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Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition

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A rise in the popularity of ecotourism has coincided with voluminous definitional discourse. Amongst stakeholders, confusion has resulted from the disparate nature of these definitions. In the absence of a common definition or set of key tenets the challenge has been to ensure operational ecotourism that adheres to the theoretical underpinnings of the concept. Without some semblance of definitional consensus, ecotourism may be on a precarious course whereby the ethics upon which the activity is conceptualised, the natural environment upon which the activity depends, and the legitimacy of the industry are at risk. The ambition of this research is to disentangle a set of themes from the evolving definitional debate in order to provide a framework for the development of ecotourism policy and applications. Recurring themes are identified through the application of content analysis methodology to select contemporary definitions. Those themes that appear most frequently are then introduced as an ecotourism conceptual framework based on key tenets. The tenets are meant to represent a set of established fundamental beliefs central to ecotourism: (1) nature-based; (2) preservation/conservation; (3) education; (4) sustainability; (5) distribution of benefits; and (6) ethics/responsibility/awareness.

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Introduction and Context

Since its inception, ecotourism has consistently grown and is now widely considered the fastest growing sub-component of the world's largest industry – tourism (Dowling & Fennell, 2003; Fennell, 2003; Hawkins & Lamoureux, 2001; WTTC, 2004). The proliferation of ecotourism has generated interest from a multitude of stakeholders because it attempts to satisfy seemingly disparate conservation and tourism development ends (Weaver, 2005; Wight, 1993a). As a result, even scholarly interest has become fashionable with researchers actively engaged in the mounting complexities and confusions associated with this tourism type from a myriad of perspectives (Weaver, 2005). Despite such engagement, nearly 25 years after the first definition of ecotourism was published and since the subsequent appearance of a plethora of others, there remains little consensus among experts and a great deal of confusion about its meaning (Björk, 2000; Blamey, 2001; Honey, 1999; Hvenegaard, 1994; Mowforth, 1992). While it may be argued that the abundance of descriptive themes and the lack of definitional consensus is characteristic of the broader tourism discourse, these diverse interpretations

of ecotourism are causing a myriad of difficulties for managers and planners who are in need of operational guidance (Donohoe & Needham, 2005a; Dowling & Fennell, 2003; Fennell, 2001a). Scace *et al.* (1992) argue that the ongoing definitional debate is not redundant as difficulties in ensuring quality ecotourism can be attributed to the absence of a common or universal definition and set of ecotourism tenets or criteria. Key concerns related to this void are management controls and standards which are slow to appear (Björk, 2000; Wight, 1993a). The implications of a burgeoning industry operating in the absence of standards and definitional consensus are such that the ecotourism industry is evolving into many different forms. Some forms claim to be 'genuine ecotourism', while others do not (Fennell, 2001b). As a result, the concept is being operationalised in such a way that what is occurring in the field may not accurately reflect the concept's theoretical underpinnings. Without some semblance of definitional order, the proliferation of ecotourism will continue both inside and outside of definitional boundaries; thereby manifesting as one thing in theory – another in practice. As a consequence, Sirakaya (1997: 920) argues that 'ecotourism may be taking a dangerous course' whereby the real benefits and costs of ecotourism are being perverted, lost or unknown. Concomitantly, this puts at risk the natural environment upon which such experience directly depends, the environmental ethics upon which the activity is conceptualised and the legitimacy of the ecotourism industry (Wight, 1993a).

Understanding Ecotourism

Historically, the term 'ecotourism' was adopted in order to describe the nature-tourism phenomenon (Wallace & Pierce, 1996). To illustrate with an early example, the first formal and one of the most widely accepted definitions of ecotourism was introduced by Ceballos-Lascuráin in the 1980s (Blamey, 2001; Boo, 1990). It stated:

Traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas. (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1987: 14)

Although this definition has been applauded, critics suggest that it lacks foresight and overlooks experiential opportunities (Fennell, 2001b). It disproportionately focuses on what tourists do, rather than what they should do (implying missed opportunities) (Stewart & Sekartjakrarini, 1994). Since the 1980s, the definitional discussion has broadened to include other dimensions or ethical considerations (Blamey, 2001). For example, some argue that ecotourism is an expression of sustainable development (Björk, 2000; Fennell, 2003; Wight, 1993b). Others argue that it is strongly rooted in educational experiences (Blamey, 2001; Buckley, 1994), and some make the link to the natural environment, which distinguishes this tourism type from other tourism experiences, such as mass tourism (Hvenegaard, 1994). In fact, ecotourism is not a homogeneous phenomenon but instead, it has become accepted as a complex and synergistic collection of social, ecological and economic dimensions that reflect a common core idea (Björk, 2000; Weaver, 2005). This common core is

an ethics-based approach to tourism; where the satisfaction of both conservation and tourism development ends is critical (Weaver, 2005; Wight, 1993a).

