

Wildlife Tourism: Impacts, Management, and Planning

Karen Higginbottom (ed), 2004
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THE publishers of this edited volume rightly claim that it should be required reading for a varied audience interested in wildlife tourism including tourism professionals, wildlife managers, recreation managers, researchers, and general readers with an interest in the role of wildlife tourism. I volunteered to review this book, since I readily confess to being a wildlife tourist at times, and I was curious as to the inner workings of the industry. This volume provides an eye-opening viewpoint on wildlife tourism to someone outside the field.

The editor does an admirable job of pulling together a range of papers pertinent to wildlife tourism and provides introductory and closing chapters which lay out the groundwork and puts all the other chapters in context. Similarly, the contributing authors each present a thorough overview of the industry and offer guidelines on areas where the profession could develop and expand in future.

The book is divided into three main parts devoted to the wildlife tourism industry, the impacts of wildlife tourism, and managing and planning wildlife tourism. Within these, there is a wide array of topics covering everything from wildlife watching, the role of zoos, and consumptive wildlife tourism (a euphemism for hunting and fishing) to the positive and negative effects of wildlife tourism on wildlife, conservation, and host communities, the economics, marketing and business of wildlife tourism, and strategic planning for the industry movers and shakers. While I initially intended to skim over some of the chapters that I thought would be a bit dry (marketing, business planning), I actually found each of the chapters was quite readable and informative if not downright absorbing. While reading through this book, I could not help but reflect on some of my own previous experiences as a wildlife tourist (visiting Komodo dragons in Indonesia, trekking to a remote bat cave in the highlands of New Guinea, getting up close and personal with sea birds in a rookery in New Zealand, or even the memorable experience of having a wild seal pup approach and have a good sniff of me on Kangaroo Island in South Australia) and the wide range of wildlife tourism opportunities that are available.

However, I have a few warnings for those outside the wildlife tourism industry who may be interested in picking up a copy of this book for their personal library. First, this is not a real bargain coming in at

a whopping \$89.95 for a rather slender volume (compare to the recently published behemoth, *Conservation of Australia's Forest Fauna*, at over 1 000 pages for about 15% less in cost). But the volume of your volume is not the overriding criterion in judging a book, is it?

Second, as a conservation biologist with a profound sense of respect for the intrinsic value of life on our planet, I had a hard time reconciling a few notions that were put forth in this tome. In general, "wildlife" is a poorly defined concept and is often used in an arbitrary manner depending upon the context. Some common definitions refer to wildlife as "all living things, except people, that are undomesticated," "living organisms that are not in any way artificial or domesticated and which exist in natural habitats," or "any non-domesticated living organism, including plants, lower animals, and vertebrates." These definitions are inclusive, taking into account the whole variety of life forms and highlight the undomesticated nature of wildlife. Other common definitions make particular reference to, or leave out, specific taxonomic groups: for example, "any wild mammal, bird, reptile amphibian," or "a broad term that includes nondomesticated vertebrates, especially mammals, birds, and fish." The term wildlife, as used in this book, was strictly in reference to fauna, and, with a few exceptions, referred predominately to vertebrate fauna. As such there was no reference to tourism in relation to plants, plant communities or ecosystems, nor wildlife tourism in relation to other life forms. In fact the authors explicitly treat wildlife (i.e., animal) tourism as a narrow subset of nature-based tourism, special interest tourism, or ecotourism depending on the context, which I found to be an artificial distinction. In terms of wildlife tourism, why is visiting a zoo any different to visiting a botanical garden other than the taxonomic group being viewed?

Third, the basic forms of wildlife tourism that were explored in this volume include not only the more conventional "wildlife watching" (viewing or interacting with wildlife), but also the somewhat challenging ideas that "captive-wildlife tourism" (e.g., visiting zoos and wildlife parks, and indeed, going to the circus) and "consumptive wildlife tourism" (e.g., hunting, fishing, and, yes, even bull fighting) were in some way equated with wildlife tourism. In my humble estimation, viewing wildlife in a highly artificial captive setting or seeking wildlife out for the sole purpose of killing it are sad approximations of the uplifting, enriching experiences that seeing wildlife, behaving freely and interacting in its natural habitat, can bring to humankind. In particular, I found the chapters devoted to zoo tourism and hunting and fishing tourism had difficulty making the connection with wildlife tourism and conservation. Further, the chapter on hunting and fishing tourism, focused heavily on the situations in Germany and Australia, but could have made a much stronger case for the use of wildlife hunting for

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conservation purposes if the authors had focussed on issues in Africa and North America, where much of the large game hunting occurs.

Finally, make no mistake about it, wildlife tourism is an industry, and all profitable industries focus on using commodities for financial gain. The wildlife tourism industry is focussed on using wildlife as a commodity and while the authors propound that considerable conservation measures are or can be effected from wildlife tourism, my gut tells me that the industry has a long way to go to meet those goals. It appears as though this industry is primarily about using wildlife for commercial gain not about the wildlife itself, the host communities, or conservation. I truly believe the vast majority of small-scale wildlife tourism operators have scruples, operate in a sustainable manner, are conservation oriented, and have a vested interest in maintaining populations of wildlife. However, in marketing terms there may be a need to restrict access to a commodity to make it more desirable (Chapter 9); there may even be a vested interest from some unscrupulous wildlife tourist operators to keep some forms of wildlife scarce, thereby creating an artificially high demand

for a niche market of wildlife viewing or other wildlife tourism opportunities. Unfortunately there is no data to support or refute my suppositions.

This brings me to my last criticism of this book. As a scientist, I found it frustrating that while there were quite a number of anecdotal stories or case studies (generally highlighted in pull-out text boxes) used to illustrate the topic under discussion, there was no hard analysis of data, no synthesis of trends, no graphs, tables or figures showing the effects of wildlife tourism on conservation initiatives, or on wildlife, local communities, or economic indicators (the Triple Bottom Line of sustainability in wildlife tourism). Chapter 12 provides the sole statistic in the entire book: "strong positive relationships were found between overall satisfaction with the wildlife experience and how much visitors believed they learnt about wildlife (Pearson's $r = .563$)."

Granted, this book is not intended for a statistically-oriented, analytical audience, but I would have found it somewhat beneficial to provide at least a modicum of analyses to show the relationship between wildlife tourism and these triple bottom line indicators that the various authors strive for.