

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING ECOTOURISM
IN
PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

A number of events and circumstances are coming together to make the discussions in this Seminar particularly appropriate. The various international meetings which have been held, the reports of and agendas from those meetings, and the many events proposed for The International Year of Ecotourism (IYE 2002) have heightened the profile of ecotourism. Even with these initiatives, and the policy-attractiveness of ecotourism, strategies to implement ecologically-based, sensitive and sustainable tourism are difficult to formulate.

Interpretation of ‘ecotourism’. One of the difficulties in preparing strategies for ecotourism is knowing precisely what it is. Clearly, ‘ecotourism’ is a subset of tourism; equally clearly it refers to the touristic use of natural/ecological resources, and most likely the penetration of sensitive and fragile environments. Early discussions about this form of tourism used the term ‘nature-based tourism’, which, perhaps is a more objectively-relevant term, free of the passion and emotiveness of the prefix ‘eco’. In practice, the use of the term ‘ecotourism’ is not seriously prescribed – the users determine the meaning intended.

In some cases, the ardent pursuit of ecotourism is predicated on a number of beliefs, including:

- that there is an abundance of ecotourism resources, and that all that is necessary is some means of delivering those resources to tourists;
- that there is a ready-made bank of tourists, interested in visiting eco-sites to enjoy an eco-experience;
- that a commitment to ecotourism might provide a bonus or value-added component to an existing range of tourism products;
- that ecotourism could become the principal tourism attraction for a country/region/locality;
- that a commitment to ecotourism would be likely to result in low impact on the environment;
- that ecotourism would sustain high levels of local employment.

As some agencies and entrepreneurs have discovered, ecotourism is a very complex tourism product. Firstly, not all natural environments are attractive and suitable for tourism; secondly, ecotourists are a special sub-set of all tourists, and some tourists might not adopt an ecological frame of mind for more than a brief segment of their tourist visit; thirdly, the basic principles of tourism attraction apply, whether or not the principal resources are environmentally-based; and, fourthly, the management of ecotourism is arduous and may be geographically exclusive (enclavic). As agencies throughout the Pacific region will be aware, there is an uneven commitment to any form of tourism, with considerable variations between what may be described as the ‘honey pots’ which have developed an international profile for their tourism product (usually leisure and recreation-based), and other island countries which seem not yet to have a tourism

product which appeals to the major metropolitan countries which are the origins of most international visitors.

This presentation. It is the purpose of this presentation to examine briefly some of the critical issues about ecotourism, and then to concentrate on the process of strategic planning which might be adapted to the special circumstances of Pacific island countries which are in the process of considering whether ecotourism can (or should) be an important component of their portfolio of tourism resources.

Part 1 will consider some of the **strategic questions** such as the motivation for the commitment to ecotourism, the pre-conditions for an ecotourism strategy, the key participants in ecotourism activities, and the context for such a strategy;

Part 2 will examine briefly, the structure of the **strategic planning process**, and consider the importance of setting objectives;

Part 3 will focus attention on **methods of resource assessment**, giving attention to the issues of carrying capacity, and the ecotourism opportunity spectrum;

Part 4 will consider some of the principles behind the **geographical frameworks** which can be used to differentiate the regions in which nature-based resources are the principal tourism attractions;

Part 5 will examine some of the components of **management regimes** which will be necessary to secure the implementation of a sustainable ecotourism product and strategy.

A concluding section will address a number of **difficult questions** which are particularly pertinent to the circumstances of the Pacific region in that they focus attention on the requirements for cooperative, complementary, and integrated ecotourism strategies, and the capacity needs of the region.

1. STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

As the Program of Action of the Barbados SIDS Global Conference stated:

“the mere availability of the requisite resources may not be sufficient to sustain either a viable ecotourism experience or a viable ecotourism business: those resources would need to meet a range of pre-requisite criteria...”

It is this range of pre-requisite criteria which are considered in this and later sections.