Other attempts to understand the ecotourism concept have been related to exploring individual ecotourism components. These components have been expressed in the literature as 'principles', 'characteristics', 'criteria', 'themes', and 'dimensions'. For example, Buckley (1994) introduces a dimension-based model that includes conservation, sustainability, environmental education, and nature-based activities. Wallace and Pierce (1996) provide six fundamental principles related to minimised negative impacts of both infrastructure and participant numbers, increased awareness and educational opportunities, support for conservation, democratisation (the participation of all stakeholders in decision-making processes), provision of community benefits and educational and experiential opportunities for locals. This last principle overlaps considerably with increased awareness and community benefits. The authors argue that these conceptual principles reflect the 'evolution of an ethical overlay' for ecotourism (Wallace & Pierce, 1996: 846). In a volume on nature-based tourism, Newsome *et al.* (2002) argue that five interrelated components/characteristics must be present to make ecotourism distinct from other tourism types. The experience must be nature based, ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative, locally beneficial and (participant) satisfactory. While the first three components are considered ecotourism specific, the authors acknowledge that the last two are desirable for all tourism forms. However, in combination they argue that these components collectively constitute ecotourism. Eagles (2001), like Newsome *et al.* (2002), addresses both tourism (tourist and provider satisfaction) and the environment with a set of practical 'principles of ecotourism' that address a range of issues related to management, experience, and ethics.

Other attempts to understand and describe ecotourism have also relied on a 'component' identification approach. Björk (2000) for example, examines a series of definitions and identifies a set of central sustainable development principles common to ecotourism. The list includes loosely defined principles such as educational opportunities, planning considerations, ethical responsibility and provision of community benefits. Others have taken a more empirical or quantitative approach with the application of content analysis methodology to the analysis of ecotourism definitions. Sirakaya *et al.* (1999) examine industry definitions presented by ecotourism operators in the USA, yielding a set of 14 themes that include among others: sustainability, responsibility/ethics, community involvement conservation and education. Edwards *et al.* (1998) compile 25 definitions from a myriad of North American sources (government, academic literature, etc.), comparing definitional rhetoric against a set of pre-determined components: purpose, setting, activities, guiding principles, management and operations, nature conservation, planning and design, economic benefits, experience and awareness, nature conservation, community benefits and social-cultural conservation. In this case, the sample size and composition did not support a comprehensive analysis. The most recent and comprehensive review to date is presented by Fennell (2001b). This analysis reviews 85 ecotourism definitions from which the author declares 'variability' as a distinguishing feature of the ecotourism definitional literature. In addition,

those variables that appear most often are identified as: (1) location or natural setting, (2) conservation, (3) culture, (4) benefits to locals and (5) education. Fennell (2001b) also examines definitional changes through time, noting that conceptual variables most common in contemporary definitions are slightly different than those from a broader, longitudinal sample. Fennell (2001b) concludes that there is growing sensitivity to 'sustainability' and 'benefits to locals' – a new trend in the definitional discourse. Consequently, the author purports that this temporal phenomenon warrants further exploration.

The work of Fennell (2001b) and others establishes that there are recurring definitional themes or ethics common to the definitional literature. These studies also suggest that these thematic trends can be identified through analysis, that definitions are still evolving, and that definitional consensus has yet to be reached. It has been over five years since the publication of these findings and as researchers we are very sensitive to research replication and validity testing. For these reasons the remainder of this paper takes the discussion to a new stage in order to determine if the patterns suggested by antecedent research are recurring in the more contemporary literature. Buckley (2000: 437) argues that trends' identification is 'akin to postulating historical hypothesis' and in the case of ecotourism, such trends are testable retrospectively. He also argues that the identification of such trends is fundamental to business planning and public policy, as both business and government are increasingly being held accountable for environmental transgressions and fraudulent claims. Ecotourism policy development has only recently been initiated in response to the lack of consensus as to what constitutes ecotourism (Fennell, 2003). Given that definition is the essential basis for policy development (Honey, 2002), that a lack of definitional consensus is contributing to operational confusion (Dowling & Fennell, 2003), that this confusion is contributing to an industry-wide legitimacy crisis (Wight, 1993a); a re-examination of the definitional debate is required in order to facilitate contemporary ecotourism policy developments.

Purpose and Objectives

In the context of the ongoing ecotourism definitional challenge, the central purpose of this study is to conduct a thematic content analysis of contemporary ecotourism definitions, thereby offering an empirically derived understanding of the key tenets of contemporary ecotourism definitional discourse. While many definitions for ecotourism have emerged over the last few decades, there has been limited detailed analysis of these definitions with the explicit purpose of identifying key components central to the concept (Björk, 2000). Therefore, this paper simultaneously accepts Fennell's (2001b) call for further research whilst addressing the void identified by Björk (2000).

The research motivation is based on a broader agenda that seeks to examine the links between definition and quality standards for ecotourism (policy development). With definitional maturity established, the researchers can then explore the processes and procedures for standards and quality assurance programmes finely tuned to the needs of ecotourism (Table 1). This paper represents the first stage.

