Ecotourism – the experiences of three European providers

Laura Galloway*,
Amos Haniff,
Nina Jakobi,
Manuel A. Correia Dias Parente Patrocinio

School of Management & Languages, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, EH14 4AS, *l.galloway@hw.ac.uk, 0131 451 8286

Abstract
Ecotourism has emerged as a niche within the tourism market. Somewhat vaguely defined in literature, the term fundamentally comprises educational aspects such as promotion of sustainability and active participation for local development at its conceptual core; it therefore describes a future-oriented endeavour to protect natural heritage while supporting local communities and contributing to economic regeneration of remote areas. In the private sector, which this paper focuses on, it hence basically aims to link revenue generation with conservation through education and integration. Currently, the ecotourism market is experiencing rapid growth, resulting in an intricate predicament on how to mitigate the effects of growth on sustainability. While conservation and economic exploitation might seem inherently contradictory, there is an opportunity for mutual benefit for both entrepreneurs and communities within the concept of ecotourism as a rural business strategy. The paper at hand aims to research on rural entrepreneurship in this regard; it employs a case study methodology, surveying and comparing small ecotourism venues in three countries (Portugal, Greece and Scotland) in respect to terminology usage and compliance, opportunities detectable in the different markets and support available from national authorities. Findings, while indicating favourable conditions for business development, reveal a divergence between principal advocacy for ecotourism and practical support actually retrievable for entrepreneurs.
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Introduction
The current paper aims to investigate the experiences of three rural eco-tourism firms in Scotland, Portugal and Greece with a view to providing some information about the potential benefits of eco-tourism for the rural economy, particularly in terms of the contribution ecotourism entrepreneurship might make. Specific objectives include to explore the feasibility of ecotourism ventures in the rural economic context, and to compare the activities of the founders of these firms with that discussed internationally in the academic literature in terms of market demand and experience.

The Ecotourism Opportunity
Eco-tourism is not well-defined in the academic or popular literature. The International Eco-tourism Society define it as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (TIES, 2011) and thereby they separate it conceptually from nature-tourism which they define as simply tourism to places of natural significance or beauty. They describe eco-tourism as that which has sustainability at the heart of its agenda, and cite the 1992 Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry statement that eco-tourism "meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future.” Honey (2008, p.4) states that “although often equated with nature tourism, ecotourism, properly understood, goes further, striving to respect and benefit protected areas as well as the people living around or on these lands”. With these somewhat opaque definitions in mind, it is important to separate ecotourism from an emerging ‘greening’ of tourism generally.

Certainly, there is increasing awareness, interest and engagement with the environmental, conservation and ecological protection agendas throughout the (particularly) western world, and there is compelling evidence that this is leaking at an ever increasing rate into the preferences for tourism amongst consumers (Ayala, 1995; Budeanu, 2007, Honey, 2008). Ayala (1995, p.351) claims that hotels, resorts and otherwise tourist-oriented providers are increasingly adapting their practices to engage with the environmental and conservation agenda, particularly in the areas of “waste management, water conservation and purchasing”. Ayala identifies that this is not sufficient to render provision ecotourism, as critical to the concept are additionally “provision of learning and experiencing” (ibid). Honey (2008, p. 443) concurs, summarising some efforts as amounting to not much more than what she calls “ecotourism lite, which offers tidbits of nature or minor environmental reforms such as not changing the sheets daily”. Again, Honey stresses the additional components of education and experience as essential to ecotourism proper as well as engagement and conservation of nature and environment for local communities, present and future. Therein lies a potential paradox, however, as with the growing interest in and provision of ecotourism, there is the obvious extrapolation of the danger of it becoming an oxymoron in the global context: how can increases at a global level in ecotourism be reconciled with the fundamental conservation aims at the heart of ecotourism.

According to Budeanu (2007) the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) estimate that 850 million people travel as tourists annually and this number is increasing (though recession-based fluctuation is observable). Within this large tourist
market, as a result of changing attitudes to environmental concerns, the ecotourism market is experiencing unprecedented growth, comprising five to ten per cent of the market and growing at three times the rate of other types of tourism (Honey, 2008; also Campbell, 1999; Uddhammar, 2006; Rajagopal, 2008). It has long been established that tourism has a negative effect on the environment, both in terms of travel to destinations and the effects of concentrations of visitors on the destinations themselves (e.g., Rose, 2011), and it is to this apparent paradox in the ecotourism market rationale that the paper now turns.

