

Defining culturally sensitive ecotourism: a Delphi consensus

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Since sustainable development was introduced, culture has been submersed by more pressing tourism priorities such as the economy and the environment. To avoid putting at risk the resources upon which ecotourism depends and the desired sustainable outcomes it purports to deliver, research and praxis must be equally sensitive to all the pillars of sustainability – social, cultural, economical, and environmental. As a first step, this study employs the Delphi technique in order to assess the import of culture for ecotourism, to develop a definition for culturally sensitive ecotourism, and to identify the barriers and opportunities associated with its implementation. Over 100 ecotourism experts from 39 countries were consulted over a six month period.

Keywords: cultural sensitivity; Delphi technique; ecotourism; sustainability

Introduction

Growing interest in sustainable tourism experiences (demand) in combination with increasing access to ecological and cultural landscapes (supply) is facilitating ecotourism development in a growing variety of cultural and ecological contexts. Despite the now global ecotourism landscape, relevant literature has come to suggest that a set of values – embedded in ‘Western’ understandings of human/environment relationships, market demand, and environmental management – are being superimposed on ‘other’ or ‘non-Western’ ecotourism destinations and their value systems (Backman & Morais, 2001; de la Barre, 2005; Carrier & Macleod, 2005; Cooper & Vargas, 2004; Jamal, Borges, & Stronza, 2006; Stark, 2002). A lack of sensitivity to the cultural context of ecotourism presents perils related to goal achievement. The literature suggests that real danger exists for model transference failure when a single ecotourism mould is used. There exists potential for benefits to be replaced with insecurity, resentment, conflict, ecological degradation, and economic loss (Vivanco, 2002). Cater (2006, p. 36) asserts that ‘if we uncritically accept Western-constructed ecotourism as the be-all-to-end-all, we do so at our, and others’ peril’.

Ecotourism researchers and professionals are calling for cultural sensitivity and a rethinking of so-called universal ecotourism knowledge (Cater, 2006; Donohoe & Needham, 2007; Jamal et al., 2006; Stark, 2002). Sofield (2007, p. 158) presents an alternative, arguing that ‘where different world views and different aesthetics are involved, a

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greater degree of acceptance and understanding for difference is imperative'. Furthermore, for ecotourism to truly exemplify sustainable development, the ecotourism mould must be sensitive to cultural differences (de la Barre, 2005; Cater, 2006; Honey, 2002; McCool & Moisey, 2001; Stark, 2002). In the *Oslo statement on ecotourism* (The International Ecotourism Society, 2007), culture is identified as a critical issue for strengthening the sustainability and potential benefits of ecotourism. A call to action is made by the international ecotourism community:

Encourage the ecotourism industry to operate with integrity to protect and promote tangible and intangible cultural heritage and living cultures, and to preserve and celebrate the multitude of unique cultural, social, religious, and spiritual elements of local and Indigenous communities around the world. (The International Ecotourism Society, 2007, p. 6)

Calling on Habermas's (1990) discourse ethics and moral theory, Stark (2002, p. 109) defines 'universalisability' as a 'rational consensus on a proposed norm'. She argues that the norm is valid, if and only if the interests of those actually affected by decisions are represented. Thus, 'universalisability' is a measure of 'real' stakeholder consensus. In the sustainable tourism case, Hughes (1995) raises questions about the universalisability of scientific understanding and definition. He claims that the dominant approach to sustainable tourism is technical, rational, and scientific; and this approach has eclipsed the emergence of an ethical response that addresses the value of culture. In the ecotourism case, Stark raises questions about whether we have truly reached a 'universal' consensus on ecotourism and its key tenets, and whether this so-called consensus accounts for the interests, values, histories, and traditions of people who do not share the same culture. Stark and Hughes raise serious concerns about the universalisability of 'what we know', and by extension, 'what we do' in the ecotourism case. Their work implies that our understanding is not complete, it does not account for multiple interests and values, and it is not culturally sensitive. Not only are international and 'universal' definitions derived from and deeply embedded in Western paradigms, it is the case that ecotourism research has historically focused on and has originated in Western locations (Backman & Morais, 2001; Cater, 2006; Donohoe & Lu, 2009).

Despite the global ecotourism reach, it may be possible to understand ecotourism as a 'socio-cultural bubble' whereby predominantly English-speaking, scientific, and Western influences are represented and very little is known about non-Western values, perceptions, and behaviours (de la Barre, 2005; Carrier & Macleod, 2005; Crouch & McCabe, 2003; Donohoe & Lu, 2009; Tribe, 2004). Cater (2006) and Jamal et al. (2006) equate this 'bubble' with a hegemonic sphere, whereby the 'West' assumes the role of dominant knowledge population. With this role comes some degree of influence, power, or control over 'other' populations' and the ecotourism paradigm. de la Barre (2005) contends that the current ecotourism epistemology is exclusive. It disenfranchises certain ways of being in, or knowing, nature and wilderness in destination cultures, and that this has an impact on the sustainability of ecotourism destinations.

To make ecotourism sensitive to various values, beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and opportunities, there is a need for the recognition of multiple ecotourism realities, the identification of realities that may be ignored or overlooked by hegemonic structures, and the understanding of influences, potential conflicts, and outcomes of such phenomena (Jamal et al., 2006; Sofield, 2007). The latter requires an epistemology and methodology that highlights and prioritises cultural sensitivity and that is counter-hegemonic by design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Saukko, 2005). This includes definitions, standards, research models,

visions, and strategies that are sensitive to the diversity of cultural values and identities that exist in the ecotourism landscape (de la Barre, 2005; Cooper & Vargas, 2004; Donohoe & Needham, 2007). Recent articles in the *Journal of Ecotourism* (de la Barre, 2005; Cater, 2006; Jamal et al., 2006), *Philosophy and Geography* (Stark, 2002), the *International Journal of Tourism Research* (Donohoe & Lu, 2009), and the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (Carrier & Macleod, 2005) stress that a priority shift towards a more-balanced notion of sustainable ecotourism and the recognition of ‘cultural sensitivity’ as a precursor to sustainable ecotourism goal achievement. In essence, antecedents emphasise a need to introduce the cultural sensitivity concept into ecotourism discourse and praxis and to develop models, templates, and tools for assisting researchers and professionals in this process. To date, a definition of cultural sensitivity has not been brought forward in the ecotourism context.

