

## **ECOTOURISM: TRAVELING AND DISCOVERING NATURE CONSCIOUSLY CASE OF ATLAS KASBAH – AGADIR – MOROCCO**

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### **Abstract**

*Ecotourism is a type of tourism that involves visiting fragile, and relatively undisturbed natural areas, intended as a low-impact and often small-scale alternative to standard commercial (mass) tourism. This type of tourism participates in local economies in its implementation; where it must be part of the development of the territory. The ecotourist takes the time to discover rather than to travel thousands of kilometers. In this paper, we will discover more about this concept, the profile of ecotourist, the impact of ecotourism, and a case study about an ecolodge in Agadir Morocco, and its experience and the ecotourism world.*

### **Keywords**

*Ecotourism, Ecotourist, Natural areas, Nature, Tourism; Responsible.*

### **Introduction**

Ecotourism is designed to provide tourists with an insight into the human impact on the environment and to enhance the appreciation of our natural habitats. Since the early 1970s, tourism has been the fastest growing industry worldwide (Boo, 1990). With the emergence of new social and environmental concerns, it is increasingly faced with the question of its compatibility with the development of local communities and environmental protection (McCool, 1995). Ecotourism is therefore often seen as a miracle solution capable of reconciling economic development, environmental protection, and community well-being. "Around the world, ecotourism has been hailed as a panacea: a way to fund conservation and scientific research, to protect pristine and fragile ecosystems, to benefit rural communities, to promote development in poor countries, to enhance ecological and cultural awareness, to instill social and environmental consciousness in the tourism industry, to satisfy and educate tourists and even, according to some, to build world peace" (Honey, 1999).

Tourism is an enterprise of great global significance from an economic and social point of view, but also an environmental point of view. Like nature tourism, ecotourism is a category of tourism practiced by people seeking close interaction with and without damaging nature. Ecotourism is the vision of a tourist living in the heart of a protected area with unique and colorful animals. Ecotourism remains tourism of the future, when implemented and managed by knowledgeable people, it can help the growth of remote areas more efficiently and in a sustainable manner than any other industry.

In this paper, we will learn more about this concept, the profile of eco-tourists, the impact of ecotourism, and the case study of the ecolodge in Agadir Morocco, its experience and the world of ecotourism: Responsible eco-tourism initiatives include

projects that reduce the negative environmental effects of mainstream tourism and improve the cultural identity of local communities.

### **Birth and development of ecotourism**

Ecotourism developed in the wake of the environmental movement that took shape in the early 1970s. Growing public interest in the environment and outdoor travel, coupled with growing dissatisfaction with mass tourism, showed the tourism industry that there was a place for ecotourism (Orams, 1995; Weaver, 1998; Honey, 1999). The understanding and acceptance of the principles of conservation and sustainability by a growing portion of the population have also contributed to the phenomenal evolution of the term ecotourism (Orams, 1995).

There is no consensus on the origin of the term ecotourism (Fennell, 1999). According to some authors, it first appeared in English in an article by Romeril (1985) (Blamey, 2001). However, the Mexican ecologist Ceballos-Lascurain used the Spanish word 'ecoturismo' even earlier, when the Canadian National Forest Service was promoting ecotours along the Trans-Canada Highway as early as 1973 (Fennell, 1999). Recently, the term was even traced in an article by Hertzler (1965) who used it to explain the complex relationship between tourists and the environment and the cultures with which they interact (Fennell, 1999). However, Budowski (1976) is generally cited as the pioneer of the concept of ecotourism (Blamey, 2001; Orams, 2001; Honey, 1999). In his article "Tourism and Environmental Conservation: Conflict, Coexistence or Symbiosis?" Budowski acknowledges that the relationship between tourism and the natural environment tends to be conflictual, but that the potential exists for a relationship based on mutual benefits. His description of the symbiotic relationship that might follow resembles the contemporary idea of ecotourism, but without using the term (Blamey, 2001). Table 1 contains a sample of some of the definitions frequently found in the ecotourism literature.

While a definition such as Ceballos-Lascurain's (1987) emphasizes the proximity that tourists seek with nature, more recent definitions have sought to highlight a variety of principles associated with the concept of sustainable development (Blamey, 2001). In keeping with this trend, participants at the first World Ecotourism Summit, held in Quebec City in 2002, recognized that ecotourism encompasses the principles of sustainable tourism in terms of its impacts on the economy, society, and the environment and that it also includes the following specific principles that distinguish it from the broader concept of sustainable tourism (World Tourism Organization (WTO) and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 2002):

- Ecotourism actively contributes to the protection of natural and cultural heritage;
- Ecotourism includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development, and operation and contributes to their well-being;
- Ecotourism provides visitors with an interpretation of natural and cultural heritage;
- Ecotourism is best suited to individual travel as well as small group tours.

