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WILDLIFE TOURISM ENTREPRENEURS THE WAY AHEAD IN ATTAINING SUSTAINABILITY

Pranjal Kumar Mahanta & Y. Venkata Rao***

Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of the link between sustainability and entrepreneurship. Wildlife tourism is one area where there is a high degree of involvement of the entrepreneurial sector, and in many instances there is a budding appreciation of the role played by these entrepreneurs towards sustainable tourism. However, there are cases where they fail to comply with the sustainability goals. This article discusses the connection between these entrepreneurs and the issues of sustainability, problems they face in adopting sustainable business practices and measures that are essential for them towards realizing the goal of sustainable tourism.

* Research Scholar, Department of Tourism Studies, Pondicherry University, Puducherry-605 014.

** Department of Tourism Studies, Pondicherry University, Puducherry-605 014.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of entrepreneurship within the tourism industry. From the late 1980s, entrepreneurship within the small business sector became more closely researched in tourism studies (Shaw and Williams, 1998; Buhalis and Cooper, 1998). The emphasis is on serving the niche markets created by the demand for specialized tourism products. Wildlife tourism is one such area. The majority of wildlife tourism activities are considered to be in smaller, niche-tourism business enterprises (Beeton, 2004). In fact, small to medium size wildlife tourism enterprises make up the majority of wildlife tourism enterprises.

Koh and Hatten (2002) asserts that the tourism entrepreneur is the persona causa of tourism development and that he/she is responsible for transforming tourism resources into tourist attractions. They define tourism entrepreneur as, "a creator of a touristic enterprise motivated by monetary and non-monetary reasons to pursue a perceived market opportunity legally, marginally, or illegally". Keeping in harmony with this definition, an attempt is made here to define Wildlife Tourism Entrepreneur (WTE). A Wildlife Tourism Entrepreneur (WTE) is someone who discovers an opportunity in the wildlife tourism business activity and then creates and develops, by taking calculated risks, a successful business venture out of it with or without the economic factor, i.e. profit maximization and being the sole motivation. The issue of illegally pursuing a market opportunity does not arise here because wildlife tourism is not considered illegal as is the case with some other types of tourism such as sex-drug-gaming tourism which are considered illegal in many communities. Even in places where consumptive wildlife tourism (hunting and fishing) are practiced, they are permitted by the law of the respective countries and as such not considered illegal at all.

WTEs include wildlife resorts and hoteliers, wildlife tour operators, wildlife tour promoters, community based enterprises, not-for-profit organizations and government owned enterprises. In Australia alone, there are atleast 1196 enterprises that include wildlife as a planned component of the experience they offer to tourists (<http://www.crctourism.com.au>). The small to medium sized wildlife tourism enterprises are characterized by entrepreneurs who have diverse range of motives for entering the industry and very different employment experiences. Many WTEs have strong lifestyle aspirations. They want to live and work in an attractive environment and are least motivated by economic factors. For example, in North America, entrepreneurs were attracted to the Yellowstone National Park area because of quality-of-life variables (Snepenger et.al., 1995). There has been a growing recognition of the role played by WTEs in sustainable tourism operation, adoption

of environmentally and socially responsible business practices. Quite a good number of these entrepreneurs are charting out a new course of tourism that is socially conscious and environmentally sustainable.

In the light of above, an attempt has been made to review the relevant literature on the entrepreneurship in tourism in general and wildlife tourism entrepreneur's role and responsibility in promoting sustainable development while advancing wildlife tourism business in particular. The paper also brought out the elements of sustainable development, considered by the WTEs.

2. Sustainability and Entrepreneurship

Sustainable development is a relatively recent concept and was given thrust in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), better known as the Brundtland Commission, which defines it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Sustainable entrepreneurship is a spin-off concept from sustainable development (Crals and Vereeck, 2005) and is defined as the continuing commitment by businesses to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce, their families, the local and global community, as well as future generations (World Business Council for Sustainable Development).

