us” (pp. 59–60). Finnegan (2001) further clarifies that photographs function as “naturalistic enthymemes;” that is, viewers presume the images in photographs are real. One of my most common disappointments is that my photographs never look like the photographs that I see in coffee table books, guidebooks, magazines, or other promotional materials. These sources provide abundant, up-close photographs of wildlife, and yet, I have rarely seen that wildlife in my ecotravels. For example, I wrote in my Costa Rica field notes:

I went to the Monteverde Cloud Forest with a guide, because I really wanted to see some animals/birds, I didn’t want to get lost, and I wanted to learn about the forest . . . [However,] the trails in the park are well developed, so there’s really no chance of getting lost, so I guess I didn’t really need a guide for that, and we didn’t really see much. (field notes, June 11, 1998)

My own photos of the Costa Rican quetzal, the Indonesian hornbill, and orangutan compared with those that appear in National Geographic require extensive explanation because these animals barely visible amongst the trees. I want my photographs to look like the professional photographs in National Geographic, yet I have neither the patience nor equipment to capture such images (Costa Rica field notes, June 11, 1998; Indonesia field notes, August 11, 2005).

Another example of disappointment relates to environmental degradation. Ecotourists may come to realize that ecotourism locations are not always well-protected habitats in pristine condition. Guidebooks, magazines, and documentaries often discuss the environmental issues in various locations, yet the ecotourist’s attentions and anticipations are focused on a certain kind of experience, one that does not involve environmental degradation. Even though I was certainly not disappointed by my 2001 and 2009 trips to Tanjung Puting National Park in Indonesia, large areas of the park and near the park have been destroyed by illegal loggers and gold miners (field notes, June 24–29, 2001). For example, I visited a large area called Aspai near Tanjung Puting National Park in which the topsoil had become sand from logging and gold mining activities (field notes, June 28, 2001). In visiting Bunaken National Park in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, I found plastic bottles, bags, and other trash floating in the ocean, marring my image of pristine coral reefs even though I knew about the trash problem before visiting (field notes, August 11, 2005). Even though this was a valuable learning experience about deforestation and coral reef destruction, the idyllic portrayal of scuba diving in untouched coral reefs and hiking through pristine forests was not what I anticipated from the documentary featuring Julia Roberts (Jackson & Cole, 1998) that I had watched before traveling to Tanjung Puting National Park or the National Geographic feature (Kaufman, 2005) that I had read before visiting Bunaken National Park. Although texts construct what we are supposed to look for, presence helps us to more fully understand and contextualize such problems.

Each of these examples serves as my own counterexperiences to my daily life as a professor in the USA, illustrating how ecotourists in general seek out these
counterexperiences and how those experiences may or may not conform to their expectations. Ecotourists also separate themselves from other kinds of tourists, in that they are seeking educational and environmental advocacy opportunities. While there is much debate about appropriate forms of ecotourism and whether they promote conservation and cultural respect because ecotourists have developed the expectation in advance, they are conscious to some extent of environmental problems and cultural appropriateness in ways that mass tourists are often not. For example, when I visited the town of Creel near the Copper Canyon in Chihuahua, Mexico, my group participated in a tour of local area attractions, which included a visit to unique rock formations and the cave dwellings of the Rarámuri and Tarahumara. The local museum exhibit noted that these indigenous groups have a communal culture and houses are used only when weather is hostile. Yet, my tour group’s arrival to visit their cave dwellings was marked by our own awkwardness and shame in the “tour-of” rather than “tour-with” approach, despite our tour guide’s encouragement to enter the cave (field notes, March 11, 2007). This “tour-of-place” creates an Othering distance through the outsider’s gaze. The people in my group felt this sense of Othering acutely, and most of us decided not to enter their homes even though we were invited to do so by the tour guide. Although the ecotourist may not achieve the kind of environmental and cultural awareness that conservationists or academics desire, as Peterson and Peterson (2000) explain, environmental terministic screens sort our experiences with nature and can offer possibilities for critical reflection, altering our environmental selves and identities. As I have argued elsewhere, such experiences can enable us to bridge the divide between nature and culture (Sowards, 2006). My own identity in thinking about nature and culture has been transformed through my ecotourist and researcher experiences with orangutans and elephants in Indonesia, rain forests in Costa Rica, and desert landscapes and the Rarámuri of Chihuahua, Mexico. I have also seen my travel companions, including family members, friends, and students, experience similar moments of profound alterations of identity and self.

