DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Author

Holly Marie Donohoe

Affiliation of the author

President, CLEER Consulting Inc.

Contact details of the author

CLEER Consulting Inc.

3710 Richmond Road, Suite 202J

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K2H 5B8

E-mail: holly@cleerconsulting.com

Title of the dissertation

Breaking the barriers: Making ecotourism culturally sensitive in a global community

Supervisor

Prof. Dr. Marc Brosseau

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

This study examines the evolution of ecotourism and the emergent ‘cultural turn’ in the ecotourism discourse. It is informed by antecedents who call for definitions and measures to assist ecotourism stakeholders (professionals, researchers, policy-makers, communities, tourists) to ensure that culture is not compromised during the ecotourism experience, that barriers to cultural sensitivity are identified and appropriate action is taken, and that sustainable outcomes result. The purpose of the research is to develop a contemporary framework for culturally sensitive ecotourism. Through consultations with a global network of ecotourism experts, key ecotourism tenets are identified, a cultural sensitivity definition is developed, and when integrated, they comprise the contemporary framework. The utility of the framework for assisting the ecotourism community to ‘break the barriers’ and operate with understanding and integrity, to be sensitive to local and Indigenous communities, to protect cultural heritage and living cultures, and by extension, operationalize sustainable development, is explored.

Methodology

This study draws on a comprehensive literature review, including the content analysis of academic and professional publications in English, French, and Mandarin, to trace the evolution of the ecotourism concept and to identify tenets common to the contemporary definitional discourse. It is complimented by the application of the Delphi technique and the judgement of ecotourism experts on the importance of cultural sensitivity (a neglected definitional theme identified through review and analysis) for ecotourism. Over the course of six months, 167 experts from over 40 countries were consulted and a consensus definition for culturally sensitive ecotourism was developed. The Internet served as the primary medium for Delphi administration.

Theoretical conclusions

The results of the research reveal an evolving understanding of the contemporary ecotourism paradigm and the import of cultural sensitivity in the cultural mosaic of the global community. Through the identification of key tenets, the development of a consensus definition for cultural sensitivity, and the integration of these key results, a contemporary framework for culturally sensitive ecotourism are introduced. The framework is conceptual by design and its utility for 'genuine' and 'culturally sensitive' ecotourism evaluation has yet to be assessed. The framework embodies the transformative capacity of ecotourism, it captures salient themes and issues, and it contains an embedded mechanism for cultural sensitivity in the global community.

Practical application of the dissertation

As ecotourism continues to expand into increasingly remote and sensitive natural and cultural areas, guidance is required to ensure that ecotourism delivers sustainable ends. In consulting the world's experts, a conceptual framework is developed and its salience is established through analysis. Theoretically, it is meant to break the barriers related to definitional confusion and lack of consensus regarding what ecotourism is, is not, and should be. Substantively, the framework provides a strong and explicit foundation for the development of ecotourism generally, and culturally sensitive ecotourism specifically. This may include regulations, policies, programs, codes of ethics, or education and training modules. The framework may also serve as a research tool for such purposes as the evaluation of ecotourism operations (case studies) or the comparative analysis of ecotourism across cultural and geographical boundaries. Finally, it is hoped that it will serve to inform the contemporary ecotourism discourse related to ecotourism and cultural sensitivity. Given that this is an emergent issue and that knowledge in this regard is evolving, the framework offers a theoretical basis for 'breaking the barriers' through ongoing debate and praxis.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of chapter one

This introductory chapter outlines the theoretical and methodological foundations of the research. The thesis purpose and objectives are described and the papers-based thesis structure is addressed.

Abstract of chapter two

In this chapter, a content analysis of ecotourism definitions is completed and tenets central to the contemporary discourse are presented.

Abstract of chapter three

This chapter examines the east-west divide in contemporary ecotourism research and it questions the universalizability of ecotourism definitions developed in Western contexts. Cultural sensitivity is introduced as a necessary concept for moving the contemporary ecotourism paradigm forward.

Abstract of chapter four

In this chapter, the results of a comprehensive review of the Delphi technique are introduced. Methodological characteristics, advantages, potential problems, solutions, and best-practices are explored as the basis for chapter five.

Abstract of chapter five

This chapter presents a consensus definition for culturally sensitive ecotourism and it identifies potential barriers and opportunities associated with its implementation in the ecotourism industry.

Abstract of chapter six

This concluding chapter synthesizes the key findings from Chapters 1 through 5 and in doing so, introduces a conceptual framework for contemporary ecotourism. Theoretical, methodological and substantive contributions are described and recommendations for future research are made.

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