Among the important strategic questions are:

- what has motivated the interest in and commitment to developing a strategy for ecotourism ?
- what have been amongst the strongest influences ?
- who are the principal participants in ecotourism – the ecotourists ?
- is (should) ecotourism be a stand-alone strategy, or an integral component of a broadly-based tourism strategy ?

Motivation; purpose. Each country which embraces a strategy of ecotourism will do so for its own purposes. Those purposes might include, for example:

- the creation of a new tourism attraction;
- the diversification or expansion of an existing spectrum of tourism attractions and activities, to offer new tourism experiences;
- to divert attention away from already-pressured attractions;
- to seize business opportunities, particularly to engage local communities and entrepreneurs;
- the creation of a focused marketing strategy;
- a contribution to biodiversity conservation (a philosophical motivation);
- a commitment to ecologically sustainable development (a ‘principled’ strategic commitment);
- an increased national profile (because of, for example, compliance with international advice, the creation of a competitive product).

It is necessary to clarify what is being planned for (and why it is being planned) before the strategic exercise reaches an advanced stage; the purpose will influence the strategic process and the outcomes.

Impact of International meetings and agendas. The agendas and programs from such international meetings as those at, for example, Rio de Janeiro (1992) and Barbados (1994) have provided some of the enlightenment about the potential of ecotourism. The general ‘message’ of the agendas is that small island countries, and especially those which may be unable to meet the challenges of conventional mass tourism, may be suited to the more specialized product of the niche ecotourism market. This message conveniently reinforces the predilection of some countries to avoid the outcomes of mass tourism (especially the induced social pathologies), to guard jealously their spectacular ecological resources and lifestyle, to avoid sharing their resources with anyone other than ‘discriminating, environmentally and culturally sensitive visitors’, and their preference to exploit their particular ecological values with only low-impact (tourism) development.

If the commitment is made to ecotourism, it needs to be recognized that the outcome may not be as economically advantageous as may be hoped; ecotourism is largely an ecologically-driven rather than an economically-driven strategy. The Barbados Agenda and the more recent UNEP statements have accentuated this issue. In addition, a recurring theme in many of the reports, agendas and protocols is the need to involve the local population in the planning for and management of the ecotourism development;

community-based planning is an important component, even a pre-requisite of strategies of ecotourism development.

Ecotourist. As with all aspects of tourism segmentation, the participants – in this case, the ecotourists – may be differentiated at least by

- demographic,
- psychographic, and
- geographic characteristics.

In addition to these specific characteristics, tourists who are attracted to ecotourism resources may be differentiated into four groups:

- those who are **deliberate** or intentional ecotourists – the ‘typical’ ecotourist;
- those who are **opportunistic** or accidental ecotourists;
- those who are **incidental** or attracted ecotourists – where the ecotourism venture is only one of a smorgasbord of tourism attractions;
- those who are **adventure** tourists – seeking sometimes ‘extreme’ physical and psychological challenges.

It is important that the profile of potential users of local ecotourism resources is understood, so that (a) there are not over-optimistic predictions of level of use, and (b) the ecotourism product can be designed to appeal to the most likely target market.

Independent or component strategy. An important strategic issue is whether ecotourism should (can) be a ‘stand-alone’ strategy or a sub-strategy within a broadly-based tourism strategy. The balance of opinion would probably be that ‘ecotourism’ should be a sub-set (even if it is the principal sub-set) of a broadly-based tourism strategy, not least because it will be dependent upon many of the components of a general tourism strategy.

2. STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

No-matter whether it is an independent strategy or an integral component of a more general strategy, the strategy-formulation process will need to be systematic, based on the clear articulation of objectives, a thorough assessment of the available resources, a determination of the market demand, and the creation of an appropriate quantitative, qualitative and geographical strategy.

Strategic planning process. Although the scope will be different, and will be determined by the nature of the particular task, there is a ‘sameness’ about the strategic planning process whether the strategy is for an entire country, a region within that, or localities within a region, or even to sites within defined localities. The thoroughness of the step-wise approach will be a significant determinant of the appropriateness of the eventual strategy.

