

Ecotourism and Certification: Confronting the Principles and Pragmatics of Socially Responsible Tourism

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Many ecotourism proponents advocate certification as a means to distinguish legitimate ecotourism from counterfeit 'greenwashed' products. This paper discusses efforts by certification advocates operating in global arenas to generate standards for measuring compliance with one dimension of widely accepted definitions of ecotourism, the stipulation that it should provide benefits to local communities. The paper then presents an ethnographic case study from Belize that reveals disagreements among ecotourism stakeholders in Belize and between them and international experts about the meaning of several key terms: who should count as 'local', what should count as 'participation' by locals, and what constitutes a 'benefit' to local communities. The author argues that divergent perspectives on these issues must be recognised and accommodated in the process of harmonising or standardising certification criteria for ecotourism; failure to do that could imperil both the principled and pragmatic rationales behind the requirement that ecotourism provide benefits to local communities.

Keywords: ecotourism, certification, ecolabeling, Belize, local communities, participation

Certification: Potential and Pitfalls

Certification programmes represent an increasingly important strategy for encouraging the sustainable production of goods and services. As the 1992 Earth Summit focused global attention on efforts to remake development in more sustainable forms, emerging trade regimes imposed limitations on the ability of governments to set environmental and social standards for businesses. Certification initiatives emerged as non-government, market-based interventions to promote sustainability by encouraging the preferential consumption of goods and services from companies that adhere to high social and environmental standards in their production (Conroy, 2002: 109). Since the Earth Summit, certification programmes have been created to define and measure sustainability in a number of industries.

Within the tourism industry alone, 104 certification or ecolabelling programmes have been developed (Honey & Stewart, 2002b: 4). Debate has ensued over the potential positive and negative impacts of such certification schemes. While certification initiatives aim to push the industry towards more sustainable operating practices, critics caution that developed countries and transnational corporations based in those countries will be likely to dominate the process of creating and implementing certification programmes, leading to programmes

that privilege the interests of the global North over the needs of the developing global South, and the concerns of the profit-oriented private sector over those of environmentalists (Sasidharan & Font, 2001; Sasidharan *et al.*, 2002). Resulting standards may be too low to provide adequate protection for the environment and too high for small and medium enterprises in developing countries to meet, exacerbating global inequities along a North–South divide. Additionally, it is not clear that the market for certified tourism products is sufficiently large to enable certification programmes to become economically viable (Sharpley, 2001). Further, scholars and practitioners on both sides of this debate agree that the proliferation of ecolabelling schemes in tourism has generated confusion among consumers, making it difficult for any programme to function effectively (Honey & Stewart, 2002a; Sanabria, 2002; Sharpley, 2001).

Several recent initiatives address these concerns. In 2000, an international workshop on Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Certification convened to address the problem of proliferating certification programmes by developing broadly applicable standards for ecolabelling programmes in tourism. The workshop brought together participants from twenty countries, who represented most of the leading sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification programmes, Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organisations involved in certification, academics, consultants, business leaders, and others with expertise in tourism and ecotourism certification and environmental management. The Mohonk Agreement they drafted is a two-tiered framework, with one set of criteria for certification in sustainable tourism and an additional set of criteria for ecotourism (this Agreement is reproduced as an appendix in Honey (2002b) and can also be found at www.rainforest-alliance.org/programmes/tourism/certification/mohonk.html). In related efforts, the Rainforest Alliance, The International Ecotourism Society, the Center for Ecotourism and Sustainable Development, the World Tourism Organisation, and the United Nations Environment Programme are collaborating to harmonise criteria for 'green' certification programmes in tourism and possibly to create an accreditation body for certification programmes in sustainable tourism and ecotourism (Buchara *et al.*, 2004). The Rainforest Alliance is also tackling the North–South divide in a project that targets training and technical assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises in five Latin American countries to enable their participation in certification programmes, at the same time that the project facilitates the harmonisation of best management practices and certification standards within the region (Buchara *et al.*, 2004). This paper calls attention to some issues that should be considered in the context of such initiatives to develop regional and global standards for certification.