According to the International Ecotourism Society in 1990: Ecotourism: is defined as follows: "it is about a responsible trip in the natural areas that preserves the environment and increases the well-being of the local populations (new travel

formula)". In 1999, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), this term is newly defined under the following terms: "This environmentally responsible tourism modality consists in traveling in natural areas to appreciate and enjoy nature while promoting the preservation, having a minimal visit impact and favoring active integration that brings socio-economic benefits to local populations. "

The main criteria for ecotourism are defined as follows, among others (Bonilla, 1987; Wearing et al., 1996; Timothy et al., 2003):

- Have a low impact on the resources of the protected natural area.
- Integrate different actors (individuals, communities, tourism operators, and government institutions) in the planning, development, implementation, and monitoring phases.
- Respect local cultures and traditions.
- Generate sustainable and equitable income for local communities and as many stakeholders as possible, including private tourism operators.
- Producing income that will be used for the preservation of protected areas.
- Educate all committed actors about their role in preservation.

Ecotourism as a form of travel has emerged step by step and has developed over time, according to several problems encountered (Cater, 1993):

- Originally, mass tourism in LDCs: Least Developed Countries;
- Short term profitability research;
- Generate little income for local people.

From the beginning of the 80s, there was an environmental awareness that has an impact on tourism. Since then, we have noticed an increase in demand for "responsible" tourism, and worldwide recognition of the concept of "ecotourism" (2002: International Year of Ecotourism, annual ecotourism summit). Today, ecotourism is growing rapidly, (between 10 and 15% per year according to the World Travel and Tourism Council). It is also developing, mainly in the LDCs (especially Central America, tropical Africa, and Southeast Asia). In terms of certification and label, we can say that ecotourism benefits from a certificate under the name of Environmental Management System (ISO 14001, EMAS)

The creation of a label and certificates "ecotourism" facilitates the task to ensure the professionalism of the activity (Certification for Sustainable Tourism, Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program, ...)

The evolution of the concept 'Ecotourism' through the years is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Ecotourism definitions**

<b>Ecotourism definitions given by researchers</b>
<p><b>Ziolkowski (1990)</b>            "Low-impact tourism which focuses on experiencing the local culture and what it has to offer on its unadulterated terms."</p>
<p><b>Boo (1991)</b>            "Ecotourism / nature-oriented tourism refers to tourism to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific objective of admiring, studying and enjoying the scenery and its flora and fauna."</p>

<p><b>Figgis (1992)</b>  “Travel to remote or natural areas which aim to enhance understanding and appreciation of the natural environment and cultural heritage, avoiding damage or deterioration of the environment and the experience to others”</p>
<p><b>McCormick (1994)</b>  “Purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the culture and natural history of the environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, while producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people.”</p>
<p><b>Blamey (1995)</b>  “An ecotourism experience is one in which an individual travels to what he/she considers to be relatively undisturbed natural area and is more than 40 kms from home, the primary intention being to study, admire or appreciate the scenery and wild plants and animals as well as existing cultural manifestations found in the area.”</p>
<p><b>Brandon (1996)</b>  “Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, to enjoy and appreciate nature that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.”</p>
<p><b>Lindberg and McKercher (1997)</b>  “Ecotourism is tourism and recreation which is both nature-based and sustainable. Concepts of sustainability inevitably involve social, philosophical, and, political and environmental sustainability.”</p>
<p><b>Embratur (1999)</b>  “The segment of tourism activity which makes use of natural and cultural heritage sustainably, promotes its conservation and seeking to establish an environmental conscience through the understanding of nature, and promoting the well-being of the involved population.”</p>
<p><b>Weaver (2001)</b>  “Ecotourism is a form of tourism that fosters learning experiences and appreciation of the natural environment and enhances the cultural resource base of the destination and promotes the viability of the operation.”</p>
<p><b>Fennell (2003)</b>  “Ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive and locally oriented (control, benefits and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas and should contribute to the preservation of such areas.”</p>
<p><b>Sâmbotin et al. (2011)</b>  “Ecotourism is a form of tourism developed in natural areas, whose goal is to acknowledge and to appreciate nature and local culture, which includes conservation measures and ensure an active involvement, generating benefits for the local population.”</p>
<p><b>Carrascosa-López et al. (2014)</b>  “Ecotourism must retain its essence which is its model of sustainability, preserving ecosystems and satisfying local people improving their living conditions.”</p>
<p><b>Cobbinah (2015)</b>  “Ecotourism principles which are clear and widely promoted include environmental conservation and education, cultural preservation, experience and economic benefits.”</p>

*Source: Chandel and Mishra, 2016*

### The actors of ecotourism

The aim may be to educate travelers, provide green conservation funding, directly support the economic growth and political empowerment of local communities, or promote respect for different cultures and human rights (Scheyvens, 1999; Coria & Calfucura, 2012). Ecotourism has been seen by environmentalists as a key activity since the 1980s. Therefore, in addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, the promotion of recycling, energy efficiency, water conservation, and the development of economic opportunities for local communities are an important part of ecotourism. Of these reasons, the ecotourism also appeals to environmental and social responsibility advocates (Irandu, Shah, 2014).