Study purpose and objectives

The purpose of this study is to define cultural sensitivity for ecotourism. A model for making progress towards culturally sensitive ecotourism is adopted after the Fyall and Garrod (1997) process model for making tourism sustainable. The model requires that the concept (cultural sensitivity) be defined, its import established, and that tools and measures be developed for evaluating its application. This study is therefore congruent with the first two stages of the Fyall and Garrod model as its central objectives are to assess the awareness and importance of cultural sensitivity for ecotourism, develop a cultural sensitivity definition for ecotourism, and identify barriers and opportunities for establishing cultural sensitivity as an ecotourism imperative.

The Delphi technique is employed in order to capture and interpret international ecotourism expert judgement on cultural sensitivity. In doing so, this paper offers several contributions towards making ecotourism culturally sensitive. First, a group judgement is rendered about the importance of cultural sensitivity, thereby establishing the need for future investments related to cultural sensitivity and ecotourism. Second, a consensus definition for cultural sensitivity is developed through consultation with the expert group. The Delphi is purposefully selected as it is an inclusive method whereby different perspectives, values, and experiences are afforded equal weight. Third, potential barriers and opportunities for establishing and implementing cultural sensitivity in the ecotourism industry are identified. Finally, it is the ambition of this paper to contribute to the evolving understanding of the links between culture, sustainable development, and ecotourism, contribute a theoretical basis (definition) for the development of cultural sensitivity planning, management, and research tools, and engage the ecotourism community in the cultural complexities of the contemporary ecotourism paradigm.

Study methods

For the purpose of this study, the Delphi technique is selected over traditional survey methods (surveys, group interviews, and focus groups) for eliciting knowledge and opinion from a group of international ecotourism experts. The Delphi is a qualitative method used to systematically combine expert knowledge and opinion to arrive at an informed group consensus on a complex problem (Linstone & Turoff, 1975; Moeller & Shafer, 1994). Using iterative rounds of sequential questionnaires interspersed with feedback reports, the technique relies on the interpretation of expert opinion. It provides an enabling mechanism for organising conflicting values and experiences, and facilitates the

incorporation of multiple opinions into an informed group consensus (Briedenhann & Butts, 2006; Linstone & Turoff, 1975).

The method is judged to be a best fit on the basis of its suitability for tourism research (Donohoe & Needham, 2009; Garrod & Fyall, 2005; Green, Hunter, & Moore, 1990) and a set of key attributes and advantages that are congruent with the study's objectives (Table 1). Additionally, the structure, utility, and purpose of the Delphi technique are congruent with the work of de la Barre (2005) and Stark (2002), who suggest a need for 'constructed space' for consensus building. Given that ecotourism has historically been advanced by 'Western' and/or non-inclusive knowledge systems and that this process finds us now in a potentially calamitous predicament, it makes the most sense to apply a 'counter-hegemonic' methodology that supports Habermas's (1990) principle of universalisability and the achievement of inclusive consensus. In this way, the product of the Delphi, the consensus definition, is to reflect multiple interests, values, and expertise while mitigating the risk of furthering Cater's (2006) 'hegemonic sphere'.

A three-stage Delphi exercise, with three survey iterations, comprises the methodological framework (Figure 1). As the foundational step in the research design, an expert panel was developed. Guidance suggests that panel size, characteristics, and composition should 'be governed by the purpose of the investigation', the scope of the problem, and the resources available (Cantrill, Sibbald, & Buetow, 1996, p. 69; Linstone, 2002). For this study, international ecotourism experts were desired to create an inclusive panel that reflects a diversity of experience, knowledge, skills, and cultural perspectives. Two relevant expert groups are identified: ecotourism professionals from government, private industry, and non-governmental organisations; and academics engaged in ecotourism research and education. The inclusion of both professional and academic experts is substantiated by Briedenhann and Butts (2006), Sunstein (2006), and Vaugeois et al. (2005) as a means for achieving a balance between differing approaches to, and perspectives on, 'knowledge', for mitigating the existent divide between research and professional communities (knowledge sharing, communications, priorities, epistemology, etc.), while ensuring a more inclusive and relevant Delphi consensus.

Table 1. Delphi attributes and advantages.

Legitimacy: The Delphi is considered an established research technique.

Suitability: The Delphi is well suited to complex problems where exact knowledge is not available and the contributions of experts would contribute to advancing understanding and knowledge about the problem.

Proximity: Given the potential difficulties involved with bringing participants together for face-to-face meetings, the Delphi offers a 'virtual laboratory' where physical meetings are not required.

Reflexivity: By design (iterations), the Delphi allows for participants to really think through the concepts and questions – so that the resulting data is very rich, and by extension, valid research findings result (and statistical presentation of results is possible).

Flexibility: The Delphi is flexible, allowing for a variety of design decisions to be made. Flexibility permits methodological adaptation in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Repetition: The Delphi is designed to move a group towards a convergence of opinion. The process requires multiple iterations where surveys are distributed and feedback (summary reports) is provided to participants. The product is an informed judgement about a complex problem.

Anonymity: By design, the Delphi reduces the risk(s) for group dynamics to influence outcomes. Experts are free to express their opinions without fear of losing face among their peers.