Memorializing Experience Through Traveler Identities

Tourists also make efforts to record their experiences in various ways, most commonly through photographs and conversations, but also through postcards, letters, emails, journals, videos, souvenirs, and storytelling (Lury, 1997). As Martinez (2000) argues, each experience shapes consciousness that leads to expression. Experience with the sublime, the exotic, and the dangerous adventure allows ecotourists to shape a particular kind of identity related to what Cantrill (2004) calls the environmental self that “exerts a strong referential effect in focusing attention and stimulating memory” (p. 158). In sharing experiences of travel in locations such as Southeast Asia or Central America, tourists select experiences that foster that person’s idea of who they want to be; as Irwin (1973) explains, “memory is the mortar of identity and the scaffolding of character” (pp. 22–23). Merleau-Ponty observes that the physical embodied experience is not always why we choose to
experience the natural world: “I endeavour, not to be in nature, but rather to win the recognition of others” (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 513). The idea that we might travel to experience nature for the recognition of others is illustrated in tourists’ efforts to remember their experiences through activities such as purchasing souvenirs and sending postcards to those at home. Sharing those experiences is about how ecotourists establish a certain kind of traveler’s identity for friends, family, colleagues, and others.

That traveler’s identity is constructed through memorializing the experience, even if that experience failed to meet expectations. Jeannette Monsivais (2007), who traveled to Monteverde, Costa Rica with me in 2006, offers this example of our attempts to see the quetzal:

I thought our encounter with the quetzal would be magical. I imagined we would become lost during one of our hikes in the cloud forest, and just as we had given up, the quetzal would suddenly appear and lead us out. Of course, neither event took place, but a few days later, in the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve shop, I would discover my excitement over the Quetzal was not connected to the actual bird . . . I realized I was more impressed with the image of the quetzal, what it represented, than I was with the actual bird. (p. 38)

Monsivais illustrates how expectations have influenced her experience and how she will tell this story to others upon returning home, also effected by the availability of quetzal souvenirs and postcards for ecotourists. My own reaction to seeing the quetzal is similar to Monsivais’s in that we ironically staged a picture of our group looking for the quetzal through binoculars, rather than taking a picture of the bird itself because it was barely visible even with binoculars (field notes photograph, July 23, 2006). When I traveled to Costa Rica in 1998 and spent two weeks looking for the quetzal to no avail, the anticipation of finally seeing the quetzal in 2006 made the experience itself almost fantastical. Part of that fantasy is being able to claim an ecotraveler identity as one who has seen the elusive quetzal in the rain forests of Costa Rica.

How we remember and what we choose to tell others can also exceed and erase parts of the actual experience. Crystal Robert (2009), who traveled to Indonesia with me in 2009, describes her experience several months after we returned:

Although I can honestly say that it was one of the more uncomfortable times in my life, it was also by far the most rewarding. We traveled by river, docking at several parts of the rainforest, where there were orangutan-feeding sites. Gliding by orangutans at these locations drove home the fact that our accommodations were so beyond our usual comfort levels . . . I feared that if I finally stopped writing about my time in Indonesia, it would just be filed away in my memories, a souvenir that would fall to the bottom of a junk drawer. (pp. 20–21)

In my own notes, I wrote that “I saw a medium sized male orangutan in a tree, very near the river edge; probably wild because it was on the non-park side of the Sekonyer River. Also, I saw hornbills, 3 crocodiles, 5–6 kingfishers” (field notes, July 3, 2009). In my own recounting, seeing wildlife was very important to me, and part of the exotic adventure narrative that I told myself and other people. Robert’s (2009)
narrative and my own illustrate both the importance of remembering and how we remember, particularly in how she concludes with the possibilities for transformation: “Despite my short time there, it brought home the fact that I know I can always make a difference in the world by acknowledging the cultures and environments of others” (p. 21).

From my own travels as an ecotourist, many memories of natural and cultural differences stand out in my mind and field notes as transformative experiences, such as the Rarámuri cave dwelling experience in Chihuahua, Mexico. Other memories also shaped my thinking about power, privilege, and perspective, such as the time I felt cheated by my guide in Gunung Palung National Park in Indonesia and I tried to negotiate for a US$10 reduction in price (field notes, July 20, 2002). This incident and others remind me of cost of living, class status, and lifestyle differences, in addition to cultural understandings of what it means to be cheated, a lesson that I have reflected on many times since then. This experience reflects the importance of Shugart’s (2003) discussion of the critical researcher’s ethics in trying to understand and write about those who are not like us and to consider the ways in which we objectify, essentialize, and fetishize in the moment of touring as well as in the reporting and memorializing of travel.