Ecotourism as a Special Case: Principles and Pragmatics

The vast majority of certification programmes in tourism focus on the concept of 'sustainable tourism' applied broadly to the industry. However, proponents of ecotourism assert that it must be subject to broader and more stringent criteria of sustainability than mass tourism or variants such as nature or adventure tourism, in order to reflect the principles around which definitions of ecotourism have coalesced over the last decade (Epler Wood & Halpenny, 2001; Honey &

Stewart, 2002a). Early on, ecotourism was defined by The Ecotourism Society (now The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)) as 'responsible travel to natural areas, which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people' (Honey & Stewart, 2002a: 1). As the concept was elaborated, it became increasingly distinct from nature tourism and more explicitly normative (Blamey, 2001: 6; Campbell, 1999: 535). The current executive director of TIES defines ecotourism as

travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights. (Honey, 2002b: 381)

Ecotourism's proponents assert that it is 'qualitatively different' from other forms of tourism, including nature tourism; while nature tourism is defined on the basis of what travellers do, ecotourism focuses on 'the *impact* of their travel on both the environment and the people in the host country. Ecotourism posits this impact should be positive' (Honey & Stewart, 2002a: 1, italics added). As a result,

Ecotourism standards go beyond questions of ecoefficiency (i.e., those that are both cost-saving and environmentally better) and are more responsive to national and local stakeholder concerns. They look beyond the tourism entity itself and ask how ecotourism companies can contribute to conservation of protected areas and what mechanisms are in place to ensure that benefits reach local people. (Honey & Stewart, 2002a: 63)

This paper focuses on the widely accepted stipulation that ecotourism must benefit local communities, a principle with both ethical and pragmatic roots. Ethically, the requirement that local communities benefit from ecotourism and participate in decision making is 'the socially responsible, or right, thing to do', as it seeks to diminish inequalities between North and South and across class lines within the developing world (Blamey, 2001: 13). The instrumental rationale is driven by the assumption that 'local communities are most likely to protect or maintain a resource base in a form that is suitable for tourism if they stand to benefit from it' (Blamey, 2001: 13). As Northern environmentalist NGOs worked to establish protected areas in developing countries to conserve biodiversity, they promoted tourism to those protected areas for two key reasons. First, tourism revenues could fund patrols and management for protected areas in an era when government revenues and resources for such management were shrinking (Ashton, 1991). Second, the creation of protected areas curtailed nearby communities' access to some resources. In response to – or to forestall – protests or 'poaching' by local populations, conservationists proposed that revenues from tourism to protected areas should compensate nearby communities for their loss of access to resources. These revenues would provide local people with a stake in conservation and discourage forms of resource use deemed 'not sustainable'; however, this would require that nearby communities be integrated into the ecotourism product somehow (Boo, 1990, 1991; Lindberg & Huber, 1993). As Western noted early on:

Conservationists, economists, and tourists alike have awakened to the realisation that you can't save nature at the expense of local people. As custodians of the land, and those most likely to lose from conservation, locals should be given a fair share. Sound politics and fair economics argue for making local people partners and beneficiaries in conservation, as opposed to implacable enemies of it . . . Conservation and tourism that denies the rights and concerns of local communities is self-defeating . . . [It] takes only a few disgruntled people to disrupt tourism. (Western, 1993: 8–9)

Ecotourism proponents have embraced the idea of certification as a means of moving ecotourism 'beyond conceptualisation to codification' and for distinguishing 'genuine ecotourism' from 'ecotourism lite' and greenwashing (Honey, 2002a: 370; Honey & Stewart, 2002b: 3). Certification advocates confront the question, 'How does one decide when a nature-based tourism experience is sufficiently supporting of local communities and/or conservation to qualify as ecotourism?' (Blamey, 2001: 14). While the environmental impacts of tourism have been studied and – partially – quantified (though many issues remain unresolved; see Honey (2004)), the evaluation of community involvement and the creation and measurement of socioeconomic indicators is perceived as even more difficult to standardise and quantify; it has rarely been undertaken by sustainable tourism programmes (Epler Wood & Halpenny, 2001: 127). However, the social and economic aspects of ecotourism are critical to its success, since a few disgruntled local people have the ability to undermine the protected status of the flora and fauna in reserves and thus destroy the base for ecotourism.