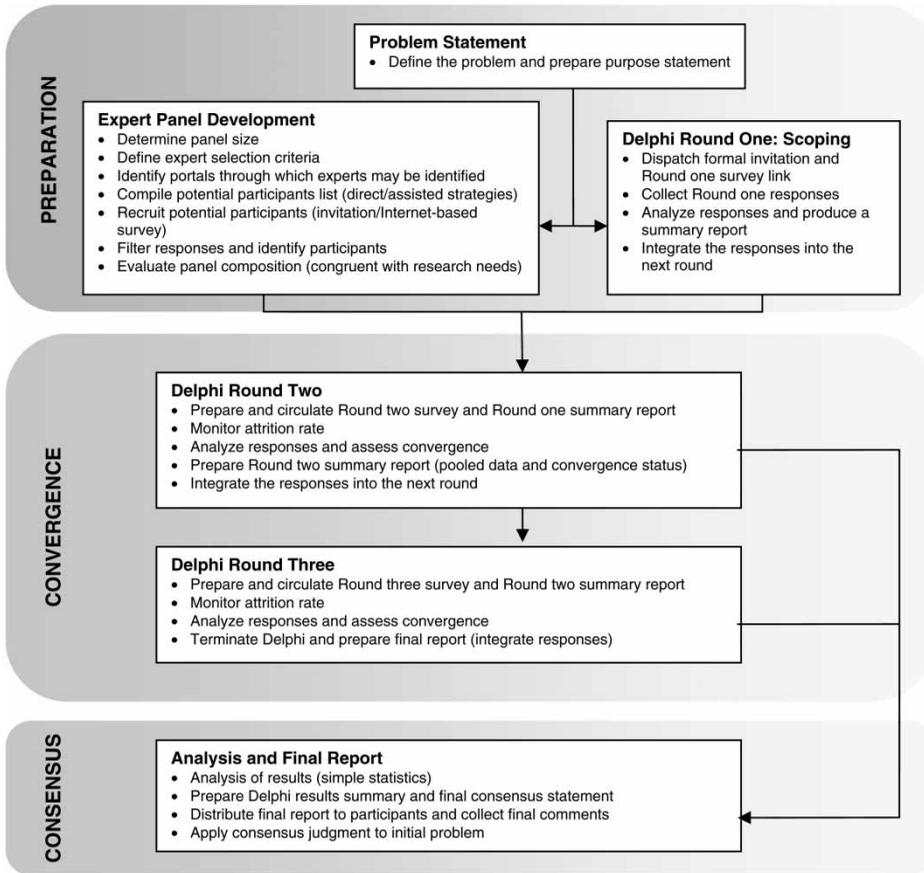


Figure 1. Three-stage Delphi approach.

Through a review of published work in five peer-reviewed publications (*Annals of Tourism Research*, *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Ecotourism*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, and *Tourism Management*) and with the assistance of the International Ecotourism Society and the International Ecotourism Club, an initial set of 684 potential participants were identified. The desired panel size was between 50 and 100 individuals from a range of cultural backgrounds and geographical locations. Experts – that is, 86 professionals, 32 academics, and 39 professional and academic experts – were selected on the basis that they satisfied several predetermined ‘ecotourism expert’ selection criteria (determined through a potential participant survey). This included English language proficiency and one of the following: current or previous experience in the public, governmental, or private sectors related to ecotourism and/or nature-based tourism activities (minimum 5 years); evidence of professional productivity in terms of peer-reviewed or professional publications and research and/or participation in academic or industry symposia; and a teaching portfolio that includes courses dedicated to tourism and/or ecotourism (minimum 5 years). An evaluation was also completed to ensure the cultural richness of the panel. The participant’s nationalities were compiled and the breadth of nationalities was assessed as a simple measure. Thirty-nine nationalities are represented on the panel (Figure 2).

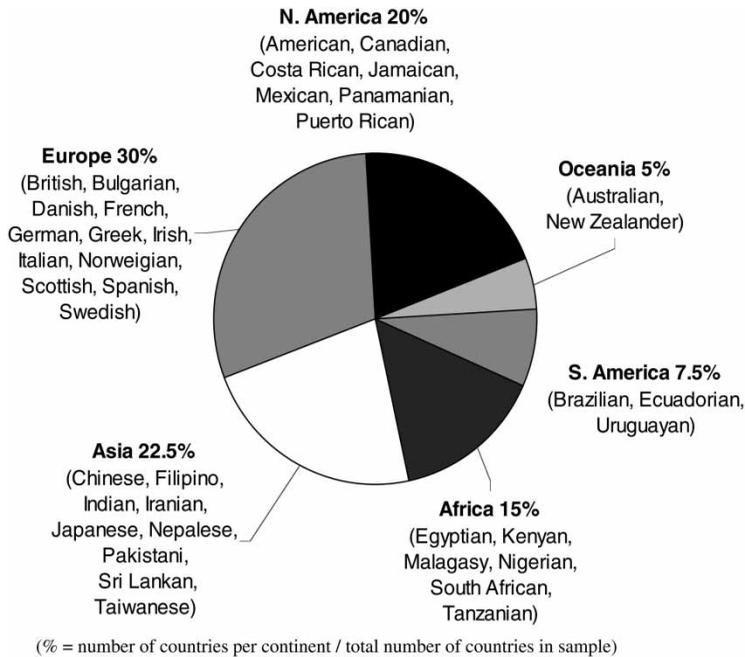


Figure 2. Research participant nationalities (% = number of countries per continent/total number of countries in sample).

The participant's locations provide a secondary indicator of richness. The participant's location was used to create an Internet-based map of the research laboratory. Different coloured markers were used to identify the locations of professional experts (blue), academic experts (red), and those who self-identify as both academic and professional experts (green). Identifying information is excluded from the map so that it can be shared with participants without compromising anonymity. A map with participants located across the globe, while a very basic indication, is meant to compliment the aforementioned measure of cultural richness.

Once the expert panel was established, the Delphi surveys were administered sequentially over a six month period. The first round was a scoping exercise designed to get participants reflecting about the relationship between cultural sensitivity and ecotourism. Round one asked: What are the three most important issues surrounding contemporary ecotourism? How important is it for ecotourism to be explicitly sensitive to culture and cultural differences around the globe? How appropriate is the working definition of cultural sensitivity for ecotourism (definition provided)? What cultural variables or attributes are needed to find expression in the definition? Participants were provided with a one month period in which to respond. A response rate of 60% was achieved (Table 2).

Rounds two and three presented a series of questions designed to move the group towards a definition for cultural sensitivity. Through the iterative process, the definition was enhanced by hundreds of participant comments and suggestions. In each round, an enhanced definition was introduced and feedback was collected regarding its appropriateness. In order to assess the level of convergence between rounds, simple mean scores and standard deviation were calculated. This data analysis approach is substantiated throughout the Delphi literature and in particular, the Delphi research within the tourism domain (Green et al., 1990; Moeller & Shafer, 1994). As the definition was enhanced, a convergence of group opinion

Table 2. Delphi panel composition.

Panel member	Round one	Round two	Round three
Survey delivered to:	157	94	79
Total (completed surveys)	94	79	61
Professional	47	41	33
Academic	22	17	15
Both professional and academic	25	21	13
Response rate ^a (%)	60	84	77

^aThe research was completed between January 2008 and July 2008. As the research moved into the summer months and the busy ecotourism season, it was expected that participation would decline. A larger initial group was sought in order to mitigate potentially high attrition.

and an increase in convergence between rounds were observed. Between Rounds two and three, the definitional enhancements were minimal, no significant change in the mean scores was observed, but the increase in convergence (reduction in standard deviation value) was noteworthy. Thus, it was decided that consensus had been reached and that further rounds would not produce additional convergence of opinion.