Table 1 Generic process model for ecotourism standards development and implementation

Stage 1	Establish a strong working definition for ecotourism and its fundamental tenets.
Stage 2	Establish an ecotourism policy statement that links these fundamental tenets to other normative, strategic and operational policies and practices.
Stage 3	Identify and interpret the relevant legislative and regulatory requirements for operation and procedures in the regional case.
Stage 4	Identify priorities and set appropriate objectives and targets for ecotourism practice using the fundamental tenets as guides.
Stage 5	Identify evaluation criteria to measure compliance with the fundamental tenets.
Stage 6	Establish an organisational structure and programmes and projects to implement policy objectives surrounding these fundamental tenets.
Stage 7	Invest in planning, monitoring, corrective action and other maintenance and review activities to ensure that ecotourism policy and practice are in harmony.
Stage 8	Invest in adaptation instruments so that changing environmental, economic and social circumstances are considered opportunities and not barriers to achieving ecotourism goals and objectives.

Definitions and standards provide the framework for the development of appropriate policy and practice for preserving the ecosystems that host ecotourism (Honey, 2002). In addition, it has been established that such standards provide the foundation for the legitimacy of ecotourism practices and opportunities (Donohoe & Needham, 2005a; Sirakaya, 1997). In essence, an investment in standards demands companion investments in monitoring, evaluating and ensuring that ecotourism conservation and development ends – that is the values, principles and ethics – are satisfied in application (Wight, 1993a). Study findings should provide much needed guidance for government, industry and/or researchers who may be developing tourism management plans, research projects, codes of ethics, definitions, standards or other ecotourism related advancements.

Methodology

A thematic content analysis model is applied to an ecotourism definition sample in order to extract a set of common themes. Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences based on the systematic and objective analysis (comparing, contrasting and categorising) of communications (Babbie, 1992; Krippendorff, 1980; Schwandt, 2001).

Content analysis relies on a count of the manifest content or visible surface content of select ecotourism definitions (units of observation). Without committing to a complicated statistical procedure, the method facilitates the identification of popular themes in the ecotourism literature. The advantage of this method is that content can be easily discerned and recorded, and the results can be easily replicated (Babbie, 1992; Krippendorff, 1980). The general analytical

steps of this method are modified to better reflect the research objectives (Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Schwandt, 2001). The subsequent steps are followed:

- (1) Collection of definition samples.
- (2) Identification of analysis criteria (nominal codes).
- (3) Creation of analysis framework (template/matrix).
- (4) Test coding on a sample of definitions.
- (5) Refine coding rules and analysis framework.
- (6) Coding of definitions.
- (7) Record results in the analysis framework.
- (8) Assess reliability and accuracy (intercoder agreement).
- (9) Tabulating results.

In order to initiate analysis, a set of tentative themes was determined in a pilot study (Donohoe & Needham, 2005a). The pilot focuses on a preliminary analysis of the definition sample and is informed by a critical review of relevant antecedent research (Björk, 2000; Blamey, 2001; Bottrill & Pearce, 1995; Epler Wood, 2002; Fennell, 2001b; Fennell & Dowling, 2003; Honey, 2002; Newsome *et al.*, 2002; Scace *et al.*, 1992; Wallace, nd; Wallace & Pierce, 1996; Wearing & Neil, 1999). This list of themes was refined to 16 criteria that serve as a content analysis template (Table 2).

Table 2 Content analysis template

<i>Criteria for analysis (working hypothesis derived from pilot study)</i>	<i>Select references and their definitions</i>
	<i>Observation ()</i>
Distribution of benefits (to community and others)	
Democratisation	
Sustainability	
Preservation/conservation	
Monitoring and assessment of environmental impacts	
Education	
Minimising impacts	
Small scale (groups and enterprises)	
Ethics/responsibility/awareness	
Reliance on parks and protected areas	
Management	
Enjoyment/experience	
Culture	
Adventure	
Nature-based	
Volunteerism	

Source: Donohoe and Needham (2005b).

Subsequently each definition is coded and where reference is made to one of the 16 criteria, the 'hit' or observation is recorded. Totals are calculated for all criteria and the top ranked criteria are then identified. This frequency tabulation provides the evidence for the discussion of key ecotourism tenets in subsequent sections.

The study sample includes 30 academic definitions of ecotourism, all of which were published after 1990. Those definitions most commonly referenced in the contemporary literature were identified and included in the sample. The definitions were selected from a range of prominent tourism research and policy publications (industry, academia, government etc.) available in both English and French. Based on the assumption that these most recent and common definitions reflect earlier academic work and that they continue to influence ongoing research and policy developments (evidenced by common references in the literature), a successful maturity test is likely to be achieved.