This paper summarises the criteria proposed by certification advocates in global arenas to measure benefits to local communities; it then turns to an ethnographic case study from Belize to identify issues that should be considered as global and local agendas intersect in the process of creating and implementing ecotourism certification schemes.

Development of Criteria for Ecotourism Certification

Though most of the literature on certification in tourism focuses broadly on certification for sustainable tourism, this paper focuses on efforts to generate criteria for assessing benefits to local communities for the purpose of ecotourism certification, in particular. The Mohonk Agreement, mentioned above, represents one important part of such efforts. The two-tiered framework outlines certification criteria for sustainable tourism with an additional list of requirements for ecotourism certification. Criteria for sustainable tourism include indicators of social and economic sustainability in addition to indicators of environmental sustainability. Those social and economic criteria are quite general. For example, the Agreement calls for 'mechanisms to ensure that negative economic impacts on local communities are minimised and preferably that there are substantial economic benefits to local communities' (Honey, 2002b: 376). It also requires attention to the 'appropriateness of land acquisition/access processes and land tenure; measures to protect the integrity of local communities' social structure; and mechanisms to ensure that rights and aspirations of local and/or indigenous people are recognized.' Further, it stipulates that enterprises must engage in 'ethical business practice', adhere to the highest labour

standards, and contribute to the development / maintenance of local community infrastructure (Honey, 2002b: 375–6).

In addition to these criteria for *sustainable* tourism certification, the Mohonk Agreement provides a second tier of criteria for certifying *ecotourism* enterprises that include, but go beyond, the standards for sustainable tourism. These are directly linked to the principles that define ecotourism; they include 'economic, social, and cultural benefits for local communities', 'fostering of community involvement, where appropriate', 'minimal impact on and presentation of local (indigenous) culture', and 'interpretation and environmental awareness of nature, local society, and culture' (Honey, 2002b: 377). How these abstract criteria may be defined or measured is not specified, but a recent summary of the academic literature on ecotourism certification offers a somewhat less abstract list of criteria for economic sustainability, including assessment of the structure of employment opportunities, the distribution of income from ecotourism, the balance of trade impacts of tourism on communities or regions, and backward and forward linkages between tourism and other formal and informal economic activities in local communities (Sirakaya *et al.*, 2001: 423).

Current efforts such as the Mohonk Agreement go beyond the beneficiary approach to development often taken by ecotourism ventures in the past, which aimed to generate employment and income for residents of communities near protected areas without involving them in decision making. Incorporating the calls for 'participation' and 'empowerment' that emerged during the 1990s to enable local communities to collectively prioritise their needs and choose means for meeting them (Brandon, 1993; Cernea, 1991; Chambers, 1997; Wells & Brandon, 1992), the Mohonk Agreement stipulates that 'the development of a certification scheme should be a participatory, multistakeholder, and multisectoral process' that includes representatives from local communities, tourism businesses, nongovernmental organisations, community-based organisations, and government agencies (Honey, 2002b: 374). Its call for 'mechanisms' to minimise negative economic impacts on local communities, provide economic benefits, and ensure recognition for the rights and aspirations of local people suggests a need to develop participatory processes for planning, implementing, and assessing ecotourism. These prescriptions reflect an emerging consensus among experts that stakeholder participation is integral to the development and application of sustainability indicators for monitoring ecotourism impacts (Sirakaya *et al.*, 2001: 422).

However, stakeholder involvement in setting criteria for certification is complicated by the simultaneously global and local scope of the problems ecotourism is trying to address. As environmentalist discourse has conceptualised the entire earth as a single ecosystem over the last two decades, environmentalism has become an increasingly transnational practice (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Princen & Finger, 1994; Sachs, 1993; Taylor & Buttel, 1992). Ecotourism reflects such transnational efforts: it aims to channel Northern tourists' consumption patterns in ways that contribute to conservation of the environment and the sustainable use of natural resources in the global South. However, ecotourism's principles also require local participation in planning and local enjoyment of benefits. While global standards for certification in ecotourism would increase the legitimacy and impact of both certification

programmes and ecotourism itself, efforts to establish working agreements on a global scale may conflict with the integration of local perspectives regarding equity and participation.