The Ecotourism Paradox
Budeanu (2007, p. 500) notes, “popular tourist destinations are becoming overcrowded, and suffer from water and air pollution, litter, dirty seawater and beaches, congestion, aesthetic pollution…shortage of resources and waste overcapacity”. Budeanu goes on to predict that this is set to worsen as tourism continues to grow. This in itself is one of the rationales behind much of the conservation efforts of regular tourism providers and, indeed, ecotourism as a segment of the greater tourist market (Uddhammar, 2006; Laszlo and Zhexembayeva, 2011). At the same time though, researchers are noting the inherent contradiction in the rationale for conservation and a growing global market: Kuo (2008) questions the logic of a rural conservation agenda supported by an increasing market; Cengiz (2007) and Uddhammar (2006) express concern about the sustainability in conservation terms of the development of national parks for ecotourists in Turkey and in Africa and India respectively; Panzieri and Marchetti (2003) question the long-term effects of ecotourism on the environment in Italy; and so on and so forth. While this paradox cannot be ignored, there are also examples throughout the literature illustrating how it might be mitigated. For example, Fitzsimmons (2008) finds that the damage threatened by an increasing interest in exploring coral reefs has led the industry to adapt by affording tourists access to ‘sacrificial reefs’ in order to protect other ‘pristine’ natural reefs that would be threatened by excessive human visitation. Through this, the economic, educational and conservation agendas are pursued in tandem.

Ecotourism as an Economic Regeneration Activity
One of the most commonly cited reasons for engaging with ecotourism is the economic benefit it may afford local areas. The OECD recently reported the NORA region (coastal Norway, Iceland, Faroe Islands and Greenland) as prime territory that could benefit economically from ecotourism. The NORA region is characterised by its isolated geography. This has marginalised it economically, but it is this remoteness itself that is a marketable commodity in ecotourism terms (OECD, 2011). The World Bank cites three aims of ecotourism: economic growth; poverty reduction; and conservation and biodiversity funding. It states that it “offers valuable opportunities for generating revenues for development and for conservation” (World Bank, 2003, p. 1). There is, therefore, increasing identification of ecotourism as a means by which economic regeneration can be afforded and this recognition is at both the regional level (for example, Ibrahim and Gill, 2005, in Barbados; Sol Sapo, 2011 in Portugal), and international level (as reported in Pelanatureza Magazine, 2011, the United Nations encourages member countries to invest in ecotourism). There is, subsequently, similar rhetoric at government level in many countries (eg. Cision, 2010). Honey (2008, p. 444) explains the two-stranded rationale of conservation and economic value further: “At the local level, ecotourism principles have become part
of many rural struggles over land, resources and tourism profits…In the most fragile environments, like the Galapagos, well-run ecotourism is the only option [to avoid] irreparable damage to the environment…In other instances, ecotourism is clearly more profitable than alternative economic activities”.

Ventures in the ecotourism sector come in a variety of forms. The World Tourism Organisation identifies public, private and non-governmental organisations involved in ecotourism (WTO, 2000). The current paper insofar as it concerns business opportunity and entrepreneurship is concerned primarily with the private sector, and there is much commentary on the requirement of support to establish and maintain ecotourism businesses within it. Ecotourism firms are regarded both as potential contributors to marginalised economies and as alternative tourist offerings in the context of the environmental damage the tourism industry as a whole makes. For example, Budaenu (2007, p. 501) cites various international organisations that “advocate the need to increase awareness and tourist participation in initiatives aimed at sustainable tourism”. Concurrently, the World Bank (2003) identifies a need for collaboration between sectors to support enterprise in ecotourism. In an industry based on providing natural resource experiences to tourists with the aim of conserving those natural resources and generating profit from affording visitation to or participation with them there are obvious multi-sector implications; governments may have responsibility for environment; local populations may have stakeholder interest in conservation; local authorities may have ownership of many natural resources; and some natural phenomenon, while commercially exploitable, just exist outside of capitalist (or any non-natural) infrastructure. Thus, is there room for the small trader in this milieu? Kuo (2008) claims that there is, and while acknowledging the potential paradox of conservation and increasing markets, identifies an opportunity for local economies to benefit from the enterprise of individuals. Kuo notes the particular suitability of rural areas, corroborated many times over in the literature, as those that can advantage most. Rural areas by definition are sparsely populated; the UK Post Office (2006) defines a rural area as having a population of fewer than 10,000. Low populations, borne of topography, lack of accessibility or historic chance, often lead to cleaner, greener environments. While most of the western populations are urban-based, rural locations are spaces to which tourists have long been attracted, separate from urban life and work and closer to nature. As the ecological agenda has increased in public consciousness, the relative appeal of rural locations as tourist destinations has switched from a ‘push’ from the cities to a ‘pull’ to the country. As Panzieria and Marchettini (2003, p. 177) put it: “environmental integrity is in itself a basis for tourism”.