There is a considerable base of literature and experience upon which to draw for the creation of a purpose-designed strategic planning process; the key issue is that the generalities of a planning process need to be fine-tuned to fit the special circumstances of the agency and community for which the plan is being prepared, and the context into which the plan must fit. It is important that planning process is suited to the plan-making circumstances, and especially that it is not too elaborate (requiring the input of information and other resources which are not available), but also that it is not so simplistic that it avoids addressing the critical issues which may eventually determine the implementability, success or failure of the plan.

In summary, the critical steps may be as follows:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Study preparation• Survey• Analysis, synthesis, projection, prediction• Policy and plan formulation• Output (outcomes) |
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It is important that, no-matter how narrowly-focused is the intended plan (i.e., whether it is a tourism strategy, or an ecotourism strategy), the eventual plan is integrated with other sectors of the national agenda.

Setting objectives. Although this step may become lost in the profile of the eventual plan outcomes, it is a crucial step because it sets the philosophical (vision) and operational (measuring devices and means of implementation) targets for the plan. This vital step should be based on appropriate consultative processes, involving the various stakeholders, which may include:

- government(s) – as entire agencies, and especially the relevant internal sectors ;
- the tourism industry;
- the ‘custodians of the resources’;
- the affected community(ies).

The consultative processes, for which there are many different styles and mechanisms, should be directed towards finalizing, at least as a preliminary set, statements about the preferred scale, nature and distribution/location of the intended development, with the nomination of targets (mainly quantitative), performance criteria and standards (both quantitative and qualitative), responsibilities, and expected implications.

In drawing up the objectives it will be necessary to determine their purpose and nature. For example, they may be:

- **Essential** (to be achieved in full) or **Optional** (may be achieved in full or in part);
- **Independent** (not dependent on the achievement of other objectives or outcomes) or **Dependent** (may be achievable only if other objectives/plans are achieved in part or in full);
- Statements of **Intent** (what is expected to be achieved);
- Statements of **Implementation** (prescribed operational requirements, such as performance standards, plan schedules)

It is crucial that the distinction of these different types is recognized, not only because of the different expectations which may be generated by them, but also because they will attract distinctly different measures of achievement.

3. METHODS OF RESOURCES ASSESSMENT

There are many methods and techniques available which may be used to assess the capabilities and suitabilities of the spectrum of resources which support tourism development, and many of those which are particularly appropriate for the assessment of nature-based resources for ecotourism.

Simple methods. Most simple methods of resources assessment require preliminary reconnaissance of the potentially relevant resources, and the categorization and weighting of them according to their attractiveness (for the purposes of tourism). These methods require, for example:

- inventory of resources;
- categorization of those resources;
- assessment of their development potential (assets, liabilities);
- identification of patterns, networks, linkages, and accent points;

Some simple methods may emphasize quantitative assessments, whereas others may emphasize qualitative and descriptive analysis. The information base for these methods may be gathered from ground reconnaissance or from satellite imagery, or a combination of both.

Carrying capacity assessments. Some methods, at the analytical and projection stages, attempt to establish the **carrying capacity** of natural areas, both as predictions of use levels, and also as a means of setting limits to use levels. Despite the attractiveness of carrying capacity measures, there are both theoretical and practical difficulties with these assessments; for example, any limitations or thresholds which are predicted may be made redundant by the use of appropriate management devices; and, it will not be suitable to aggregate ecological, infrastructure, social and other measures of capacity. However, carrying capacity assessments may be useful as interim measures in the early phases of plan formulation.

Opportunity spectrum methods. In recent years resources assessments have adopted opportunity spectrum methods. There is a group of **opportunity spectrum** methods which includes various orientations and refinements; this group includes:

- **ROS** (Recreation Opportunity Spectrum),
- **TOS** (Tourism Opportunity Spectrum),
- **LAC** (Limits of Acceptable Change),
- **TA** (Threshold Analysis, and more recently **UET** – ultimate environmental thresholds),
- **ECOS** (Ecotourism Opportunity Spectrum).