The concept of sustainability is having long-term orientation towards future generations as much it has for the present. The issue of sustainability goes beyond a company's sole motive of profit maximization. Rather, it incorporates such responsibilities for the companies as towards the natural environment and the society at large that have to be realized alongside. Sustainable entrepreneurs are those that contribute to sustainable development by doing business in a sustainable way. They allow the interests of the stakeholders to be part of the decision making process. They are more concerned about the environment and work in a manner so that their operations don't have a detrimental effect upon it. They strive for the upliftment of the local communities and the neighborhood.

Crals and Vereeck (2005) argues that sustainable development deals with the 3P's viz. 'People', 'Planet', and 'Profit', all of which have to be satisfied before an entrepreneurial activity can be labeled as sustainable. 'People' is about the behavior of the entrepreneurs in social and ethical issues. 'Planet' is concerned about taking care of the natural environment. 'Profit' does not solely relate to purely financial results of an enterprise but also about the use and allocation of value added from employment and investments.

Sustainable entrepreneurship requires how entrepreneurs incorporate their businesses into environmental and social justice causes. A new breed of entrepreneur is creeping up the business ranks, fusing environmentalism with entrepreneurial spirit and potentially moving toward a reorganized ecological society (Bell, 2004). Although an entrepreneur envisions new business opportunities and creates enterprises, his visions may include concern for responsible resource use, sustainability, or social responsibility. The belief that entrepreneurs cannot be environmentally aware, or do not care to be, is quickly becoming outdated (Anderson, 1998).

3. Sustainability and WTEs

The meaning of sustainability in the context of tourism is understood through the concept of sustainable tourism development. Butler (1993) stated that, "...sustainable development in the context of tourism could be taken as: tourism which is developed and maintained in an area (community, environment) in such a manner and at a such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and well-being of other activities and processes". Three important aspects arise from the above statement. First, since tourism needs to be developed, this means it has to be economically sustainable. This implies that the tourism business must make reasonable and sufficient profits. The overriding criterion in fulfilling this objective is efficiency in the production and delivery of tourism services. Second, since a tourism business does not operate on a desert island, but is embedded in a socio-cultural environment, it has to be socially sustainable. This means it should incorporate social justice causes into its considerations and strive for the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of life. Third, as above, since a tourism business exists in a physical or natural environment, it has to be environmentally sustainable. The main consideration here is the preservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological integrity.

There needs to be a more productive and harmonic relation between the three aspects of sustainable tourism development and tourism entrepreneurs can play a major role in this direction. In the context of wildlife tourism, there is a growing recognition of an increasing number of more ethically driven WTEs concerned with certain lifestyle values. Such entrepreneurs appear to fit more closely with the increasing demands for more sustainable forms of tourism production based on the needs of the community. However, there is an unenthusiastic facet of the same coin. In many instances, WTEs tend to footloose because of their profit motive. The following discussion highlights on the issues of sustainability (economic, social and environmental) and the degree of involvement of WTEs in them.

3.1 Towards Environmental Sustainability

WTEs are central to wildlife tourism experience because of their potential to influence tourists' beliefs and actions toward wildlife and because of their importance in shaping both the nature and quality of tourist experiences. For a sizable segment of visitors, they promote such safaris as to educate them on wildlife and thereby leading to more ecologically sensitive and low-impact tourism. One such example is the Leopard Track Safaris which offer tours to the wilderness of South Africa, Swaziland, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Botswana in a manner that make tourists to enjoy these wonders, while not causing any negative effects to the natural environment (<http://www.ecotourdirectory.com>). In many areas, WTEs follow a sort of business model that calls for sustainability and incorporates environmental concerns into their considerations. For example, many wildlife resorts "go solar" in the production process, keep things local and reduce waste at every stage of production and consumption.

However, there is the negative side too. Though the volume of wildlife-based tourism has substantially increased, there is little direct linkage between the benefits reaped by WTEs and wildlife conservation. Moreover, in many areas, WTEs don't have a conservation policy. For example, in northern rivers region of New South Wales, fifty percent of wildlife tourism operators don't have an environmental policy (<http://wildlifetourism.org.au>). Thus, a luxurious wildlife resort charging over US \$ 500 per guest night and not having a conservation policy, depicts poor corporate behavior. Likewise, there have been cases of wildlife tourism where the needs of wildlife tourism operators to make profits have led to practices that are environmentally unsustainable. There is a greater need for the wildlife tourism operators to adhere to certain minimal impact guidelines. However, quite often, they fail to comply with these guidelines because they perceive that compliance will lead to reduced customer satisfaction.