Study findings

Cultural sensitivity: an important ecotourism issue

The Delphi exercise evaluated expert opinion on the importance of cultural sensitivity for ecotourism. In Round one, participants were asked to rate the importance of cultural sensitivity for ecotourism and a majority agreed that it is very important (80.9%). Participants were also asked to identify (key words and descriptions) the most important contemporary issues for ecotourism. Content analysis was used to assess the responses and a frequency analysis produced a list of 20 issues. The summary list of issues was introduced to participants in a summary report that was circulated following the completion of Round one. Participants were then provided the opportunity to reflect on the validity of the 20 issues. In Round two, they were asked to rank the issues based on a scale of importance (most important to least important) and to comment on the salience of each issue. On the basis of the responses, as well as a calculated response average measure, the issues were described, and the top-ranked issues were identified (Table 3).

Table 3. Contemporary ecotourism issues (in rank order).

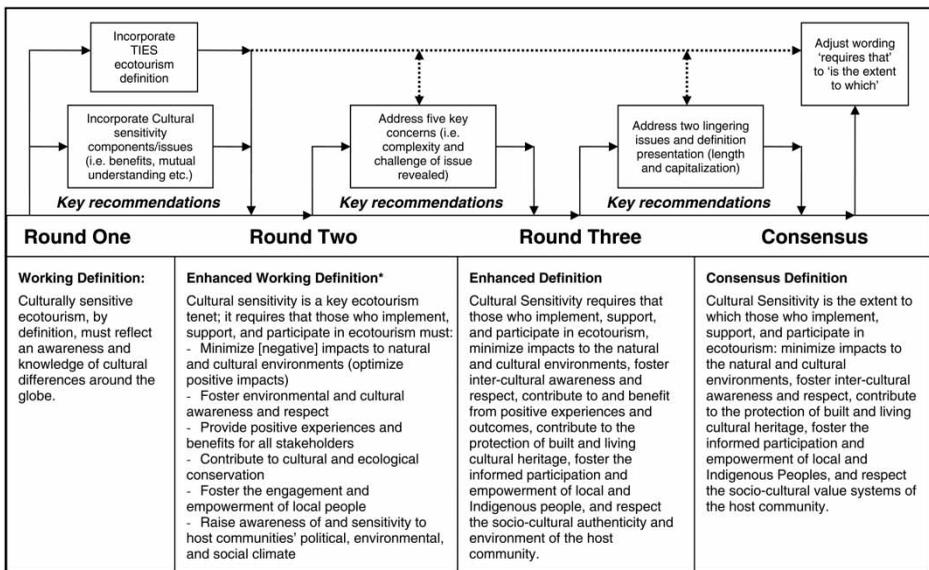
1. Community participation and benefits: Ensuring that host communities are actively participating in, contributing to, and benefiting from ecotourism.
2. Environmental conservation: Minimising negative impacts and maximising positive impacts on the natural environment.
3. Sustainable development: Recognising the valuable role that ecotourism plays in sustainable development. Ensuring a balanced approach where all sustainable development (SD) components are given equal weight.
4. Awareness/education: Ensuring that cultural and environmental awareness/education are fostered by the ecotourism experience (among all stakeholders).
5. Cultural sensitivity: Ensuring this key ecotourism principle is also an ecotourism practice. It requires clarification of what cultural sensitivity is and is not in the context of ecotourism.
6. Ethics/responsibility: Assuming an ethics-based environmentally, socially, culturally, and economically responsible approach and fostering responsibility among ecotourism stakeholders.
7. Cultural conservation: Minimising negative impacts/maximising positive impacts on communities and cultural heritage.

It is noteworthy that the top seven issues are congruent with the key tenets and principles of ecotourism as described by international ecotourism organisations and contemporary researchers (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; The International Ecotourism Society, 1990, 2007; World Tourism Organization, 2002). Collectively, these seven issues represent a cluster of ‘most important’ issues for contemporary ecotourism and they are strongly embedded in our knowledge and management systems (to various degrees and at various scales).

It is also important to note that the issues cannot be considered mutually exclusive. In fact, the Delphi participants make it clear that the issues are interconnected and that understanding the connections is critical for progress (Table 3). It is important to note that cultural sensitivity was identified as an issue of importance as it was highly ranked by the group (a secondary measure of the issue’s import). In a much broader sense, the list represents a set of issues that are important to the global ecotourism community. It follows that investments in research, management, and planning that address these issues is required to ensure the long-term sustainability of the ecotourism industry.

A cultural sensitivity definition for ecotourism

In Round one, a working definition was introduced for group judgement (Figure 3). This definition was purposefully broad and loosely structured so as to allow the group to inform the shape and content of the definition over the course of the Delphi exercise. As expected, the first definition resulted in hundreds of valuable comments, suggestions, and critiques that were used to enhance the definition for the subsequent Delphi round. While a majority agreed that the definition was appropriate (25.5%) or very appropriate (51.1%), the remainder of the group was divided. Some felt that the definition was somewhat appropriate (16.0%), while others stated that the definition was not very appropriate (6.4%) or not appropriate at all (1.1%) (Table 4).



* This definition was enhanced, partly, by incorporating the TIES (1990) definition.

Figure 3. Definitional enhancement process. Asterisk denotes that this definition was enhanced, partly, by incorporating The International Ecotourism Society (1990) definition.

Table 4. Definitional appropriateness measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Round	% Very appropriate (5)	% Appropriate (4)	% Somewhat appropriate (3)	% Not very appropriate (2)	% Not appropriate (1)	Mean score	Standard deviation
One	51.1	25.5	16.0	6.4	1.1	4.2	0.968
Two	50.0	29.5	16.7	2.6	1.3	4.26	0.874
Three	42.6	49.2	8.2	0	0	4.34	0.629

The comments revealed the breadth of participant opinion and perspective as well as the need for definitional enhancement so as to make explicitly clear what cultural sensitivity means for ecotourism (a majority agreed). Furthermore, participants suggested that the definition reflect a number of critical issues and cultural sensitivity variables including scale, mutual understanding, cultural similarities, cultural preservation, and positive benefits for stakeholders. Of note, several participants suggested incorporating the International Ecotourism Society's ecotourism definition as the basis for definitional enhancement and group judgement. The suggestion was made on the basis that the International Ecotourism Society definition captures many of the critical components (aforementioned) of cultural sensitivity revealed by participants in Round one.

