

# Urban Ecotourism

## A Powerful Way to Resolve the Disputes on Traditional Ecotourism Theory\*

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**Abstract**—Immense amounts of empirical studies have shown that ecotourism is a wise choice of human beings to develop tourism in the process of dealing with environmental crisis. By embedding the core ideas of ecotourism into urban tourism, urban ecotourism is an extension of applying ecotourism theory to urban environment and a significant way to achieve urban sustainability. However, due to a complex of reasons, the research and practice of urban ecotourism is far from ideal. Viewing from the core ideas and controversial focus of traditional ecotourism theory, this paper demonstrates the inevitability of promoting ecotourism in cities, and points out that, after applying ecotourism theory to urban environment, instead of being intensified, the controversy would be eliminated or effectively alleviated as long as with scientific management and control. As a powerful way to resolve the disputes on traditional ecotourism theory, urban ecotourism provides a vast space for the expansion of urban ecotourism.

**Keywords**—urban ecotourism; ecocity; ecotourism; urban tourism

### I. INTRODUCTION

Around the 1970s, with the rise of environmentalism, improving the environment gradually became a general expectation of all mankind. In 1983, Ceballos Lascurain, a Mexican expert, first came up with the concept of “ecotourism”, emphasizing that: the object of ecotourism should be the natural ecological environment which would not be damaged by the ecotourism mode [1]. Later on, ecotourism has been widely promoted worldwide as the major way to realize sustainable development in tourist industry. According to the International Tourism Society (TIES), the global income of ecotourism is growing rapidly at 10%~12% per year. A large number of successful cases in the United States, Canada, Costa Rica, Kenya and other countries fully prove that ecotourism is a wise choice made by human beings in the process of dealing with environmental crisis after their in-depth reflection on the law of the development of human civilization and the evolution

of living environment [2].

In 1992, Elizabeth Boo, an American scholar, proposed that, the scope of ecotourism activities should not be limited to pure natural ecosystems, but should incorporate the humanistic ecosystems centering on or even related to natural ecosystems [3]. This viewpoint provides a theoretical basis for the future development of ecotourism in cities. As the most important space for human living and development, cities are the staging grounds for people, economy, material and culture. They are also the important places for tourists to conduct tourist activities. Urban ecotourism, as a branch of ecotourism, is a fruit of the further study of ecotourism. However, since the concept was put forward in 1996, urban ecotourism has been focused extensively on urban marketing in practice, which is in conflict with the original idea of the theory. Theoretically, due to the limitation of the initial orientation of “city sightseeing” as well as the intrinsic controversy about its theoretical foundation — traditional ecotourism theory, the fear of slipping into the mire of “pseudo-ecotourism” which over-consumes urban resources has been holding researchers back, leading to the slow progress in research. In this context, this paper demonstrates the inevitability of promoting ecotourism in cities from the perspective of the core ideas and controversial focus of traditional ecotourism theory, hoping to provide a theoretical reference for the further development of urban ecotourism in China.

### II. THE CORE IDEAS AND ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY OF TRADITIONAL ECOTOURISM CONCEPT

#### A. *The Core Ideas of Traditional Ecotourism Concept*

By reviewing the related studies abroad, we would learn several similar concepts since the introduction of “ecotourism” in the 1980s, such as “sustainable tourism”, “green tourism” and “low-carbon tourism”, etc. (see “Table I”). Although these concepts have similar backgrounds and are the different philosophies or modes of exploring sustainable development of tourism, they are subject to the influence of timing and cultural differences and differ from each other in their focuses. “Sustainable tourism” is a new idea of developing tourism suggested from the perspective of

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sustainable tourism development in the 1990s under the background of the sustainability concept being promoted. It emphasizes developmental continuity, intergenerational equity and commonality of action. While “green tourism” and “low-carbon tourism” were proposed at the turn of the century in response to the dramatic deterioration of living environment and global climate change, the former advocates healthy and eco-friendly travel modes, and the

latter conveys the core values of energy reduction [5]. Among the four similar concepts, “ecotourism” was first put forward, but not until 1992 when the sustainable development theory was introduced had it received widespread attention. As an important way to achieve sustainable tourism development, it focuses on two aspects: protecting the natural environment and safeguarding the interests of local communities and residents.