In addition to the sample of academic definitions, a second sample is separately analysed. These 12 definitions are associated with 'supply-side' ecotourism participants from governmental and private sectors in Canada (Table 3). The Canadian sample has been selected for four important reasons. First, the researchers are Canadian and have an interest in the Canadian ecotourism experience. Second, Canada is currently lacking national ecotourism standards (Donohoe & Needham, 2005a; Scace *et al.*, 1992). Companion research has established that these factors are contributing to operational confusion and perversion (Donohoe & Needham, 2000a). Third, limited comprehensive study of the Canadian definitional discourse has been completed to date. The few exceptions are a report prepared by the now defunct Sustainable Tourism Association of Canada (2002), the inclusion of Canadian definitions in the Fennell analysis (2001b) and a report prepared by Edwards *et al.* (1998) that includes some Canadian definitions in a broader study of the Americas. Fourth, the Canadian focus provides a platform for the exploration of definitional similarities and differences at the theoretical and applied levels.

Table 3 Select Canadian organisations participating in ecotourism

<i>Governmental agencies</i>	Canadian Environmental Advisory Council
	Alberta Tourism
	Manitoba Ministry of Culture Heritage and Tourism
	Environment Canada
	British Columbia Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture
	Tourisme Quebec
	Canadian Tourism Commission
<i>Non-governmental organisations</i>	The Ecotourism Society of Saskatchewan
	Tourism Industry Association Canada
	L'Association D'Aventure Ecotourisme Quebec
	The Sustainable Tourism Association of Canada

In order to test for content analysis reliability, a second researcher coded a random sample (60%) of definitions from both the academic and Canadian samples. The intercoder reliability was calculated as a percentage agreement (Lombard *et al.*, 2004). These calculations produced a reliability rate of 93.7%. While there is some disagreement in the literature about intercoder reliability standards, a rate of 80% or higher is considered acceptable (Krippendorff, 1980; Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

Analysis of the Academic Sample

Two important observations can be made from the application of the content analysis template (Table 4). First, the criteria frequencies suggest that there is great variation in contemporary definitional focus (Figure 1). This observation confirms that thematic variability is and remains a distinguishing feature of ecotourism definitional discourse (Björk, 2000; Bottrill & Pearce, 1995; Fennell, 2001b).

Second, a pattern of thematic repetition can also be identified (Table 4, Figure 1). Consequently, it is possible to identify a set of distinct and robust ecotourism criteria. These criteria reflect the six themes that appear most frequently. These criteria include - in ranked order from most frequently observed: (1) 'nature-based', (2) 'preservation/conservation', (3) 'education', (4) 'sustainability', (5) 'distribution of benefits', and (6) 'ethics/responsibility/awareness'.

More specifically, 80% of definitions reference 'nature-based' settings for ecotourism (Figure 1). Reference to 'conservation/preservation' was made by 77% of the definitional sample. In combination these two criteria are the highest ranked and are the most common themes present in ecotourism definitions. These criteria are followed by 'environmental education' at 63.3%. 'Sustainability' and 'distribution of benefits' follow, both with 56.7%. 'Ethics/responsibility' completes the list with 50%.

The six top ranking criteria were referenced by more than 50% of the academic sample. The remaining 10 criteria are then representative of fewer than 50% of the sample. With the exception of 'culture' (46.7%), 'enjoyment/experience' (40%), and 'minimising impacts' (37%), the remaining seven criteria are referenced by fewer than 10% of the sample. In the case of 'monitoring' and 'adventure', no reference to these criteria is observed in the academic sample. As noted earlier, these criteria are included in the analysis as they appear in antecedent evaluations of ecotourism definitions. The lack of attention afforded these criteria in the contemporary sample raises the question of their needed inclusion in a mature definition. Consequently, only the top six criteria are included in the discussion of key ecotourism tenets.

Analysis of the Canadian Sample

Two important observations are made from the application of the content analysis template to the Canadian sample (Table 5). First, the criteria frequencies further emphasise the earlier finding that thematic variation is common to contemporary ecotourism definitions. Second, a pattern of thematic repetition can also be identified. Consequently, it is possible to surmise a set of key criteria

Table 4 Discourse commonalities: A comparison of ecotourism definitions (academic – sample 1)

Criteria for analysis (themes)	Select references and their definitions																													Total observations	Ranked order*					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29			30				
Distribution of benefits (to community and others)									✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	17 (56.7%)	4	
Democratisation																		✓																	2 (6.7%)	12
Sustainability	✓	✓		✓				✓																											17 (56.7%)	4
Preservation/ conservation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓																											23 (77%)	2
Monitoring and assessment of environmental impacts																																		0	14	
Education	✓	✓	✓						✓																										19 (63.3%)	3
Minimising impacts				✓																															11 (37%)	8
Small scale (groups and enterprises)													✓																						3 (10%)	11
Ethics /responsibility/ awareness	✓	✓						✓																											15 (50%)	5
Reliance on parks and protected areas																																			1 (3.3%)	13
Management					✓									✓																					4 (13.3%)	10
Enjoyment/experience	✓	✓				✓																													12 (40%)	7
Culture	✓	✓		✓																															14 (46.7%)	6
Adventure																																			0	14
Nature-based	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	24 (80%)	1	
Volunteerism																	✓																		1 (3.3%)	13

✓ Criteria observed in definition.