3.2 Towards Social Sustainability

Tourism entrepreneurs act as cultural brokers within host communities. They can act as important bridges between the world of the tourist and that of the local community (Jafari, 1989). Socially, tourism entrepreneurs improve the attractiveness of the community as a place to live, work, recreate and retire (Koh & Hatten, 2002). Likewise, WTEs act as agents for societal change because of their unique and enthusiastic vision and their feelings of obligation towards local communities. They help in maintaining cultural traditions and alleviate poverty. Social justice concerns are often expressed through various means such as donation to local

children's education funds. They believe that working towards social progress at the local level would create a ripple effect which would eventually spread out of the local context. They are concerned with strengthening local ties within community. They do this in a number of ways. For example, wildlife resorts buy local organic produce and encourage fair trade to strengthen communities. Not only does buying from local suppliers make for better produce, it also cuts down on fuel usage and other waste. Involvement of indigenous people as guides and interpreters by the wildlife tourism operators adds a unique and authentic element to the wildlife tourism experience that is valued by tourists and adds depth to their understanding of wildlife. Therefore, training and employing local people as guides and interpreters is considered as a sustainable entrepreneurship strategy by the WTEs. This not only provides satisfied customers but also satisfied locals who become instrumental in the protection of both the natural and cultural environments that form the basis of the wildlife tourism industry. In many cases, WTEs provide support to the local communities in developing their own low-key tourism activities such as guided walks in reserved forests outside the national park limits.

However, everything doesn't seem to go well, as there is the other side of the coin which is quite unimpressive. In many instances, when a wildlife sanctuary or a protected area is opened up for tourism, entrepreneurs move in to en-cash on the popularity of that place. Unfortunately, a vast majority of the entrepreneurs are from outside. Hoteliers from other areas come and set up businesses. Similarly, people from outside the locality invest in vehicles for transporting tourists and for safari inside the park. Locals don't have the capability to invest in infrastructure, nor do they have the necessary skills and expertise to start and run their own business. Further, many of the jobs are created within the destination, the manpower for which is sourced from outside the locality. The locals end up being employed in the lower level and other menial jobs. The motivation for profits, higher tendency to import, employing key management personnel from their place of origin, and heavy reliance on their home based enterprises for a variety of activities such as marketing and transportation mean a high leakage and a low linkage to the community. The result is that it leads to increasing conflicts between the local communities and WTEs.

3.3 Towards Economic Sustainability

If a business isn't reasonably profitable, then it is meaningless to talk about environmental and social sustainability. WTEs resort to economic sustainability in two ways. First, they satisfy tourists' demand by constantly delivering the quality service that is demanded by wildlife enthusiasts, without compromising on the environmental and social dimension of sustainability. To achieve this end, often

they use the right information, through interpretive services, that visitors seek about the places they want to visit not only while they are on site, but also before and after their visit. This kind of services creates satisfied customers, and satisfied customers create positive word-of-mouth advertising and repeat visitation, all of which contribute to economic sustainability. Secondly, they create a type of local employment that is based on demands and unspoiled environment. They also make the local communities which often deal with persistent poverty and to harness the initiative in creating sustainable lucrative businesses on their own. This encourages more sustainable economic growth.

A sound business health is the basis of any industry, and wildlife tourism is no different. However, research on wildlife tourism enterprises indicate that many businesses are not doing well financially (McKercher, 1998; Higginbottom et.al., 2003). For example, two-thirds of kangaroo-related tourism enterprises in Australia say that managing their business was the most complex and difficult aspect of their operation (Higginbottom et.al., 2003). Further, in many countries such as Australia, wildlife tourism products have been traditionally underpriced (Beeton, 2004). The wildlife tour operators need to price their product so that it provides a reasonable income.