Ecotourism and Rural Entrepreneurship
There is a considerable body of evidence confirming the extent of structural change experienced in the recent past across rural economies of Europe and North America (Cosh and Hughes, 2000; Laukkanen and Niittykangas, 2003) though much variation in the financial and employment performance of the rural economy prevails (Terluin, 2003). In many countries there has been a shift from the traditional sectors of agriculture and extraction to a predominance of small businesses (Smallbone, et al., 2002; Roberts, 2002; Ramsey, et al., 2003; Deakins, et al., 2004) either new or diversified (Rosa 2001). Much of this rural small business activity is employed in pursuit of opportunities borne of new ideologies and changing tends in consumer behaviour (Rajagopal, 2008). There is, therefore, a rationale for the development of
ecotourism within the private rural sector. The following sections will provide some information on the activities and experiences of three such private ventures in Scotland, Portugal and Greece.

**Generation of Research Questions**

The extant literature suggests two general issues emergent and under-researched. First, there is confusion regarding ecotourism. While robust definitions are available, there is also some evidence that exploitation of modern environmental concerns amongst consumers has led to the packaging of some tourism offerings as ecotourism when in fact they are little more than standard offerings that have employed greener (than previous) services, such as reducing the amount of laundry in hotels (an activity that could also be cynically ascribed to cost cutting). To preface the research, therefore, the study generates Research Question 1:

**RQ1:** Are the small rural ecotourism firms included in the current study actually offering ecotourism?

The second issue emerging from the literature is that there exists a lack of understanding about the opportunities for and roles of private small firms in the rural ecotourism sector and the extent to which governments, while placing environmental responsibility high on their agendas, are supportive of these firms, particularly in the context of the potential growth in the ecotourism market. From this research gap Research Questions 2 and 3 are thus generated.

**RQ2:** To what extent is ecotourism a sustainable business opportunity for small firm providers in Greece, Portugal and Scotland?

**RQ3:** How supported are ecotourism firms in Scotland, Portugal and Greece in terms of starting an ecotourism business?

**Methodology**

The current study uses a case study methodology as advocated by scholars such as Yin (2003). In depth telephone interviews were conducted with the proprietors of ecotourism firms in Scotland, Greece and Portugal. To homogenise the sample to some extent, one selection criteria applied was that each case should cater for its own national market (i.e., they were not foreign-focused resorts). Each interview was administered in the native language of the informant, recorded, and later transcribed in English. Translation of the Greek and the Portuguese interviews to English was carried out by researchers fluent and native in Greek and Portuguese respectively, and fluent in English. Interviews were intended to elicit as much information as possible, so following Yin (ibid) all were informal and semi-structured, using only an interview guide with several broad cues to afford focused conversation facilitated by trust and rapport. For the purposes of triangulation of the data, and to provide detailed inspection of Research Question 1, pertaining to whether or not firms’ are in fact providing ecotourism, literature about each firm, including publicity materials, press coverage and the firm’s website was examined in some detail. For the purposes of eliciting sensitive information and opinion, it was agreed with participants that all cases would be anonymized.

**The Cases**

**Greek Case**

The Greek ecotourism venture is a small eco-cruise firm operating amongst the islands and coastline of Greece since 2004. It provides accommodation and activities, with a particular focus on eco-friendly sailing and diving. The small crew is
comprised of biologists, environmental researchers, diving instructors and photographers. The firm applies a responsible travel policy which comprises distinctive environmental care with support for the local economy and community. The approach is a holistic one; from the use of biodegradable materials, recycling and reductions of energy consumption to educational activities. As well as specific eco-based activities, guests are encouraged to participate in the cruise rather than observe it.

Portugese case
The Portugese ecotourism firm, established in 2008 and based in the Tomar region of central Portugal, aims to provide leisure and discovery through the practice of sustainable tourism. They also run projects aimed at enabling the development of tourism based on historical and cultural heritage with a focus on contributing to this and local identity. Activities offered include hiking, visits to museums, historical monuments, etc. In addition, they offer workshops and courses related to environmental, cultural and ethnographic issues.

Scottish Case
Based in the Northern Isles, the Scottish ecotourism venture was started in 1992. It currently manages two nature reserves and operates tours to many of Scotland's wildlife locations. Activities are designed not only to find wildlife, but for the full experience of habitats and destinations. All branches of wildlife and natural history are covered, with bird-watching being a main activity, but including also cetaceans, wild flowers and insects. The founder has a background in wildlife management and research, and the firm has as a focus the provision of hands-on experience of nature conservation. The firms advocates sustainable practice and provides introduction to and education on Scottish wildlife.