*Rank based on the number of observed appearances of the identified criteria – ranked most observations to least.

Sources: (1) Ceballos-Lascurain, 1987: 14; (2) Richardson, 1991: 244; (3) Young, 1992; (4) Lindberg and Hawkins, 1993: 8; (5) Valentine 1993; (6) Western, D., 1993; (7) Wight, 1993a; (8) Hall and Kinnaird, 1994; (9) Hvenegaard, 1994; (10) Allcock *et al.*, 1995: 15; (11) IUCN (Now World Conservation Union), 1996, as cited in Epler Wood, 2002: 9; (12) Steele, 1995; (13) Goodwin, 1996; (14) MacGregor, 1996; (15) Wearing and Neil, 1999: 140; (16) Wallace and Pierce, 1996; (17) Lawrence *et al.*, 1997: 308; (18) Ross and Wall, 1999: 124; (19) Bjork, 2000: 196–197; (20) Weaver, 2002: 105; (21) Lequin 2001; (22) World Ecotourism Summit, 2002; (23) Honey, 2002: 381; (24) Newsome *et al.*, 2002: 15; (25) Weaver, 2002: 15; (26) Epler Wood, 2002: 9; (27) Fennell, 2003; (28) Fennell and Dowling, 2003: 41; (29) International Ecotourism Society, 2004; (30) Ecotourism Australia, 2005.

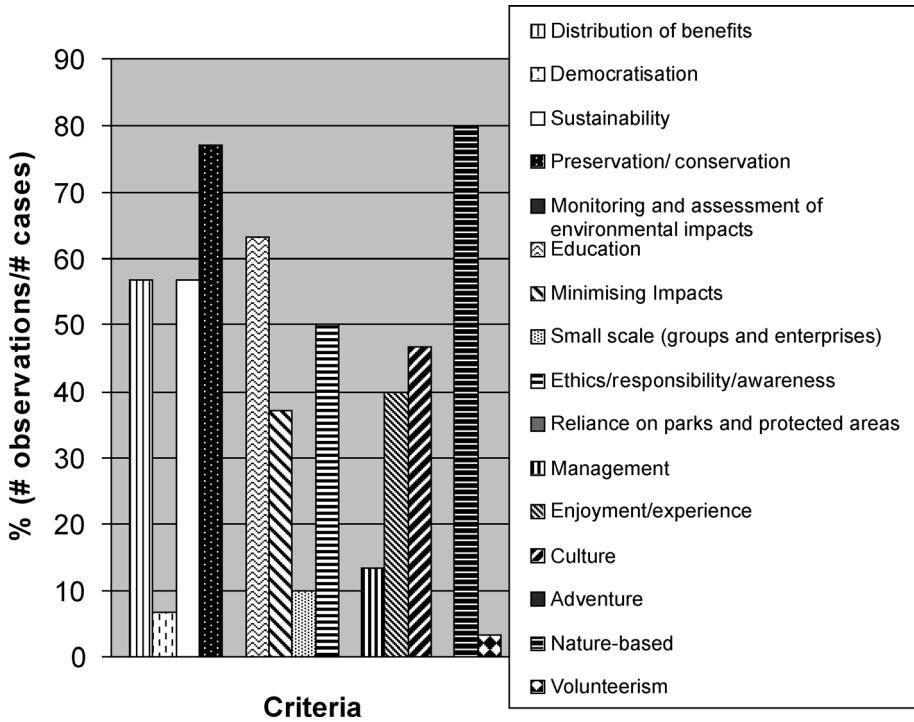


Figure 1 Frequency of criterion observations in sample 1 (academic)

common to the Canadian ecotourism definition sample (Table 5). These criteria include – in ranked order from most frequently observed: (1) ‘nature-based’ (91.7%), (2) ‘preservation/conservation’ (75%), (3) ‘ethics/responsibility/awareness’ (75%), (4) ‘education’ (75%), (5) ‘distribution of benefits’ (58.3%), (6) ‘minimising impacts’ (50%) and (7) ‘enjoyment/experience’ (50%). With the exception of ‘culture’ (42%), ‘management’ (25%) and ‘sustainability’ (16.7%), reference to the remaining criteria is limited to less than 10% of the sample. Therefore the top ranking criteria may be considered reflective of the evolutionary themes common to Canadian supply-side definitions of ecotourism.