Epler Wood and Halpenny warn that efforts to set criteria for ecotourism in global arenas inevitably lead to vague, general prescriptions: 'It is difficult to imagine how an international certification programme could appropriately set standards for the ecotourism world, given the number of local concerns' (Epler Wood & Halpenny, 2001: 129). They suggest that national certification schemes are likely to produce more concrete, measurable criteria that are more sensitive to the issues of local people. Two examples support this assertion. The Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP) in Australia, a national programme developed through stakeholder participation from both private and public sectors, requires that enterprises seeking ecotourism certification provide local employment and purchase goods and services locally; provide interpretation for their clients relating to indigenous cultures and brief them about how to minimise the cultural impacts of tourism on local communities; consult with representatives of local and indigenous communities; and provide support or discounts for local organisations or schools (Buckley, 2001: 171). The Costa Rican Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) programme, also developed through consultations with stakeholders, provides even more detailed suggestions for the ways enterprises should provide benefits to local communities. (This programme provides sustainable tourism certification, but it does so in a country that positions itself overall as an ecotourism destination.) Under the category of direct economic benefits, the CST stipulates that employers should recruit workers locally and then follow up with training and promotion. It suggests varied means by which tourism enterprises ought to promote indirect local/national benefits: encouraging their guests to patronise other local businesses, buying and utilising locally produced goods such as food and drinks, providing space for the sale of work by local artisans, using local products to decorate their facilities, and supporting local sporting and cultural events. CST criteria also include contributions to cultural development through such means as selecting cultural traits to feature in promotional materials for the business, designating a place where locals can post announcements about upcoming events, promoting the development or maintenance of cultural activities such as dance, and designing activities for hotel guests that introduce them to elements of local cultures. Additionally, CST socioeconomic criteria include contributions to public health, infrastructure, and security (www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr/EN/sobreCST/manual/intro.shtml).

In order to accommodate specific local priorities as well as the need for standardising certification criteria across programmes and national borders, Epler Wood and Halpenny recommend a process that tacks back and forth between international and local/national arenas: 'Ecotourism certification programmes should be developed locally via stakeholder processes that fully involve local communities.' But this process should be shaped by internationally recognised guidelines on the required steps for successful certification, in order to prevent unfair practices, corruption, or the profit motive from overtaking local certification initiatives. In turn, the international community must seek 'ways to unify local ecotourism certification programmes via international agreements' (Epler

Wood & Halpenny, 2001: 137). The Rainforest Alliance's current project in Latin America could exemplify such an approach, as it aims to develop or strengthen Best Management Practices and certification standards locally and harmonise them across the region (see www.rainforest-alliance.org/programmes/tourism/certification/index.html). At the same time, the Alliance is involved in efforts to create a global stewardship council to further standardise or harmonise criteria for certification.

The case study that follows is from Belize, one of the countries targeted in the Rainforest Alliance's Latin American project. This case study reveals failures of translation between global and local arenas that could undermine harmonisation efforts if not recognised. These failures of translation include disagreements among ecotourism stakeholders in Belize and between them and international experts about who should count as 'local', what should count as 'participation', and what should count as a 'benefit' of ecotourism. This type of definitional problem has not yet been addressed in the literature on ecotourism certification initiatives. However, such problems are especially important for ecotourism, because of the pragmatics of implementing ecotourism as well as the principles that guide such efforts. All of these terms must be operationalised in order to assess the performance of ecotourism businesses, and their definitions must take into account the perspectives of local entrepreneurs and communities as well as transnational businesses, NGOs, and intergovernmental organisations, if environmental protection and ecotourism development are to be viable 'on the ground'.

Ecotourism in Belize: Local Participation, Local Benefits?

Belize embraced ecotourism in the late 1980s and early 1990s in order to diversify its economy, as free trade initiatives threatened the viability of its principal agricultural exports (Medina, 1998, 2004). Sand, sun and sea tourism had begun earlier on the cayes off the northern coast. However, as the concept of ecotourism became popular, both the Government-financed Belize Tourism Board (BTB) and the private-sector Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA) began to promote Belize as an ecotourism destination, emphasising the country's tropical forests, barrier reef, and diverse cultures. Existing sand, sun, and sea destinations established marine reserves; inland entrepreneurs in western Belize enthusiastically applied the concept of ecotourism in their marketing and product development, utilising new and existing reserves; and in heavily forested southern Belize both village-based organisations and entrepreneurs developed ecotourism ventures in conjunction with new or existing protected areas.