In Round two, an enhanced definition, informed by the results and recommendations from Round one, was introduced for group judgement (Figure 3). This definition was also judged to be 'very appropriate' or 'appropriate' by a majority of the group (79.5%). There was also evidence of further movement towards a convergence of group opinion (reduction in standard deviation). However, the analysis also revealed that cultural sensitivity is a complex issue and that our understanding of what is required and by whom is yet unresolved. A set of concerns emerged from this round and their consideration throughout the definitional enhancement process was judged to be necessary by both the researcher and the research participants.

The first concern is related to the nature–culture dynamic. A noteworthy divide manifested among participants about the role and value of culture in the ecotourism experience. For example, some argued that the natural environment is an agent of cultural change (and vice versa); thus, the relationship between them is symbiotic. One participant describes this relationship as a necessary 'nexus'. Conversely, others argued that nature and culture are separate and there is no place for nature in a definition of cultural sensitivity. One participant makes this position clear: 'I would question the inclusion of natural environments in a human-centred area of ecotourism as it muddies the water'. Other participants argued that there is no place for culture in a definition of ecotourism. Representative comments include 'Ecotourism's key tenets are about nature, not people' and 'Cultural sensitivity stands separate from ecotourism'. These seemingly polarised views reveal that ecotourism and cultural sensitivity remain cloaked in confusion and that a spectrum of understanding is present among even the world's experts. Going forward, the challenge is to enhance the understanding of the nature–culture nexus as well as the role(s) and contribution(s) of people and nature in ecotourism experiences.

The second concern is related to cultural preservation. This issue also presented a noteworthy divide among participants (though not nearly as polarised as the previous). The group agreed that ecotourism should foster cultural preservation, particularly because ecotourism presents opportunities for enhancing and preserving the cultural identity of local and Indigenous communities that may otherwise be lost or at risk. However, in other communities where traditional practices are not compatible with the United Nations

Declaration of Human Rights, preservation is contested by the Delphi panel. As one participant remarks it 'is a dilemma' that is not easily resolved:

Can we tolerate certain 'traditions' (e.g. female circumcision, the position of women in much of the Arab world or in Thai villages – prostitution to earn karma points) as the right to be culturally different – or do we, as Ecotourism agents of progress, try to subvert it?

Other participants remind the group that culture is not a commodity nor is it static or tangible. One participant warns that the danger of approaching culture as a 'thing' to be preserved is that it risks a 'condensed and substantialised vision of cultures and natures'. Another participant raises concerns about authenticity: 'The most salient and problematic question associated with this definition of cultural sensitivity is what is meant by "authenticity"; according to whom?' In general, there was discomfort with the inclusion of the words 'cultural conservation' or 'cultural preservation' in the definition. Going forward, the challenge is to find a means to best express the opportunity to foster 'culture' without compromising United Nations' ideals.

The third concern is related to the stakeholders involved in the ecotourism experience and how they are to operationalise cultural sensitivity. Some participants argued that it was the role and responsibility of the ecotourism providers and the ecotourists to be sensitive (or to foster cultural sensitivity), while others argued that all stakeholders should be responsible. This includes the host community and those in support of ecotourism (policy-makers, local businesses, participants, etc.). Going forward, the challenge is to enhance the definition so that the importance and role of a multi-stakeholder approach is addressed. As participants have indicated, this is imperative for moving beyond contemporary notions of cultural tolerance to cultural sensitivity as well as for ecotourism to contribute to the structural change process (local, regional, national, international laws and policies, etc.) associated with the sustainable development imperative.

The fourth concern is related to impacts and benefits. While a majority agree that minimising negative impacts and maximising positive impacts is an important element of ecotourism, there is concern about who defines 'negative' and 'positive', how these definitions are to be adapted to the ecotourism and community context, and how they are to be measured in practice. A majority of the participants agreed that ecotourism must contribute benefits for the communities and environments in which the activities occur. However, there are concerns about the distribution of benefits across stakeholder groups. Key concerns relate to the power dynamics that exist between the host community, the ecotourism operator, the tourist, and the kinds of conflicts, challenges, and outcomes that these dynamics produce. How do we ensure that all stakeholders engage (or have opportunity/choice to engage or not engage) in a beneficial democratic and participatory process? The challenge in addressing this concern is to ensure that the definition emphasises positive outcomes without being prescriptive about what, when, where, and how they are to manifest.

Progress has been made towards understanding the relationship between cultural sensitivity and ecotourism and how this should be defined. The results from Round two served to move the group towards a consensus definition. However, a set of unresolved definitional issues regarding cultural sensitivity and ecotourism were also identified. The complexity, challenges, conflicts, and concerns related to cultural sensitivity and its definition were then brought forward to inform the definitional enhancement process. On this basis, a third definition was developed. It was introduced in Round three, and over 90% of participants judged the definition to be appropriate or very appropriate (Table 4). It must also be noted that the number of participants who judged the definition to be 'not appropriate' or

‘not very appropriate’ was reduced to zero. This produced a reduced standard deviation measure and an increase in group convergence.

In Round three, the definition was accepted by a majority of the group but a minority (8.2%) argued that the definition needed (minor) enhancement on the basis of three key issues: definition length, cultural authenticity, and outcomes. The length of the definition was an issue for several participants who felt that the definition should be shortened for practical purposes (ease of use, readability, etc.). Authenticity was also an issue among a select few. For them, the issues that emerged in Round two that were associated with cultural preservation had not been adequately resolved in the enhanced definition. Participants expressed concern about the authenticity of the host community, how and by whom authenticity is to be defined, how to preserve authenticity, and how to share authentic experiences. One participant remarked that ‘Authenticity is difficult’, while others identified it as paradoxical and complex. Participants acknowledged the challenge and suggested a shift in focus to respecting values, behaviours, and environments as a better way of addressing contested definitions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘cultural preservation’. Residual concern was also present about the inclusion of ‘positive experiences and outcomes’ in the definition. Several participants, in this round and previous rounds, contested the inclusion of the statement. In Round three, several participants recommended its removal on the basis that the statement is vague and intangible, that it is context-specific, and that it is difficult to implement and measure.