Comparative Analysis

Two critical observations can be made when comparing the results of the academic to the Canadian sample (Figure 2). First, similarities can be noted between both lists of key criteria (Table 6). The three top-ranked criteria from both lists are the same. They also have the same rank order: (1) ‘nature-based’, (2) ‘preservation conservation’ and (3) ‘education’. As such, these criteria may be considered priority themes at both the applied and theoretical levels. In addition, ‘distribution of benefits’ and ‘ethics/responsibility/awareness’ appear in both lists and appear with similar frequency. While these themes are ranked differently in each sample list, for both samples these criteria are observed in over 50% of the sample definitions and as such, may also be considered priority themes. The differences in ranking may reflect differing

Table 5 Discourse commonalities: A comparison of Canadian ecotourism definitions (sample 2)

<i>Criteria for analysis (themes)</i>	<i>Select references and their definitions</i>												<i>Total observations</i>	<i>Ranked order*</i>
	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42		
Distribution of benefits (to community and others)	✓		✓			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	7 (58.3%)	3
Democratisation		✓											1 (8.3%)	8
Sustainability							✓	✓					2 (16.7%)	7
Preservation /conservation		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9 (75%)	2
Monitoring and assessment of environmental impacts		✓											1 (8.3%)	7
Education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	9 (75%)	2
Minimising impacts	✓	✓		✓		✓				✓	✓	✓	6 (50%)	4
Small scale (groups and enterprises)												✓	1 (8.3%)	8
Ethics /responsibility/awareness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	9 (75%)	2
Reliance on parks and protected areas													0	9
Management	✓	✓										✓	3 (25%)	6
Enjoyment/experience	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓					6 (50%)	4
Culture		✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5 (42%)	5
Adventure													0	9
Nature-based	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	11 (91.7%)	1
Volunteerism													0	9

✓Criteria observed in definition.

*Rank based on the number of observed appearances of the identified criteria – ranked most observances to least.

Sources: (31) Canadian Environmental Advisory Council, 1991: 5; (32) Alberta Tourism, 1992; (33) Scace *et al.*, 1992; (34) Environment Canada, 1993, as cited in the Sustainable Tourism Association of Canada (2002) p. 5; (35) The Ecotourism Society of Saskatchewan, 1998; (36) Manitoba Ministry of Culture Heritage and Tourism, 2001; (37) British Columbia Ministry of Small Business Tourism and Culture, 2001, as cited in the Sustainable Tourism Association of Canada (2002) p. 5; (38) Tourism Industry Association Canada, September 2003; (39) L'Association D'Adventure Ecotourisme Quebec, 2002, as cited in the Sustainable Tourism Association of Canada (2002) p. 5; (40) Kingsmill, 2002: 3; (41) Sustainable Tourism Association of Canada, 2002: 5; (42) Tourisme Quebec, 2002: 8–9.

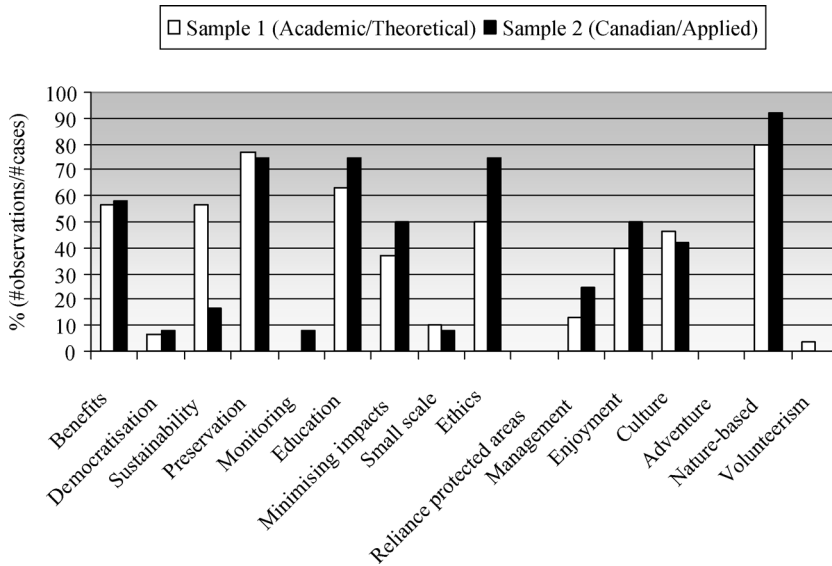


Figure 2 Frequency of criterion observations for sample 1 and sample 2

Table 6 Comparative analysis of key themes

<i>Key themes (Academic – sample 1)*</i>	<i>Key themes (Canadian – sample 2)*</i>
Nature-based	Nature-based
Preservation/conservation	Preservation/conservation
Environmental education	Environmental education
<i>Sustainability</i>	Distribution of benefits
Distribution of benefits	Ethics/responsibility/awareness
Ethics/responsibility/awareness	<i>Minimising impacts</i>
	<i>Enjoyment/experience</i>

*Criteria appear in ranked order. Those criteria appearing in italics are different.

contextual priorities (theoretical vs. applied). This notion is explored in subsequent discussion.