TABLE I. DISTINCTION OF ECOTOURISM AND RELATED CONCEPTS

Concepts	Backgrounds	Time of Proposal	Core Ideas
Sustainable tourism	Conflict between the development of human civilization and the crisis of living environment	1990s	Developmental continuity Intergenerational equity Commonality of action
Ecotourism	Conflict between the development of human civilization	1980s	Protecting the natural environment
Ecotourism	and the crisis of living environment	1980s	Safeguarding the interests of communities and residents Responsible travel modes
Green tourism	Dramatic deterioration of the mankind's living environment	1990s	Healthy and eco-friendly travel modes
Low-carbon tourism	Energy security and climate change	Early 21st century	Energy reduction

With a substantial agreement on the key issues about ecotourism, such as its naturalness, environmental protection, anti-massification, education and community interest protection, western scholars have gradually conducted more in-depth studies on ecotourism. In this paper, two authoritative databases, Elsevier and CNKI, have been used to retrieve relevant journal articles both at home and abroad, with the search time up to Oct. 2018 and the domestic

literature limited to CNKI listed Chinese core periodicals and CSCI retrieved papers. As can be seen from “Table II” the results show that: overseas studies have the largest number of the papers with keywords of “sustainable tourism” and “ecotourism”; while in domestic research, “ecotourism” has an overwhelming advantage, followed by low-carbon tourism and sustainable tourism. The popularity of “ecotourism” in China is thus clear to know.

TABLE II. COMPARISON OF THE NUMBER OF ECOTOURISM-RELATED PAPERS AT HOME AND ABROAD UNIT: PC

Keywords Database	Ecotourism	Sustainable Tourism	Low-carbon Tourism	Green Tourism	Total
<i>Elsevier</i>	416	1452	43	157	2068
<i>CNKI</i>	2003	65	144	31	2243

<sup>a</sup> Note: Search time up to Oct. 2018; domestic literature limited to CNKI listed Chinese core periodicals and CSCI retrieved papers

### B. The Academic Controversy About Traditional Ecotourism

The concept of “ecotourism” which sparked a global change in the way of tourism development has aroused extensive discussion among worldwide scholars. Some acclaimed ecotourism as the universal key to fix all tourism's ills [6]. Some believed that the advantages and problems of ecotourism should be viewed objectively. Callie (1998) stated that ecotourism was an “over-idealized and essentially controversial concept”, which means the application of ecotourism theory would inevitably be an issue full of problems and contradictions. Currently, the conflict between the ecotourism theory and practice is mainly reflected in three aspects.

1) *The contradiction between environmental protecting and economic profit-seeking*: In pursuit of minimizing the ecological impact through control to demonstrate the core ideas of “responsible tourism”, the tourist industry's nature and instinct of pursuing profits are neglected. On the one

hand, to protect the environment, ecotourism operators need to invest considerable amounts of financial, material and human resources to establish an environmental management system; on the other hand, the small scale of tourists, the highly constrained tourist activities and the apparent seasonality of natural tourism lead to an onerous burden on ecotourism operators.

2) *The contradiction between massification and de-massification of the consumer groups*: Western scholars have basically reached a consensus on the eco-tourists' characteristics of de-massification and high level. However, in the increasingly vast and growing tourist market, everyone has the travel right, and the moral standards for measuring ecotourism participants are not practical.

3) *The contradiction between purely natural ecology and compound ecology of the tourism resources*: Traditional ecotourism emphasizes exploring new ways of sustainable tourism development in natural eco-regions, but here the concept of “ecotourism” has been obviously narrowed.

Whichever type of tourism we are dealing with, the old ways of extensive development must be abandoned and the industrial thinking of harmonious coexistence and mutualistic symbiosis between human and nature as well as human and society shall be established.

### III. THE INEVITABILITY OF PROMOTING ECOTOURISM IN CITIES

The evolution of industrialization, the progress of urbanization, the changes in urban functions and the development of tourist industry co-create the rise and prosperity of the modern urban tourism. Urban ecotourism is a relatively new concept formed by applying ecotourism theory to urban environment. By embedding the core ideas of ecotourism into urban tourism, it is an extension of applying ecotourism theory to urban environment and a significant way to achieve urban sustainability.