Virtually all Belizean tourism enterprises are small: 90% of the lodging accommodations offer fewer than 20 rooms, and only three of 437 are large by international standards (BTB, 2003). Many accommodations are owned by North American or European immigrants, a common pattern in ecotourism development (Wearing, 2001). Indeed, as international travel and tourism become ever more concentrated and horizontally integrated under the control of transnational corporations, the literature on ecotourism draws the most significant distinctions between transnational conglomerates that drain profits away from

host countries in the developing global South and smaller-scale businesses owned by individuals or families 'who are either nationals or long-time foreign residents' of developing countries and who consequently keep more of their profits within the host country (Honey & Stewart, 2002b: 20; see also Honey (1999: 173), regarding as 'locally-owned' businesses that belong to 'long-term foreign residents').

Although Belize has no national certification programme for ecotourism, the country is targeted by the current Rainforest Alliance-led project to harmonise best management practices and certification standards in Latin America (Buchara *et al.*, 2004). The study that follows is based on research that explored how the ecotourism concept was being defined through both rhetoric and practice in Belize; the resulting data reveal issues that require attention in efforts to develop and harmonise certification standards, facilitate the participation of small enterprises in certification schemes, and enable linked conservation and ecotourism ventures to succeed.

Methods

Research was conducted over two summers in the Cayo District of western Belize, because the most vocal private-sector proponents of ecotourism in Belize were based there. A group of 20 to 25 Cayo lodge owners especially interested in promoting ecotourism had formed the Belize EcoTourism Association (BETA) in the early 1990s. During 1998, I conducted semi-structured interviews with members of BETA and the Cayo branch of the BTIA (to which all BETA members belonged), asking how they believed ecotourism should be defined and how their businesses were implementing ecotourism. In addition, I interviewed seven of 13 members of the Small Hotel Association (SHA) (which included two tour operators), organised by Cayo entrepreneurs as an alternative to the BTIA. Semi-structured interviews with SHA members explored whether or not they used the concept of ecotourism in promoting and organising their businesses, and how they believed the concept should be defined and implemented on local and national scales. Additionally, active members of the Cayo Tour Guide Association (CTGA) were interviewed regarding how they defined ecotourism and how their work met the criteria they specified. The sample included 23 lodge owners and 12 tour operators or tour guides.

Since ecotourism is supposed to provide benefits to 'local communities', research during the summer of 1999 in a Cayo District village of approximately 1400 residents explored the degree to which residents felt they benefited from tourism and the form those benefits took. The village was selected for its proximity to the most-visited tourism site in western Belize as well as to many of the lodges belonging to BETA members. Many of the village's residents worked for wages in tourism-related enterprises in the region or were self-employed in work related to tourism. Twenty-five per cent of the households in the village (every fourth household, working up and down each side of each street in the village, resulting in a sample of 73) were surveyed to elicit information about the degree to which households depended on income earned through tourism and to gauge village residents' perceptions of whether or not they benefited from tourism.

Results

Echoing the emerging global discourse on ecotourism, BETA established a code of ethics for ecolodges in Belize that included measures to 'support economic and social sustainability' as well as environmental sustainability. To achieve economic and social sustainability, the code called for ecotourism businesses to encourage small-scale tourism development, employ local people, purchase local products, instruct their guests to be environmentally and culturally responsible, and provide education for their clients in Belizean geography, customs and culture (Bien, 2002: 144). Although ecotourism entrepreneurs who belonged to BETA emphasised environmental preservation as the defining aim of ecotourism, four of seven interviewed added that ecotourism should provide tangible benefits to local communities, either as a matter of ethics and social responsibility or as a practical step to broaden support for conservation and ecotourism. For example, one lodge owner described ecotourism as 'tourism that thinks beyond itself, that thinks about the community which it lives within'. Another suggested:

The archaeological sites, the barrier reef, the rain forest, the fauna of Belize, all these can only be conserved if the people are in tune with the conservation of Belize. And the people can only be in tune with this if they are benefiting financially from it.