On the basis of the Round three results – that is participant feedback, comments, and suggestions – minor definitional enhancements were completed and a consensus definition was achieved (Figure 3). As is customary in Delphi research, participants were provided with the opportunity to review the consensus statement and to provide comments and suggestions. The majority of those who responded (though a minority of the group) did so very positively about both the consensus definition (specifically) and the research (generally). One participant, however, challenged the definition:

I am not certain that as phrased, the ‘definition’ is actually a definition. As written, it tells us what cultural sensitivity requires, (that is a set of action conditions) not what it is. A slight rephrasing (I have no disagreement with the content) would probably solve this.

In the light of this comment, a slight change in wording was judged to be necessary by the researcher for several reasons. First, it moves the definition away from a prescriptive definition (based on action imperatives). Second, it establishes a definitional framework for implementing and measuring the achievement of (or lack thereof) cultural sensitivity. It also establishes a basis for future efforts to operationalise the definition – that is, to develop a set of techniques, tools, and methods for making ecotourism culturally sensitive. Based on this iterative process, this definition is brought forward for ecotourism:

Cultural Sensitivity is the extent to which those who implement, support, and participate in ecotourism: minimize impacts to the natural and cultural environments, foster intercultural awareness and respect, contribute to the protection of built and living cultural heritage, foster the informed participation and empowerment of local and Indigenous Peoples, and respect the socio-cultural value systems of the host community.

Implementing cultural sensitivity for ecotourism: opportunities and barriers

Throughout the Delphi exercise, participants eluded to a set of barriers and opportunities that might affect the establishment of cultural sensitivity as an ecotourism imperative.

These barriers and opportunities manifested explicitly and implicitly in the participant survey comments. In order to better understand the complexity, that is cultural sensitivity and ecotourism, the Round three survey was purposefully designed to elucidate opportunities and barriers to cultural sensitivity from the expert panel. A thematic content analysis of the response data was completed and a set of five themes emerged (Figure 4). In turn, they are introduced and the barriers and opportunities associated with each are described.

Perceptions, attitudes, and values refers to a range of human (individual and/or collective) understandings based on observational and experiential learning about the surrounding environment (natural, social, or other) or situation. Linked with human behaviour and decision-making, perceptions, attitudes, and values can vary and change across time and space and they are not universal constructs. Barriers associated with this theme include misunderstanding, insensitivity, lack of awareness, false expectations, and conflicting values. Key concerns were related to the level of staff training (e.g. guides), understanding among agencies in the public and private sectors, and the ability to begin sensitivity training before tourists arrive in the host community (and vice versa). Thus, an understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and values among stakeholders is critical for the achievement of cultural sensitivity.

The majority of participants who made reference to (mis)understanding linked this potential barrier to education and awareness training as a means for addressing this problem. Opportunities associated with this theme include education, intercultural understanding, and awareness. Education and awareness are identified by a majority of the group as a noteworthy opportunity related to cultural sensitivity. Opportunities to shape, enhance, and contribute to evolving perceptions, attitudes, and values related to cultural similarities and differences exist in the ecotourism environment. For example, education could be in the form of organised and purposeful training and learning programmes or informal intercultural exchange opportunities. Education is thought to lead to improved understanding and sensitivity and a reduction in conflict related to differing perceptions, attitudes, and values. It is also thought to lead to opportunities for promoting diversity and heritage protection. Participants note that it can facilitate a 'richer overall experience and a better

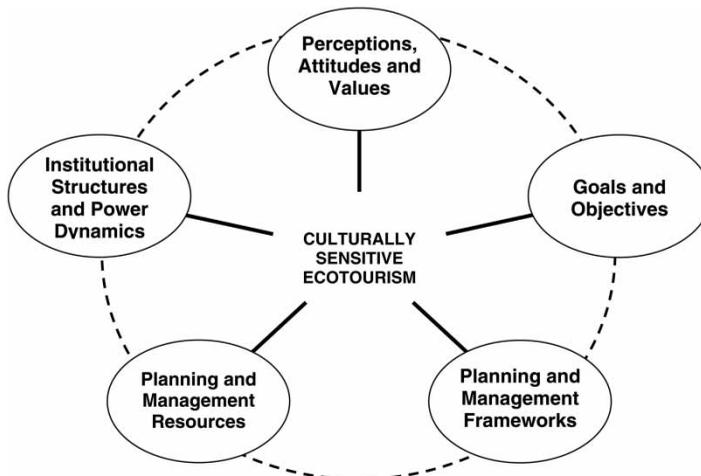


Figure 4. Opportunities and barriers to culturally sensitive ecotourism.

understanding of the tourism destination', 'The furthering of a global community based on the acceptance of our differences and an appreciation of our similarities', as well as 'genuine concern and good will among hosts and guests'. Furthermore, the Delphi panel has identified education, above all others, as the most important and critical opportunity for operationalising cultural sensitivity and for increasing awareness about the social, cultural, environmental, and economic impacts of ecotourism.

Ecotourism objectives refers to a set of philosophical parameters and pragmatic goals for ecotourism. Longstanding confusion about what ecotourism 'is' and 'does' is identified in the academic and professional literature as a significant challenge and barrier to objective achievement (Burton, 1998; Donohoe & Needham, 2006). Delphi participants cite a lack of consensus and definitional confusion as a significant barrier to cultural sensitivity, in particular, and sustainability, in general. On the other hand, participants were optimistic, identifying movement towards 'definitional consensus' as an opportunity for improved understanding. By way of discussing and operationalising cultural sensitivity, there exists opportunities to address the apparent confusion about ecotourism's objectives and definition. In addition, when a culturally sensitive approach is assumed, an inclusive space for consensus may be possible. This presents opportunities to address and resolve lingering confusion and unresolved concerns. Furthermore, it provides many opportunities for ecotourism to continue to contribute to the sustainable development imperative, particularly if a balanced approach – between economic, environmental, and socio-cultural principles – is assumed.