This section examines briefly the potential of **ECOS**.

The ECOS model has been developed especially to cope with the peculiar needs of planning for ecotourism. The capture of ecological base-line data is the important first step. This data is then assessed or measured in terms of the capacity to be used in ecotourism, with the assessment focusing on eight important factors:

• Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To the ecotourism region • To the site (access and circulation within the region)
• Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Between ecotourism and other potential uses of the same resource • Complementarity, compatibility, integration, competition
• Attractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of ecotourism experiences: • IN (tropical forests, mountain areas) • OF (birds, trees, wild flowers, mammals) • BY (watching, filming, collecting)
• Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support infrastructure • Support services
• User pre-requisites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior knowledge • Prior skills • Equipment
• Social interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of interaction (with other ecotourists) sought, achieved • Level of interaction with local/host community sought, achieved
• Visitor impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consequences of visitor access • Controls on visitor access, use
• Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder involvement • Decision process

The significance of each of these factors will depend upon the locational circumstances of the ecotourism region and site; it will also be impacted upon by the degree of intensity of the existing or proposed ecotourism development, and the nature of that development (i.e., whether it is ‘eco-specialist’ or ‘eco-generalist’).

Refinements to ECOS assessments could include:

- **Landscape assessments** (to differentiate geographical sectors according to their principal ecotourism resources, stages of ‘naturalness’/change, levels of ecotourist interest);
- **Attractiveness indices** (to differentiate according to uniqueness, international drawing power, primacy – a measure of comparative attraction);
- **Resource status** (to differentiate according to the degree of disturbance of the natural resource, and any circumstance which might impede its sustainability or cause its attractiveness to be forfeited – a form of carrying capacity assessment);
- **Conservation potential** (including rehabilitation potential);
- **Marketing assessments** (combining some of the other assessments according to an aggregation of attractiveness for particular consumer/tourist market segments – to interpret the feasibility of capturing and sustaining tourist interest).

Two important assessment principles. The entire phase of resources assessment should not be rushed, and the outcomes should not be expedited to meet non-environmental criteria.

4. GEOGRAPHICAL FRAMEWORKS.

There are three maxims which may be used to underpin the formulation of the geographical arrangements of ecotourism; these are:

- that *“even within a tourist region only certain areas are absolutely necessary for tourist development”*;
- that strategic planning for tourism *“goes beyond the popular belief that all land has equal potential for tourism development if promoted heavily enough”*;
- that *“examples of unstructured tourism development are everywhere ...social and ecological problems are inherent in unstructured, one-dimensional tourism development”*

These three maxims point to the need for a **systematically-derived geographical framework** for the development of ecotourism in any region which is appropriate. These frameworks would provide for:

- the protection for the ecotourism resources.
- a balanced distribution of development and conservation,
- a concentration of touristic experience,
- physical target zones for tourism and tourist-related activity
- an integration of ecotourism with companion tourism activities,
- the creation of specialist enclaves (to meet the particular needs of ecotourism),

- capacity limitations to the development and tourist access,
- the provision of servicing for the ecotourists,
- an environment of development confidence for potential investment.

There are **three basic geographical forms**: a destination region model; a circuit or tour model; and a twin-model.

The **Destination Region Model** has four major components.

Nodes of ecotourism attraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sites, ‘cells’, or enclaves of nature-based resources; • arrangements which may be concentrated if accessed, or may be dispersed if the attraction is to be viewed at a distance; • ‘cells’ which may be specialized, and have limited access; • degrees of servicing and support which do (should) not impinge on the natural attractiveness of the node;
Circulation corridors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access systems providing circulation around the ecotourism region, and access ways to particular nodal attractions; • route systems which provide access to the ecotourism resource areas from servicing ‘base camps’ (see twin model, later); • route systems which may be designed deliberately for selected transport modes; • interchange points around the network for transfers from one transport mode to another;
Gateways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access points into a defined ecotourism/destination region;
Hinterland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • zone of protection in which tourism development is restricted, leaving the natural environment largely unpenetrated by tourism activity; • the residue of the region once the nodal servicing centers, the circulation routes and the gateways have been excised; • may be a buffer zone around a particularly significant ecotourism site, penetrated only by restricted access routes and transport modes