Accordingly, BETA members listed numerous ways that their businesses provide benefits to local people and expand the Belizean national economy. Most obviously, their businesses created jobs. They also stimulated productive activity in enterprises with which they do business: they hired local seamstresses to make curtains or uniforms, local tour operators provided tours for their guests, and local carpenters constructed buildings and furniture; they promoted community-based gift shops or purchased locally produced crafts for the lodge's own gift shop; they purchased food for the lodges' restaurants from local producers or wholesalers. One lodge owner suggested that these practices helped the local people to 'become a part of the tourism product. They're not on the outside looking in.' Indeed, this list echoes many of the criteria for assessing economic benefits to local communities proposed in certification initiatives.

However, BETA members' perceptions of their contributions to local and national development depart sharply from the perceptions held by members of the SHA and the CTGA. Although all tourism enterprises in Cayo are small according to international definitions, tour guides and SHA members drew distinctions between themselves and BETA or BTIA members, whose businesses they described as 'big' or 'more established', as a result of their full-service nature, the economic resources their owners were believed to command, the income they were believed to generate, and their owners' foreign origins. Indeed, most BETA members were foreign-born; SHA members and tour guides labelled them expatriates or foreigners, rather than immigrants, suggesting that their allegiances lay elsewhere. Thus, while BETA and BTIA members sought to improve or ensure the quality of their product by offering in-house restaurants and gift shops and on-site nature trails – all of which generated employment, SHA and CTGA members described the full-service nature of BETA and BTIA

members' lodges as efforts to avoid sharing tourists and their dollars with others. SHA members argued that *they* were the *real* contributors to local and national development, because they 'shared' tourists with other locally owned hotels, restaurants, tour operators, and gift shops. As noted above, some ecotourism literature draws the most significant lines of distinction between transnational conglomerates that drain profits away from local economies and small-scale enterprises owned by nationals or long-time foreign residents that retain and share profits within the local economy (Honey, 1999: 173; Honey & Stewart, 2002b: 20). However, SHA and CTGA members drew the line between businesses that drain profits away from Belize and those that circulate profits locally to stimulate the Belizean economy in a different place: they did not count long-term foreign residents as 'local' or as contributors to the local economy. Rather, Belizean-born hotel owners, tour operators, and tour guides discounted expatriate entrepreneurs' claims to provide benefits for the Belizean economy and local communities, claiming that 'foreign' investors were pursuing their own self-interests rather than the greater good of Belize.

SHA and CTGA members also questioned whether North American or European expatriates or Belizean elites could or should educate tourists about Belizean cultures, as required by the BETA code of ethics. Full-service lodges pursue this goal by encouraging employees to share with guests information about their cultures, contracting local guides to provide 'local flavour' in their tours, hiring musical or dance groups from nearby villages to perform for tourists, or establishing medicinal plant trails on their properties to teach tourists about Belizean traditional herbal healing knowledge. However, SHA members – and one Belizean-born BETA member – argued that, in order to really understand and appreciate Belizean cultures, tourists would need to spend time in ethnically distinctive communities (for example, Maya, Garifuna, or Creole) learning from community residents themselves about their culture. Such claims regarding cultural expertise have an economic dimension, since teaching tourists about local cultures through immersion in villages would lead to tourist dollars being spent in those communities and open opportunities for entrepreneurial activity by community members. Thus, while international ecotourism experts call for tour operators and lodge owners to educate tourists about local cultures and minimise the impact of tourism on local cultures, Belizean tourism entrepreneurs asserted that local communities should benefit from and exercise control over either cultural change or the maintenance of cultural traditions by representing their own cultures directly to tourists.