Second, differences can be noted. Difference is most evident when ‘sustainability’ is discussed. While this criterion appears fourth in the ranked academic sample, it does not appear as a top ranked criterion in the Canadian sample. In fact, ‘sustainability’ ranked eighth behind ‘minimising impacts’ and ‘enjoyment/experience’. This difference may be reflective of the applied priorities of supply-side definitions, whereby ‘minimising impacts’ (meeting legislative requirements, etc.) and ‘product delivery’ (customer satisfaction, product quality, etc.) may have a greater and more immediate impact or function. It may also be representative of the philosophical discussion of ecotourism present in the academic literature where sustainability is increasingly a key element. This trend has been chronicled by Fennell (2001b) and Björk (2000),

and is further evidenced by a growing corpus of publications where ecotourism and sustainability are linked and appear as central themes (Cater & Lowman, 1994; Epler Wood, 2002; Manning & Dougherty, 1995; Place, 1995; Tisdell, 1998; Weaver, 2001; Wight, 1993b). This trend parallels the rise in popularity and application of the sustainable development concept since its popular introduction in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987).

Discussion

In general, the findings of this study highlight the variability in thematic focus that continues in contemporary ecotourism definitional discourse. While the discussion has grown to include a myriad of dimensions and issues, through analysis it becomes clear that a set of evolving themes may be considered central to the ecotourism concept, regardless of perspective. In fact, these six themes may be considered the essence of ecotourism definition and as such, they are introduced here as key ecotourism tenets. Table 7 provides a description of each tenet. The descriptions and associated elements have been extracted directly from the ecotourism literature and are reflective of the meanings and ethics commonly associated with these tenets.

It is interesting to note that other studies of ecotourism components have reported similar results. For example, Wallace and Pierce (1996) identify the same six principles in their description of ecotourism. In a review of the concept completed by Scace *et al.* (1992), the same six 'elements' are also identified. Where 'distribution of benefits' is absent from their list of elements, it is emphasised later in their composite definition of ecotourism (Scace *et al.*, 1992). Also, the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism, produced as part of the World Ecotourism Summit Final Report (World Ecotourism Summit, 2002) during the International Year of Ecotourism, suggests that five distinct criteria be used to define ecotourism. These criteria include: 'nature-based product', 'minimal impact management', 'environmental education', 'contribution to conservation' and 'contribution to community'. Where 'minimal impact management' appears in the World Ecotourism Summit (2002) description, it is replaced with 'ethics/responsibility' and 'sustainability' in this study. With a few exceptions, these lists identify the same content.

The results of this study are also congruent with those presented by Fennell (2001b). Fennell's (2001b) study reports that the variables most often observed in the literature include: (1) 'reference to where ecotourism occurs' (natural areas), (2) 'conservation', (3) 'culture', (4) 'benefits to locals' and (5) 'education'. Where 'culture' appears in Fennell's list, it is replaced again with 'ethics/responsibility' and 'sustainability' in this study. The differences in reported results are likely due to the breadth and volume of definitions included in the Fennell study and the relative maturity of definitions included in this study. In fact, the findings of this study confirm Fennell's (2001b: 403) observations that there is increased sensitivity to 'sustainability' and 'ethics' in contemporary discourse:

Conservation, education, ethics, sustainability, impacts and local benefits were variables which were better represented in the more recent definitions, showing a changing emphasis in how the term has been conceptualized over time.

Table 7 A framework for contemporary definition: Key tenets and associated elements of ecotourism

<i>Key normative tenets of ecotourism</i>	<i>Associated elements of ecotourism</i>
<i>Nature-based</i>	A. Activity occurs primarily in nature
	B. Healthy ecosystems
	C. Undeveloped/pristine areas (minimal human interference)
	D. Provides opportunity for visits to natural areas
<i>Preservation/conservation</i>	E. Maintenance and enhancement of ecosystems
	F. Awareness of ecosystem requirements
	G. Collaborative efforts between providers and community (protected area managers, locals, etc.)
	H. Incorporation and implementation of preservation/conservation into management plan
<i>Environmental education</i>	I. Provision of bio-cultural education for all stakeholders (staff, guests, community, etc.)
	J. Encourage interaction with nature (to provide an experiential/educational benefit)
	K. Increases awareness and understanding of an areas natural heritage
	L. Empowers visitors and other stakeholders to become involved in issues affecting heritage (both natural and cultural)
<i>Sustainability</i>	M. Achievement of equity and social justice
	N. Maintenance of ecological integrity
	O. Satisfaction of human needs
	P. Social self-determination and cultural diversity
	Q. Integration of conservation and development
<i>Distribution of benefits</i>	R. Equitable local access to resources, costs, and benefits
	S. Benefits compliment rather than replace traditional local practices and activities (fishing, crafts, etc)
	T. Maximises short and long term benefits for visitors, providers, locals, etc.
	U. Improves the quality of life for local people
	V. Complements existing tourism infrastructure
<i>Ethics/responsibility</i>	W. Ethics based environmentally, socially and culturally responsible approach
	X. Ecological principles to guide decision making
	Y. Consideration of the impacts and consequences of travel in natural areas
	Z. Lead by example – increase awareness of the value of ethics based business and action.