Findings
RA1: Are small independent firms who claim to offer ecotourism actually offering ecotourism?

Based on the criteria specified in the literature, and specifically by Ayala (1995) and Honey (2008), the study finds that each firm sampled does indeed represent ecotourism as robustly defined. Each adhere to eco-friendly practices; engage with the conservation agenda at a local level; include experience and practice in their offerings; and explicitly proffer education. Each of the firms is owned and staffed by specialists, and all employ local people from the immediate rural locale. All also include visits to or consultancy with external practitioners, thereby they comprise a valuable part of a wider business chain.

RA2: To what extent is ecotourism a sustainable business opportunity for small firm providers in Greece, Portugal and Scotland?

Each of the three interview participants claimed that the markets they attract are growing as interest grows in ecology and ecotourism. For the Greek firm this includes a wide demographic and includes international trade as well as the home market, which was the original target. Similarly, while the Portugese proprietor admitted her firm is not yet in profit, since it is a new venture she is not disturbed by this. She
claims that demand is strong amongst her mainly mid-life market, particularly as a result of the strictly defined eco-tourism activities the firm offers: “at the moment there are more people interested in such activities...in the sort of activities that have the physical and educational parts...at the moment there is emerging a public with an interest in these things”.

The Scottish proprietor’s experience would support this optimism. He stated that it took seven years for his firm to profit, but that a momentum has been achieved since then (85 per cent of his mainly older and retirement age clientele are return visitors) and the market is increasing. While competition is also increasing, the Scottish proprietor notes that focus on quality of offerings has afforded him sustainability: “I make sure that my guests have a holiday. Of course the main interest is to show them all aspects of wildlife – mammals, butterflies, bees – and to tell them something about land management, but its within the framework of a leisure holiday”.

RQ3: How supported are ecotourism firms in Scotland, Portugal and Greece in terms of starting an ecotourism business?

Each of the three informants in the study were generally content with the business environment for starting and operating an ecotourism firm. Specific issues raised include the ease with which it had been possible to start up in each country, with few bureaucratic or regulatory barriers, and this is largely similar due to the European context. However, there was a consistent lack of external support identified for each case. The Scottish proprietor claimed that there is a lack of direct support for eco-tourism firms in Scotland despite public local, national and international advocacy of the industry. However, he also claims that since “there are not too many regulations controlling the business”, he is not dissatisfied overall. Similarly, the Greek proprietor was not unhappy about the support environment, though as with the Scottish firm, the Greek firm had not benefited from any eco-tourism (or other) support at local or national level. Conversely, the Portugese proprietor expressed some frustration. It is likely that this is most evident in this case because the Portugese firm is still an early stage venture and as such might be expected to be more desirous of support. Certainly the proprietor expressed frustration at a lack of support of a venture with a multi-agenda contribution to make: “quite bad in my opinion...we are waiting for aids but we cannot get anything at all”.

Conclusions
The study finds that despite providing very distinct services, each of the three eco-tourism firms in the three different European contexts consider that the market is increasing and business opportunity and potential are good. Thus, similar to Rajagopal (2008) and Honey (2008), based on the different demographics attracted to the three eco-tourism niches the firms operate in, there is strong indication of broad increase in eco-tourism uptake. In the three cases studied, apart from the value of the firms themselves and the employment of staff, there is a greater contribution to the local economies they operate in as they form a part of wider local business networks, both indirectly by attracting tourists to local areas, and directly in that they all include in their offerings visits to or consultancy or training from external parties. While difficult to quantify, there is no doubt that this comprises value adding to the local areas in which they operate, and indeed, a rural regeneration contribution is implied.
Despite advocacy for ecotourism on the basis of its economic and conservation potentials from national governments, the UN, the World Bank, the OECD and the World Tourism Organisation, the current study finds no evidence of direct support for it in the three case studies. Even at local level, where the extant literature identifies that ecotourism, if managed appropriately, has the potential to mediate some of the contraction in rural economies and help maintain the integrity of local culture and nature, there appears to be little in the way of support for those who choose to pursue it in the private enterprise context, at least in the three regions included in the analysis here. From the entrepreneurship perspective there appears a mismatch between public acknowledgement of the potential benefits of ecotourism, particularly for rural areas, and business support practice as experienced by those who start firms in this sector. If global and national agendas include ecotourism as a means by which conservation and economic advantage can be harnessed, private venturing, cannot be excluded. Indeed, with its market focus and itinerant innovation, as well as its ability to harness local knowledge and skills, ecotourism venturing, as observed in this paper, has a lot to contribute and the signs are that this potential will continue to increase. As such ecotourism entrepreneurs may merit greater support than merely positive rhetoric.

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