The founder of the SHA, previously a BTIA member herself, also described conflicts between the 'more established' businesses owned by 'foreigners' and the 'newcomers' owned by Belizeans around issues of regulation. 'The more established businesses are concerned about putting regulations (in place)', she asserted. Indeed, BETA and BTIA members expressed a desire to improve both the quality and safety of Belizean tourism products, based on their own assessments of what tourists want and on admonitions from industry consultants to increase the 'value for money' of tourism experiences in Belize (Blackstone Corporation, 1998). While the SHA founder agreed that regulation is necessary, she cautioned that more established businesses might 'regulate the little ones right out of business' by setting standards too high for Belizean-owned busi-

nesses to meet. Further, she asserted that Belizeans were being excluded from the process of establishing standards. 'The people it's affecting need to be more involved,' she argued. 'This is my country, and I don't want to go to any meeting where I could not say my opinion. Foreigners are used to going to meetings and giving their opinions and imposing what they want on the meeting.' This assertiveness discouraged Belizeans from speaking up in meetings. Further, she explained, reflecting on her own experience in the BTIA, 'If you bring up a problem you have, but other people don't have that problem, they won't listen to you.' This entrepreneur raises two key issues, one concerning inequities in the ability of businesses to meet performance standards, and the other concerning inequities in the process of defining such standards in the first place. Although 'small' and 'large', 'established' and 'newcomer', 'foreign' and Belizean entrepreneurs have sometimes attended BTIA meetings together, the SHA founder's critique suggests that they do not all feel able to air their viewpoints or have them considered seriously.

In response, this entrepreneur organised others with similar needs and frustrations into the SHA, whose formation demonstrates the existence in Belize of a North-South divide writ small. This divide involves disparities in access to financial resources, but it is also marked by differences in expertise. Just as Campbell (1999) found in Costa Rica, non-elite locals have comparatively little knowledge regarding how tourism markets are structured and how they operate, or what expectations tourists hold and how these might be satisfied (see also Wearing, 2001). Several SHA members explained that they had earlier sought such information through the BTIA, but they had been disappointed. The differences in resources and expertise that mark an internal North-South divide in Belize are compounded by different styles of interaction and different comfort levels at formal meetings, which suggest that such meetings are not able to ensure satisfactory 'local participation' in planning and assessing ecotourism development.

The research conducted in the Cayo village demonstrates further disagreement between Belizean villagers and national and international ecotourism advocates regarding who benefits from tourism and what constitutes a benefit. In the 25% sample of villagers surveyed, a minority of 18% described their households as beneficiaries of tourism, while 82% asserted that their households did not benefit from tourism. Among the 13 households that described themselves as beneficiaries of tourism, five included members who were self-employed as artisans, vendors, or tour guides, and two households included employees (a waiter and a receptionist) in enterprises that service tourists. (The remaining six households did not specify how they benefited from tourism.) However, not all respondents whose households included wage-earners in businesses that service tourists described their households as benefiting from tourism. Five such households (including a waiter, a cook, two taxi drivers, and a golf course maintenance worker at a tourist resort) claimed not to benefit from tourism, though certification programmes such as the NEAP or CST would count such employment as a direct economic benefit of tourism.

A majority (84%) of the village respondents believed that tourism brought benefits to 'the community.' While 44% described those benefits vaguely in terms of tourism 'bringing money into the community', 27% specifically singled out

artisans, tour guides, and vendors who were self-employed as the real beneficiaries of tourism. Further, 30% of the households earned income from construction work, and another 19% included members who worked as general unskilled labourers, but none of these households described themselves as benefiting in any way from tourism. This suggests that the multiplier effects of tourism extolled as benefits by ecolodge owners and industry organisations are not visible to or valued by many residents of the 'local communities' deemed to be their beneficiaries.

Subsequent research in southern Belize in 2002 and 2004 has not contradicted these trends. Village entrepreneurs complain that full-service lodges monopolise tourists and tourism revenue, while immigrant or elite Belizean lodge owners emphasise employment creation in listing the benefits they provide to nearby communities. Though some villagers described wage labour in tourism as a benefit, most aspired to some form of self-employment, like their counterparts in Cayo. Some asserted that wage labour benefits the employer at workers' expense: 'They work you like a horse, and they get richer while you make very little money.' Thus, in the eyes of many villagers, self-employment benefits the worker, while wage labour benefits the employer. Such a perspective is quite at odds with international experts' focus on job creation as a means of providing economic benefits to local communities. In this context, the full-service nature of some ecolodges in Belize can be seen to expand opportunities for employment, but not the more desired opportunities for entrepreneurship.

