
Preface

Wildlife tourism is a broadly defined sector of tourism involving a wide range of traveler experiences. It includes watching and photographing animals in their natural habitats or in the zoo, swimming with, petting or feeding animals in a variety of settings, hunting anything from quails to elephants and any other activity involving non-domesticated animals when traveling away from home. Although the term ‘wildlife’ tends to conjure up images of mammals such as lions or kangaroos, or the larger birds (cassowaries, eagles) or reptiles (crocodiles, marine turtles), it is frequently taken to mean all animals and even plants and fungi. Wildlife tourism thus includes all levels of bird-watching, visits to glow worm colonies or night walks through forests to see luminous toadstools. In this volume however we focus mainly on tourism involving vertebrate animals (chiefly mammals and birds), and mainly on non-consumptive tourism involving free-ranging wildlife, although other taxa (e.g. turtles), hunting and captive settings are also discussed by some authors.

Proponents of wildlife tourism often focus on such factors as the educational value of introducing people from all walks of life to a variety of animals and their ecological needs, the preservation or restoration of wild habitats, monetary contributions to conservation projects, the breeding of vulnerable species and the alleviation of poverty in developing countries. Opponents point to many welfare problems such as harassment of animals in the wild for ‘action photos’, animals kept in small enclosures or mistreated for financial gain involving, for instance, photographs of tourists feeding or holding captive animals, and businesses developed around the taking of trophies of hunted creatures either in the wilderness setting or as ‘canned hunting’ in captive settings. There is criticism also of the amount of fossil fuels used in traveling to far-flung places, the possible conservation problems arising from interrupting breeding or feeding activities, habitat modification or favouring populations of some species (e.g. by feeding) at the expense of others (e.g. their prey species or competitors), of zoos which breed animals that will never be released into the wild and tourism operations that do not benefit local residents or interfere with their privacy, livelihoods and even their safety. There is much emotion involved and often far too few facts, and reality is generally not as simple as many with extreme views may imagine.

The pros and cons of wildlife tourism vary greatly from one situation to another, and benefits or otherwise tend to lie along a spectrum rather than falling clearly into discreet categories. Sometimes compromises must be found between what is ideal for different stake-holders (including the wildlife itself) to maximise or at least optimise overall positive impact. It is best when decisions can be based on the best available information, even if important decisions, due to time constraints, must still be made on a ‘best guess’ basis, while research simultaneously continues, to inform future decisions. As a discipline for study, wildlife tourism involves applied ecology (e.g. possible negative effects of wildlife-viewing in natural areas and mitigation of same, monitoring techniques for habitat restoration sites), animal behaviour and physiology (e.g. signs of stress), psychology (e.g. motivations of tourists, effective learning experiences), politics and economics. Researchers specialised in their own fields often fail to understand the complexities involved in other relevant disciplines, and there seems much to be gained by more communication of information and brainstorming

of ideas relevant to maximising the positive impacts of wildlife tourism and minimising the negative.

There is thus an enormous field of actual and potential research and a range of philosophical perspectives from different stake-holders such as wildlife-loving tourists prepared to go to great lengths to see a variety of species, general tourists who like to include brief wildlife or wilderness experiences in their travels, tour operators and staff (including guides, accommodation owners, zoo keepers, etc.) who entered the industry out of a love of animals, tour operators and staff primarily focussed on income but seeing opportunities for value-adding to their products by adding a wildlife component, professional academics and students working in the fields of tourism or environmental sciences, environmental educators, conservation managers and people involved in all levels of government.

This volume cannot hope to cover all aspects of wildlife tourism across the world, but does offer an important contribution to understanding some of the problems and to insights and recent research leading to possible solutions.

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