Planning and management frameworks refers to a set of formal and informal tools for operationalising cultural sensitivity (Fennell & Dowling, 2003). This includes, but is not limited to, guidelines, regulatory and institutional policies, and evaluative tools. When considering operational actions such as creating programmes, policies, training modules, measuring progress, and reporting outcomes, Delphi participants identified the absence of management and evaluation frameworks as a significant barrier to the delivery of culturally sensitive ecotourism experiences. Concern was also expressed about the industry's ability to commit itself to providing culturally sensitive products for facilitating informed tourist purchases and for sharing culturally sensitive values and outcomes with supporting organisations. Participants indicated that the creation of 'guidelines of what is (and what is not) culturally sensitive ecotourism, methodological frameworks, best practices', the development of policy and regulatory measures and evaluation frameworks as the logical next step for making ecotourism culturally sensitive.

Concomitantly, participants identified the creation of planning and management frameworks as an important opportunity and not simply a barrier-driven reaction for making ecotourism culturally sensitive. If the current void is addressed, there exists the potential for ecotourism to assume a leadership role by providing relevant examples of best practices, codes of conduct, and other management tools for other heritage-dependent industries, tourism businesses, and communities. A trickle-down effect may be possible, whereby the ecotourism industry can continue to 'lead by example' (by expanding its leadership to also include socio-cultural sustainability).

Planning and management resources refers to a set of operational needs, assets, and processes. For example, this may include operational costs, human resources, and time. Participants expressed concern that progress towards cultural sensitivity may be affected by related constraints: 'Operators have a lack of resources to address the issue, including time constraints, financial constraints, and knowledge base and educational constraints'. Participants expressed general concern about the costs associated with cultural sensitivity. In particular, the costs associated with staff training, policy development, community

participation, and more were perceived as barriers to success. Furthermore, participants expressed concern about financial sustainability if 'new' investments are required. Participants, particularly those with expertise in the professional domain, expressed concern about stretching financial resources to yet another ecotourism objective: 'Financial sustainability may suffer while trying to accomplish such a wide range of goals'.

The amount of time required to develop and implement cultural sensitivity plans, policies, and programmes is also of concern. This concern is magnified when the amount of time diverted from other management areas is considered (e.g. marketing, product development). Communication has also been identified as a barrier to cultural sensitivity. For example, language and communication tools (e.g. Internet) can appear as a barrier when attempting to communicate across cultures and continents. Trust relationships between providers, communities, and tourists are also required to facilitate open and engaged dialogue: 'It takes time and patience to work with communities, and to maintain ongoing favourable relations for culturally sensitive tourism'. Thus, investments are required (staff training, technological investments, translation, relationship building, time, etc.) to overcome communication barriers. Education and training have also been identified as potential barriers because of the time and cost required to train staff and educate members of the host and visiting communities. This is clearly linked to the barriers associated with perceptions, attitudes, and values.

Despite these concerns, the Delphi panel expressed optimism with regard to the current and future state of ecotourism resources. They identified potential opportunities related to resources and processes such as ecotourism supply and demand, natural/cultural heritage access and conservation, communications and marketing, education and training, and community development. Increasing supply and demand for ecotourism is identified as an opportunity to propel the industry towards cultural sensitivity and it is an opportunity to share cultural sensitivity values with ecotourism stakeholders around the world.

Participants also identified opportunities to contribute to natural and cultural heritage conservation and to increase contributions as values change. Cultural sensitivity could also work to improve communications between tourists, providers, communities, and policy-makers. Given that cultural sensitivity, ideally, facilitates dialogue, then if implemented it could lead to improved communications. Though communication is also identified as a barrier, its identification as an opportunity implies that investments could lead to positive outcomes. Marketing was identified as an opportunity for those who offer culturally sensitive experiences. Sensitivity is a 'marketing asset' that can be mobilised in marketing material and ecotourism products to attract ecotourists. It can also be used as a means to begin cultural sensitivity education long before the tourist arrives on the site: 'incorporate opportunities to understand the local culture within the tour; put effort into developing "cultural experiences"; and ensure marketing materials reflect the experience'. Education and training is identified as a barrier to cultural sensitivity but it is also identified as a potential opportunity. Investments in staff education and training are thought to have the potential to accelerate cultural sensitivity implementation. It is also thought to have the potential to increase awareness among stakeholders (leadership/trickle-down effect): 'What ecotourism operations need for success (from all perspectives) is smart, engaged, progressive people running them, people that can make prudent decisions when considering barriers (including those listed above)'.

Community development was considered to be the most important opportunity in this thematic area. Investments in infrastructure, financial infusions, community cohesion, and support for local initiatives (particularly those associated with natural and cultural heritage) were identified as potential outcomes and opportunities of culturally sensitive ecotourism.

All of these opportunities not only have the potential to benefit the community, but they may cycle back to provide resources and support mechanisms for ecotourism. One participant remarks: 'This plethora of opportunities is what makes ecotourism so inherently interesting and exciting'.

Institutional structures and power dynamics refers to the stakeholders, agencies, actors, and processes involved (directly and indirectly) in the governance of ecotourism environments, experiences, and resources. It also refers to the power dynamics that result from both the structure and function of these arrangements. Associated issues and processes include democratisation (extent), Western-centrism, consumerism, commodification, and inequality. One participant provides perspective:

Cultural sensitivity must be set in a wider, dynamic, context where there are political (terrorism/conflict, etc.), economic, social, environmental (GEC, etc.), technological, and institutional forces at work, which mean that 'culture' is a far from static concept and that there are other, very powerful forces, at work militating against sensitivity: ecotourism will often be a drop in the ocean.

Related concerns emerged from the Delphi and they have potentially long-reaching implications. Democratic process was identified as a particularly lofty goal given the number of stakeholders involved in ecotourism, their various perspectives and expectations, and the time and efforts required to ensure that everyone has a voice in the decision-making process. Also of concern was the potential for indifference or a lack of interest to manifest among members of host communities, local governments, or tourists. Political structures and trends are also identified as a potential barrier, particularly in countries where democratic process is the exception and not the norm. This feeds directly into concerns about the inequalities that exist between ecotourism stakeholders. Consumerism and commodification of 'authentic' cultural experiences are also of significant (and residual) concern to participants. Institutional barriers and contextual power dynamics have the capacity to shape ecotourism developments and the achievement of cultural sensitivity. However, understanding of these dynamics is limited both in theory and practice. Significant and long-term investments are required to better understand and address institutional barriers.