Conclusions

This ethnographic case study reveals conflicts over the meaning of key terms used in standard definitions of ecotourism among small-scale entrepreneurs in Belize and between some of them and an emerging consensus among international experts. These conflicts over who is 'local', what means for 'participation' are adequate, and what constitutes a 'benefit' could be expected to carry over into efforts to produce and implement certification schemes that would assess businesses' adherence to the principles of ecotourism. The case study demonstrates that Belizeans draw lines between 'foreign' and 'local' in structurally different places than some international ecotourism experts, though they articulate overlapping criteria for the distinctions they draw, including the degree to which profits are retained and circulated within the local community. The prominence of expatriates in ecotourism projects across the developing global South (Campbell, 1999; Wearing, 2001) suggests that 'localness' could well be in dispute in other places also.

Belizeans also problematised the concept of participation in two different senses: they raised issues regarding how people desire to participate in ecotourism development – as employees or entrepreneurs; and they raised issues regarding the arenas available for participatory planning and assessment of ecotourism development and the degree to which different population segments enjoy voice there. Currently, no organisation or arena exists in which all stakeholders in Belizean ecotourism are represented, and the organisations that do exist are seen by some entrepreneurs to privilege some participants' concerns over the priorities of others. This points to the need, documented by

other researchers as well (Johnson, 1998; Stevens, 1997; Wearing, 2001), to experiment with a range of forms and forums for participatory stakeholder exercises, in order to enable differently positioned stakeholders to educate one another about their aspirations, needs, and capacities. In current efforts to harmonise ecotourism certification criteria, it would be a mistake to assume that a lack of vocal opposition in formal, Western-style meetings indicates consensus, rather than 'muting' (Mitchell & Eagles, 2001. See also Brosius *et al.*, 1998; Cohen, 2002; Pottier, 1997).

The definition of what constitutes a 'benefit' has also been revealed as problematic. International initiatives such as the Mohonk Agreement and national programmes such as NEAP or CST require the provision of economic benefits to local communities, and outside experts share a broad consensus that employment creation is a key benefit ecotourism might offer to communities located near protected areas. However, Belizean villagers express a preference for self-employment over wage labour, perceiving the latter to benefit the employer more than the worker. This preference suggests that the means through which economic benefits to local communities may be defined and measured may be more contentious than anticipated by international experts.

Belizeans' preference for self-employment also raises issues regarding locals' access to financial resources for investment and information on what tourists want and how the industry functions. If locals prefer to be entrepreneurs rather than employees, serious constraints in terms of financial resources, business knowledge, and tourism expertise that mark a local 'North-South divide' need to be addressed. Such constraints to local, small-scale entrepreneurship extend well beyond Belize (Campbell, 1999; Wearing, 2001). These disparities point to the extent of diversity among small enterprises in ecotourism; if all are disadvantaged relative to transnational corporations, some are more disadvantaged than others. The Rainforest Alliance's current efforts to target Best Management Practices training and information on certification to small and medium-sized enterprises recognises some of this diversity, by offering programming for indigenous or community-based organisations that differs from that offered to other small businesses. But the creation of the SHA in Belize indicates that Belizeans have drawn still finer distinctions among small businesses.

This case study suggests that the transnational and national organisations currently engaged in efforts to harmonise standards for assessing the social and economic sustainability of ecotourism ventures – either globally or within world regions – should explore the possibility that some key terms used in defining ecotourism and setting criteria for its evaluation may have multiple and contested meanings within and across local and international arenas. This is an important possibility to address in implementing and assessing ecotourism in terms of its stated goals and approach to sustainability: if international experts and the diverse membership of 'local communities' do not agree about what constitutes a 'benefit', then both the principled and pragmatic rationales for ecotourism's provision of benefits to local communities are imperilled. This is so, because local support for the protected areas upon which much ecotourism depends is based not on outside experts' or local elites' perceptions of whether or not local communities are benefiting from ecotourism, but on the perceptions of local communities themselves. If ecotourism's multiplier effects are not visible to

them, and they do not count wage labour as a benefit, they are unlikely to support local protected areas. If they do not support protected areas, then both the conservation goals that led to their creation and the tourism that depends upon and supports such protected areas are at risk.

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