This simple model of an ecotourism destination region provides scope for geographically separating those areas which are to be used intensively for tourism activity (no-matter whether this is large-scale or small-scale) including the circulation routes and servicing centers, from the general natural environment resources which need protection/conservation so that they retain their ecological attractiveness and significance, and so that their sustainability can be managed.

The **Corridor Model** is characterized by its route systems through the ecotourism region providing access to the ecotourism resources. This general model, and its many variants,

has particular usefulness for conservation areas, wilderness regions, and hill country zones. Its origin is linked to the principles of the conservation movement which include providing limited access to sensitive environmental areas, surrounding core areas with buffer zones providing limited access and support development, small excised support servicing nodal points and controlled circulation through the conserved area. Its principal characteristics are:

Network of principal routes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • with supporting secondary routes and trails;
Network patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • corridor access <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • through the protected region (with no detours); • to targeted trail heads and significant sites (as detours from the principal route), either to cul-de-sac sites, or as a sub-circuit; • to secondary loops through sub-regions (providing particular touristic experiences or access to selected sites).

This model provides geographical referencing for differentiated zones of access, with controlled access through a series of sub-zones designed to protect the ecological integrity of the core environmental (ecotourism) zone. Planners concerned with both the conservation and tourism development of wilderness areas may differentiate the trail systems according to, for example, (a) a route hierarchy, (b) potential tourism experiences (usually segregated into active or passive tourism categories), and (c) configuration (with single or multiple/parallel routes, loops, and branches).

The **Twin Model** is a hybrid of the first two models. Its principal characteristic is that it provides a **‘base camp’** at the outer perimeter of the ecotourism region, accommodating most if not all of the essential support services for the excursion into the protected ecotourism region. The twinning comes from the association of the two components – the base camp and the ecotourism attraction. In some circumstances the base camp may be an attraction in its own right.

5. MANAGEMENT REGIMES

If ecotourism is a realistic development proposition, it is important that the resources are managed so as to achieve a state of sustainability.

Various types of management regime have been developed and advocated by, for example:

- protocols and agendas from international meetings and reports such the Rio Agenda 21, the SIDS agenda, UNEP Principles, UNCSD advocacies, UN and NGO guidelines;
- tourism industry groups, such as PATA, WTTC;
- NTOs

- RTOs,
- Research institutes, tourism interest lobby groups, such as TIES.

Amongst the most common advocacies have been:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • industry self-regulation; • government-imposed regulations; • government technical assistance packages; • industry-based codes of practice for ecotourism operators; • reward systems (for good practice); • government accreditation programs; • industry accreditation programs; • rapid assessment models; • financial assistance programs (for approved development forms, styles); • partnership programs; • community-based programs; • codes of practice (behaviour) for (eco) tourists. |
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Each of these management forms has its own characteristics, and each is dependent upon supportive structures and pre-requisite resources (human, finance, skill, knowledge, and organization). Each circumstance will determine which of the forms is appropriate, and may determine whether one or more forms may be implemented concurrently. There may not be an easy transferability of a form successful in one episode of ecotourism management to another; although there may be similarities, each episode will have to have its own purpose-designed management regime, not least to cope with the localized political, cultural, economic, and organizational factors.

CONCLUSION: SOME DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

The principal questions which remain to be posed address the special circumstances of the Pacific region. Among the difficult questions are the following:

- is ecotourism a viable strategy in the region, and everywhere in the region ?
- will (or should) any national ecotourism strategies be independent and competitive or integrated across the region and cooperative ?
- what are the necessary strategic capacities needed to support the creation, development and implementation of sustainable strategies of ecotourism ?