Source: Adapted from Stacey and Needham (1993).

Concomitantly, a recent analysis by Weaver (2005) argues that there is an emerging consensus on the core ecotourism criteria. In fact, Weaver's list of criteria parallels those tenets presented in this study. While ethics does not appear explicitly in Weaver's description, an ethics based approach to operationalising the concept is implied (Weaver, 2005: 440, 443). In no way does the presentation of key tenets for ecotourism negate the fact that this concept continues to evolve in the literature and in application. However, we appear to be moving towards definitional consensus.

While this study does not seek to examine cultural/institutional relativism where ecotourism is concerned, the comparative analysis of Canadian supply-side definitions identifies subtle but important differences at the normative scale. The Canadian sample emphasised 'enjoyment/experience' and 'minimising impacts' over 'sustainability'. If 'supply-side' can be considered a type of 'culture', this manifestation may be considered a form of cultural relativism, whereby supply-side definitions tend to reflect different priorities (operational) than the general theoretical definitions. As such, further reflection is needed in the supply-side context so that definitional priority differences may be understood. Certainly, this insight is needed before standards and policy development can progress.

Conclusions

The ambition of this research was to clarify the ongoing confusion about the 'nature' of ecotourism by extracting a set of recurring themes from the definitional discourse and introducing a tenets-based conceptual framework for ecotourism. As such, this paper does not seek to contribute to the existing confusion by introducing a new or composite definition of ecotourism. Instead, this analysis serves to highlight a set of key ecotourism tenets that may be considered the essence of the evolving contemporary definition.

The fundamental concern requiring reflection is whether or not supply-side definitions are reflective of the theoretical principles of ecotourism. In the case of Canada, the main principles, 'nature-based', 'preservation/conservation', 'education', 'distribution of benefits', and 'ethics/responsibility/awareness' are well represented in contemporary definitions. Again, the emphasis on 'enjoyment/experience' and 'minimising impacts' over 'sustainability' is likely due to differing contextual priorities. In this case, differences may be a result of evolving theoretical themes in the literature and a distinct operational approach in applied definitions.

Also requiring reflection and future study is the operationalisation of the key tenets of ecotourism. Fennell (2001b) and Wallace and Pierce (1996) agree that principles and definitions are the articulated foundations of policy and they must act as such when constructing operational systems sensitive to standards, regulations and guidelines. Wallace (nd: 2) also asserts that principles should provide an 'over-arching ethical framework' for applied constructs. Therefore, the key tenets should (ideally) become the fundamental roots of ecotourism applications (Honey & Stewart, 2002). To date, ecotourism case studies have shown otherwise. These tenets are disregarded, perverted or manipulated in application, thereby threatening the legitimacy of the industry (Donohoe &

Needham, 2005a; Honey, 2002; Sirakaya, 1997; Wallace & Pierce, 1996). There have been cases of 'greenwashing', 'environmental opportunism', and/or 'eco-exploitation', whereby providers are marketing and offering 'ecotourism' without any or with limited ethical or practical considerations of the conceptual principles (Buckley, 2000; Honey, 2002; Sirakaya, 1997; Wight, 1993a). It is also the case that many operational constraints are contributing to the common 'minimalist', 'lite', or 'pseudo' approach, whereby some tenets are applied while others are applied superficially or not at all (Donohoe & Needham, 2005b; Honey, 2002; Weaver, 2005). The concern is that with diluted adherence to the principles of ecotourism, 'it will evolve into a less benign form of nature-based activity that is no longer recognizable as legitimate ecotourism' and no longer distinguishable from mass tourism (Weaver, 2005: 446). As such, the evaluation of ecotourism should remain a priority for researchers interested in documenting and understanding the operationalisation of this tourism concept. In addition, the tourism industry should also be careful not to allow the ecotourism sector to be corrupted by 'pseudo' ecotourism providers who do not apply the fundamental principles. In recognition of this 'dangerous course' (Sirakaya, 1997: 920), there has been growing ecotourism stakeholder interest in the development of standards for ecotourism such as certification/accreditation programmes and codes of ethics. If an international standards protocol for ecotourism was developed it would become increasingly difficult to invest in manipulation, the environmental and economic benefits associated with ecotourism could be realised, and the current legitimacy crisis could be averted (Wight, 1993a). For ecotourism to be successful and for the benefits of this theoretical concept to manifest, guidelines and standards must be made available to all stakeholders (Honey, 2002; Issaverdis, 2001). The key tenets introduced in this paper provide a framework for definition and the evolution of such controls and standards. The challenge then becomes implementing and monitoring these tenets in practice.

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