Opportunities were also identified for addressing the institutional barriers and power dynamics. Culturally sensitive ecotourism may contribute to community engagement, that is, individual contributions to the local tourism economy and social fabric. This may lead to improved democratic process for ecotourism planning and management while engagement and democratisation have the potential to lead to community empowerment and improved social cohesion (social capital). It also has the potential to contribute to social and environmental justice for individuals and communities. It may contribute to the improved status of women, employment opportunities, minority inclusion, improved access to education and healthcare, human rights, quality of life, and improved distribution of financial benefits. In the ideal case, it should lead to improved understanding and acceptance among cultures.

Cultural sensitivity and the sustainable development imperative

Since the 1980s, there has been growing recognition that sustainable development represents both a considerable challenge and a vital imperative for human development and well-being. Popularly introduced in the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development *Brundtland Report*, the concept demands that a balance be achieved between economic,

social, and environmental needs and limitations for present and future generations. These three elements have become widely known as the *pillars of sustainability*.

In recent years, a noteworthy discourse has emerged regarding the need for a fourth pillar – culture (Hawkes, 2001). This ‘fourth pillar’ is proposed on the basis that sustainable development is achievable only when there is balance between the objectives of cultural diversity and those of environmental responsibility, economic viability, and social equity (Nurse, 2006). In terms of global development, the import of culture has been accelerated on the basis of the growing value of cultural assets (goods, services, experiences, etc.) in economic exchange systems, as well as the growing threats to cultural diversity associated with globalisation (Carrier & Macleod, 2005; Jamal et al., 2006; Stark, 2002). The importance of culture, its protection and celebration, its import for human development and well-being, and its vital role in sustainable development processes is formally recognised in key-stone policies and statements such as the United Nations (2005) *Millennium development goals*, the United Nations (1998, reconfirmed) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (2001) *Universal declaration on cultural diversity*.

Ecotourism champions’ environmental conservation and education is well aligned with the principles of sustainable development (Sharpley, 2000; Weaver & Lawton, 2007). Because of an ethics-based approach to tourism management, ecotourism is perhaps more than any other tourism type, best positioned to achieve sustainability. Although the principles of sustainable development have been formally and informally adopted by the ecotourism community, in sharp contrast, there is considerable disagreement about whether sustainable development is actually being achieved (Honey, 2002).

In the last decade or so, these concerns have been linked with the fourth pillar of sustainability – culture, and by extension the import of culture to ecotourism. Cooper and Vargas (2004, p. 56) identify a failure to truly acknowledge the import of culture for the ecotourism experience and the absence of ‘cultural sensitivity’ in the ecotourism exchange as the ‘two-edged sword of ecotourism’. They argue that attracting tourists into environmental and cultural contexts, many of which are sensitive to a scale of activity and experiential expectations that they are not equipped to manage, can damage both the host environment and culture while compromising the progress towards sustainable development. Individuals and organisations involved in ecotourism management and research argue that in adopting the principles of sustainable development, ecotourism has overlooked the importance of culture and has instead focused on the other pillars of sustainability. In fact, there appears a historic disregard for the cultural pillar of sustainability and disproportionate emphasis on the economic and environmental pillars. Doel (2003, p. 502) puts this in perspective: ‘Little wonder, then, that culture is often assumed to pale in significance when compared with more pressing concerns like economic crisis, regional conflicts and global warming’.

The achievement of ecotourism goals, and by extension sustainable development, is recognised to be contingent upon successful adaptation to, and protection of, complex cultural systems. While the current sustainable development paradigm recognises this in principle, antecedents suggest that the ecotourism experiment will fail in the absence of a greater sensitivity to the fourth pillar of sustainability – culture, and by extension, the cultural context for ecotourism. Culture and cultural sensitivity are, therefore, considered as important as the other pillars – social, economic, and environment. This imperative is supported by the judgement of the Delphi panelists specifically and the general findings of this study. The cultural sensitivity definition and the opportunities and barriers identified through the Delphi exercise represent but one of many necessary steps in the process required to break the barriers to sustainable development through ecotourism.

Conclusion

The Delphi proved to be a valuable and inclusive forum for the generation of ideas and debate. It produced a rich data set that contributed to an evolving understanding of cultural sensitivity and it facilitated the development of a cultural sensitivity definition. The research sought to capture and interpret expert opinion related to the importance of cultural sensitivity, the development of a cultural sensitivity definition, and the barriers and opportunities associated with operationalising the concept in the ecotourism domain. While there remains little doubt that cultural sensitivity is an issue of import, the study also reveals that investments are required to expand the breadth of its understanding among ecotourism stakeholders. The study accomplished its central objective to move the group through the development of a consensus cultural sensitivity definition for ecotourism. There is much hope (explicit in the participants' comments) that this definition can serve as a first step towards making ecotourism culturally sensitive in the global community.

The ecotourism literature establishes that definitions are the foundation from which ecotourism policy and practice frameworks can be developed (Garrod, 2002; Honey, 2002). They are also thought to serve as a basis for the legitimacy of ecotourism practices and opportunities. Therefore, the next step, as the Fyall and Garrod's (1997) sustainable development process model suggests, and as confirmed by the Delphi panel, is to develop a set of frameworks – techniques, tools, methods, policies for culturally sensitive ecotourism. This requires companion investments in monitoring and evaluation to measure the extent to which ecotourism is culturally sensitive in practice. The study also served to illuminate the potential barriers and opportunities for implementation. Opportunities were identified by participants and these perhaps are the greatest measure of 'hope'. While participants expressed concern about the process and resources required to make ecotourism culturally sensitive, there was agreement about its importance and its contribution to sustainable development. Participants cited a number of reasons, including community empowerment, educational opportunities, intercultural exchange and understanding, heritage conservation, and sustainable outcomes. Although the barriers and opportunities were not prioritised by the panel, the mere fact that they were identified may be considered a noteworthy contribution that is not found elsewhere in the academic or professional literature. Their identification may also serve as a critical pathway for mitigating barriers, maximising opportunities, and achieving cultural sensitivity.

Although somewhat paradoxical in its complexity and necessity, this study identifies cultural sensitivity as a contemporary ecotourism planning and management imperative. While ecotourism continues its 'coming of age' (Weaver & Lawton, 2007, p. 1168) and our understanding of the contemporary ecotourism paradigm evolves, it is hoped that the study's findings will provide guidance for ecotourism stakeholders in both the academic and professional domains who are contributing to ecotourism management plans, research agendas, standards, codes of conduct, or other ecotourism-related advancements related to culture, cultural sensitivity, and sustainable development.

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