Influences on the viability of ecotourism. In addition to the availability of suitable ecotourism resources, there are three generally important strategic linkages which will influence the viability of ecotourism in any region. These linkages are:

- **between ecotourism resource regions and the principal origins of ecotourists:** the prevailing evidence is that the most desirable locations are often in developing countries, and that the visitors to these locations are from the principal metropolitan developed countries of North America, Europe and Japan. Although there is a day recreation interest in natural settings to be found in most countries, the most dramatic tourist flows to ecotourism settings are to the ecological ‘honey pots’ of the South American, South African, South-east Asian and East Asian/Pacific regions;
- **between ecotourism as a principal and a companion attraction:** most evidence points to the targeted regions exploiting ecotourism to create a potential competitive market edge in the international arena, whether or not ecotourism is the principal attraction;
- **between the pre-requisites of tourism and ecotourism:** the evidence is that ecotourism is principally a special form of tourism which is dependent upon many of the basic pre-requisites of general tourism – infrastructure, accommodation, transport, support services, information, marketing, human resources.

Regional issues. The principal data-collecting agencies project continuing growth in tourism activity in the Asia-Pacific region. However, the generalized data camouflages the real situation in the Pacific island countries, where the growth has been, and is not projected to be as dramatic as in the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. One consequence of this situation is that the already successful tourism destinations (sometimes referred to as ‘the honey pots’) are positioning themselves to sustain their current attractiveness, and maneuvering to capture new market segments by exploiting their ecotourism potential. The accumulated tourism profile, infrastructure and experience of these ‘honey pots’ creates a significant advantage for them over the other Pacific countries which may lack commensurate attractiveness and servicing capability.

Each of the Pacific island countries, territories, regions and localities will develop their own appreciation of their capacity to be important players in ecotourism in the Pacific region. Among the difficult questions to be addressed are the following:

- how comparable, competitive and complementary are the ecotourism resources in the region ?
 - in the world-wide marketplace;
 - in the regional marketplace;
 - as discrete resources – for a full ecotourism experience;
 - as value-added experiences.
- how sustainable are the ecotourism resources ?
 - capacity thresholds and limits to acceptable change
 - conservation, remedial strategies
- how adequate are the support resources ?
 - skills, knowledge;
 - services;

- accessibility;
- local, immigrant, expatriate;
- education, training.
- could there be cooperative, mutual-support strategies within and across the region ?
 - to contribute to an aggregate regional ecotourism profile;
 - to ease the potentially detrimental consequences of excessive demand in sensitive environments :
 - to create complementary attractions and sites;
 - to divert attention to locations where similar experiences can be enjoyed without aggravating harmful consequences ?
 - by integrating independent strategies:
 - by formulating a region-wide strategy
 - how would a cooperative strategy work ?

The over-riding strategic questions for the future of ecotourism in the Pacific region are whether a composite strategic structure is desirable, can be created and can be sustained.

The operational context in the Pacific region is of multiple jurisdictions, a diversity of ecological resources, access difficulties, and different commitments to any form of tourism. Despite its exotic location, and the mystique of ‘the South Pacific’, the region is faced with severe competition from other ecology-rich regions of the world. In order to be competitive, and especially to at least mitigate potential locational and logistical difficulties, the member countries in the region may need to address capacity-building strategies on several levels:

- capacity to determine the rationale for, and the acceptable styles of ecotourism;
- capacity to conduct resource inventory and analysis exercises;
- capacity to create appropriate geographical, organizational and management frameworks;
- capacity to integrate functional strategies – ecotourism within tourism, tourism within other national strategies, national within Pacific-wide strategies;
- capacity to integrate spatial strategies – locality within region, region within country;
- capacity to achieve short-term and longer-term requirements in terms of human resources, financial resources, technical resources.

A final strategic statement:

“The mere availability of the requisite resources may not be sufficient to sustain either a viable ecotourism experience or a viable ecotourism business: those resources would need to meet a range of pre-requisite criteria.”