More positive and transformative memories are related to outstanding hospitality in Mexico, Costa Rica, and Indonesia; I cannot imagine US Americans taking a group of foreigners into their homes as I have experienced in so many ecotourist locations. During my two-week stay in Long Bawan, Kayan Mentarang National Park, Indonesia, my traveling companions and I spent entire days learning about forest ecology, rice harvesting and production, traditional farming techniques, and food and cultural practices with community members (field notes, September 6–13, 2003). Their hospitality reminds me of what it means to be part of a community and how life in the USA can become fraught with ideologies of individualism, even as I recognize simultaneously that this is a romanticized notion. Reyes (2010) writes that collective memory scholarship discusses how memorializations help us to achieve unity, and yet it is the role of difference that makes us remember: “memory is a medium for the negotiation of present and past, identity and alterity, self and other” that enables difference to constitute identity in how we become (p. 236).

Conclusion

Definitions of ecotourism tend to include the importance of generating awareness of local people and ecosystems in ecotourism destinations, in addition to promoting environmentally sustainable tourism (Honey, 1999). Unlike mass tourism, ecotourism projects promote cultural and environmental awareness and advocacy as well as participation in outdoor activities in natural environments. I.A. Richards (1976) argued that “the quality of our conduct may depend on the character of our feedforward” (p. 251), which functions as “celebrated open-mindedness, the suspension of judgment” (p. 250). Our expectations about ecotouring are also an ethical principle about suspending judgment when we encounter texts, people, or
places that can shape our thinking. “It is true that often knowledge of other people lights up the way to self-knowledge” (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 215). Ecotourists may be more oriented around this self-consciousness, even though they are also limited by their cultural and environmental expectations.

However, ecotourism projects rarely are able to meet all ecotourism goals, leading to some negative and potentially disastrous consequences. For example, 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, gendered division of labor, and diminished economic opportunities, such as revenue leakage (Buckley, 2004; “Close encounters,” 2004; Simon Devung, personal communication, August 6, 2002; Horton, 2009; Nani Husein, personal communication, August 6, 2002; Sowards, 2010; Stem et al., 2003; Weaver, 2001). Furthermore, most definitions of ecotourism emphasize community participation in decision making and policy adoption (Diamantis, 2004), but is often not a significant component of many ecotourism projects, even though scholars contend that such participation is essential (Stem et al., 2003; Vincent & Thompson, 2002). In most locations, much work needs to be done to foster conservation and cultural consciousness in ecotourism activities. An important question remains, then, because ecotourism can enable greater understanding of the world, but can also be detrimental. From my perspective as an ecotourist, ecotourism offers the possibilities for self-transformation and environmental and cultural awareness. I have also talked to many Indonesians and Costa Ricans who work in ecotourism industries about their views on ecotourism. Many people have responded positively, by noting how they enjoy meeting people from other countries, participating in outdoor activities, and promoting their culture and locality. Very few people have given a negative assessment, although I mostly have talked to people who are likely to speak of the positive aspects of ecotourism, since they work in the industry. However, the tension between the cultural and environmental benefits and disadvantages of ecotourism is not easily resolved, and tourists should carefully consider their ecological and cultural impact before traveling, if at all.

Ultimately, ecotourism can have a transformative potential for the tourist, because “tourists are always in the process of becoming, precisely through the process of learning” (Pezzullo, 2007, p. 40). While expectations are a key aspect of rhetorical practice, cultural and environmental learning may enable the tourist to suspend judgment, maintain an open mind, and develop a consciousness of self-reflexivity. Recognizing the power of expectation and its influence on experience, memory, and identity can enable us to think more critically about touring and traveling. Although this disruption of identity is fragile and subject to possibilities of Othering, traveling can also open up the potential for transformations. Ecotourism, and its counterpart, mass tourism, are fraught with problems, but understanding how rhetorical practices shape and influence tourists’ own descriptions, behaviors, experiences, expectations, and memories may help foster consciousness of who we are and our impact in the world.
The connection between expectation, experience, and memory of ecotourist activities is closely tied to what ecotourists hope to achieve by participating in such tours and what motivated them to travel in the first place. Expectations rhetorically constructed before traveling influence what ecotourists attend to and remember, and experiences can exceed and disappoint in ways that shape memories and identities. Because the study of environmental communication is often rooted in a particular place and community, how we come to understand our expectations, experiences, and memories of such locations and people is essential in recognizing our own perceptions and roles in such studies. As Pezzullo (2007) explains, “being present as a mode of advocacy suggests that the materiality of a place promises the opportunity to shape perceptions, bodies, and lives with respect to the people and places hosting the experience” (p. 9). David Abram (1996) notes that a new environmental ethic can emerge through our perceptions rooted in experience; this study of expectations, experiences, memories, and identities is of particular importance for environmental communication scholars and activists who do field work, textual analysis, and community engagement. Since all kinds of texts and interactions shape our expectations, experiences, memories, and identities, examining how these concepts intersect and work together is critical for understanding ourselves, others, and the natural world.

References