#### A. Promoting the Eco-environmental Restoration

Weaver (2005) stated that the negative effects of tourist development on the environment might be exaggerated. According to the empirical studies in several cities, ecotourism products are more likely to become a catalyst for environmental restoration and other changes which improve rather than just maintain the status quo of the environment. For instance, when some migrants or native birds and other animals couldn't find the habitat in adjacent farmlands, cities provide them with temporary or long-term living space. At the same time, urban residents strengthen this function by frequently and actively feeding them [8]. This has also become a strong evidence that urban ecotourism is protecting biodiversity and promoting sustainable development. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the construction of ecological civilization remains a long-term state policy and has been integrated into the national "five-in-one" construction. Eco-city construction is a hallmark of human civilization progress and the direction of urban development. Urban ecotourism is an effective method to facilitate the eco-city construction which, in turn, would continuously promote the eco-environmental restoration and create a better environment for the urban ecotourism development. Both of them help each other forward in a virtuous circle.

#### B. Making Sure the Pressure of Transportation on Environment Under Control

The tourist industry in natural areas usually poses a big pressure on environment because of the transportation<sup>[9]</sup>. Flognfeldt (1997) once criticized that developing ecotourism in remote areas of Norway had a negative effect on environment<sup>[10]</sup>. The application of transport caused air and noise pollution in natural areas. Even worse, the damage to the natural environment for the construction of infrastructure such as airstrip, passenger terminal, parking lot and related services is horrifying. By contrast, urban ecotourism is more favorable. With the use of existing infrastructure, it increases the frequency of utilization and traffic volume to meet participants' needs, and the negative impact of transportation on environment has thus been effectively controlled.

#### C. Expanding the Size of Educated Group

Orams (1995) believed that education was a unique feature of ecotourism that distinguished it from other types of natural tourisms [11]. According to Boo (1990), the biggest hope for the ecotourism management department is to change tourists' attitudes and values so as to cultivate and encourage environmentally friendly behaviors [12]. Beaumont (1998) pointed out that the ecotourism in primitive natural environment was a kind of didactic transforming practice [13]. Nevertheless, due to the limited number of natural eco-tourist participants, the effectiveness of the educational function of natural tourism couldn't be fully displayed. While the urban ecotourism is able to provide valuable opportunities for the public to receive environmental education and let more people know the value of ecological protection, which helps bring the educational function of ecotourism into full play.

#### D. Enhancing the Stability of Operators' Earnings

The threshold of tourists' traveling distance decay is often affected by the time and cost of going to the tourist destination. In most cases, traditional eco-tourist destinations are located in remote areas, and meanwhile, the natural ecology is greatly influence by season and climate, therefore leading to severe seasonal fluctuations in ecotourism operators' income. On the contrary, compared with the remote original ecology, urban environment not only can provide more choices for potential participants, but also is less subject to the seasonality of tourism, which obviously enhances the stability of tourist operators' earnings.

#### E. Ensuring Multi-party Benefit Sharing

Gona (2004) presented that people worrying ecotourism might have stagnated and the idea of re-planning was mainly due to a significant reduction in donor funds for the support of eco-tourist infrastructure construction [8]. But cities usually have sound infrastructure and are able to absorb the influence of tourist industry better. They possess superior reception conditions that remote areas cannot compete with. Moreover, through a variety of ways like product development, planning, policy orientation and product marketing, we can integrate the mature urban tourist development experience into urban ecotourism to ensure that tourists, host communities and investors would all gain long-term benefits from this vibrant and healthy industry [14].

## IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the above analysis, it's evident that, as a concept derived from ecotourism, urban ecotourism not only provides a possibility for combing urban ecology with cultural protection, but also improves our understanding on the cities' value of protecting natural and cultural environments as well as local economic growth. It is a new idea of urban sustainable development. A large number of empirical studies has shown that, after applying the theory to urban environment, instead of being intensified, the disputes and contradictions about traditional ecotourism theory will be eliminated or effectively alleviated as long as with

scientific management and control, which offers a vast space for the expansion of urban ecotourism.

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