4. Constraints

WTEs face a number of problems in adopting and following sustainable business practices which directly or indirectly affect in attaining sustainable tourism. Some of the constraints are discussed here. First, WTEs don't have expertise in management skill and experience. It appears WTEs do not make adequate or appropriate use of essential management and operational practices. Financially, they are poorly managed. In addition, many SMWTE owners have lack of time for the management and administration of their business. Second, there is a lack of planning and research. The owners of the WT enterprises do not think in a strategic and holistic manner because they lack professionalism, knowledge, experience and specialized training. The absence of focused planning results from minimal pressure to create such plans. Third, there is a lack of adequate finance. WTEs suffer from under-capitalization. They don't receive timely and adequate capital from the financial institutions that hampers the smooth running of their business. Fourth, WTEs lack advertising and marketing skills and marketing funds as well. WTEs feel they lack funds to promote and market their products and services locally and internationally. Fifth, there is a lack of awareness of issues, risks and government regulations which are viewed as barriers towards sustainable wildlife tourism entrepreneurship. Sixth, though there has been a large increase in the number of initiatives aimed at tourism entrepreneurs, the measures of support have not always been correctly

tailored to the needs of WTEs. Support systems are often found to be too general which is insufficiently apt for wildlife tourism, lacking in quality, too expensive, inflexible, poorly targeted or promoted. Finally, there has been an over-emphasis on environmental management systems and certification at the expense of eco-efficiency, eco-design, integrated approaches (including environment, health, safety and quality) and sustainable production (based on renewable resources).

5. Suggested Initiatives

Initiatives need to be taken by the government and policymakers to encourage WTEs in adopting sustainable business practices that would lead towards realizing the goals of sustainable tourism. First, government support at all levels of entrepreneurship should be developed to make the wildlife tourism enterprise sustainable. The government should lend support to ensure that the services rendered by WTEs are of a high standard and that natural resources are collectively protected. The government should come out with appropriate policies and support that would encourage potential and emerging WTEs to enter the market in the light of strong competition faced from established ones. The government should assist these businesses by coordinating and monitoring policies, structure and regulations, and reducing taxation. Second, efforts should be made to improve effectiveness of marketing. The government should provide substantial publicity and subsidies to WTEs. WTEs should decide who its customers are (or will be) through undertaking marketing research as well as using existing marketing information from sources such as government agencies, marketing publications and academic institutions. Third, government and WTEs should ask for NGOs and academic institutions to provide technical and educational support. Another key activity for NGOs is building awareness about the negative impacts of tourism among WTEs. In this direction, a praiseworthy effort is taken up by Travel Operators for Tigers (TOFT), a non-profit joint venture of UK-based India-focused travel operators, and Global Tiger Patrol through eco-labeling of wildlife resorts in six tiger reserves in north India (<http://www.toftigers.org>). Fourth, it is of utmost importance to utilize the revenue generated by the business activities of WTEs to protect the ecologically sensitive wildlife habitats. For wildlife tourism to be sustainable, WTEs should be made accountable and should put substantial amount of their benefits back to the conservation of wildlife habitats. Towards this direction, setting up a separate protected area conservation tax would be a good option. Fifth, WTEs should also be made accountable towards the development of local communities. They should focus more on developing leadership and managerial skills of local communities to position them in higher paid jobs rather than restricting them to the lower paid jobs. Sixth, policy makers should constitute programs to promote indigenous WTEs as a desirable alternative to employment and publicly recognize and honor those who are successful in

achieving sustainable business practices. Finally, WTEs should be encouraged to form self-help networks, for example environment business, eco-efficiency and joint environmental management systems implementation clubs. This would continuously put sustainability on their agenda.

6. Conclusion

In order to identify best practice for wildlife tourism businesses, it is necessary that the issues of sustainability from the environmental, social and economic aspects need to be addressed (Beeton, 2004). However, as Higginbottom et al. (2003) found, many wildlife tourism businesses may be exemplary in one element, but not in others. A high degree of awareness about the business' environmental impact; a high level of concern for social justice and a low level of interest in economic success on the part of WTEs is the need of the hour. An integrated values of environmental integrity, social justice, fair trade, living wages, and the development of high quality services that would last generations is required. WTEs need to have an unusual mix of entrepreneurial spirit, and a sense of personal obligation to the environment and society. Focus should be on a forward-thinking orientation to influence values over the long term rather than make money in the short term and anticipate the effects of one's actions business plan on the environment and society at large.

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