There is a multitude of actors working in the ecotourism sector are multiplying more and more given the importance of the concept, a classification can be done in this direction (Nepal; 1997).

- Personal Protected Areas,
- Individuals and community organizations,
- Members of the private sector of industry and tourism,
- Officials from governmental or non-governmental organizations,
- Secondary speakers

Ecotourism is a mode of travel that presents itself as the tourism of tomorrow, it is a form of tourism that consists of visiting relatively untouched natural areas to study and admire the landscape of the plants and wild animals that they shelter (Fennell, 2020). It is a form of responsible travel that contributes to the protection of the environment and the safeguarding of ecosystems (Stamou & Paraskevopoulos, 2006). Ecotourism activities are culturally friendly so group activities are often limited to 12 people. It takes into account the cultural heritage of these destinations it is a new way to develop the territory is to be a responsible traveler (Fiorello & Bo, 2012). The ecotourist is different from a visitor in the sense that, in most instances, he or she is mindful of his climate, contributing to the protection of the ecosystem.

### Who is the ecotourist?

Future generations can experience destinations unaffected by human intervention. Many university programs use this term as a working definition of eco-tourism. Ecotourism usually deals with living parts of the natural environment. It focuses on socially responsible travel, personal development, and sustainable environments (Holden, 2016).

The international ecotourism society developed the following profile for the ecotourism market in 1998 based on a survey of travelers from the United States (Wood et al., 2001). Several factors are taken into consideration to have a better profile, which we quote as follows:

**Age:** Between 35 and 54, although age varies depending on the activity.

**Gender:** 50% were women and 50% men, with clear differences depending on the activities.

**Education:** 82% were in possession of a university degree. Interest in ecotourism is shifting, affecting more and more layers with a lower level of education.

**Group Composition:** A majority (60%) of experienced ecotourists prefer to travel as a couple: only 15%, that they will be traveling with their families and 13%, that they prefer to travel alone.

**Duration of the trip:** The largest group of experienced ecotourists give preference to trips of 8 to 14 days.

**Expenses:** Experienced ecotourists were more willing to spend than mainstream tourists: The largest (26%) was willing to spend between US \$ 1,000 and US \$ 1,500 per trip.

**Important elements of the trip:** The predominant answers of experienced ecotourists: Landscapes. Observation of animal life and excursions, hikes. The two main motivations of ecotourists experiment with their next trip: to enjoy landscapes and nature, to make new experiences, and to know new sites.

Another study developed ecotourism in Switzerland. For the first time, an attempt was also made in Switzerland to quantify the value of the landscape for tourism. The benefits that Swiss tourism derives from its landscapes and its natural resources are not only of great importance to the Swiss economy but also to the environment. That corresponds to an added value of CHF 2.5 billion per year, according to Newsletter 14/2002 of CIPRA's AlpMedia Net service.

By drawing up an outline of the ecotourist visiting the Alps based on various studies<sup>1</sup>, one can establish the following profile he or she:

- would be between 30 and 60 years old, with a high level of education and a regular income,
- would come from an urban suburb or a big city, and seek relaxation rather than action on his vacation,
- would especially like to discover (if possible new) landscapes, and spend a pleasant holiday away from the tourist centers', with no necessarily save money but without spending much either,
- would spend a beneficial summer holiday - either relaxing at the sea (sun, sand, sea) or by choosing a more active holiday in the mountains (hiking),
- would prefer relatively small stations to very well-known and popular areas, and occasionally allow a (short) stay in a higher class hotel.

Significantly more than half of the respondents (64%) expect their agency to travel precise information on the ecological aspects of their stay. 71% of them even state that they would prefer a tour operator that has shown an interest in ecology. In addition, these travelers have high requirements concerning health and safety standards. In the future location of their ecotourism stay and expect to be able to carry out hikes and excursions independently, with good information. Generally speaking, the travelers interested in ecotourism expect a benefit from an advantageous offer at least in terms of price-quality ratio, service to be able to taste typical cuisine using local products, and to be able to be hosted in small hotels run by the local population.

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<sup>1</sup> Lifestyle analysis 1999, Tourist survey in Austria 2000, statistics Austrian 2001, traveler survey as part of the various studies on the potential for 2001/2002

### **The impact of ecotourism on the region**

Ecotourism is a very important factor that has fundamental results. The latter has an essential contribution to creating programs of education on the environment and the local population which will benefit from the advantages of ecotourism. Ecotourism has an essentially economic meaning, but here it represents an upheaval of the daily life of the local population since it allows it to generate some benefits from the activities carried out between AGR, Cooperatives, and guest house. The local population is decisive in this sense since they must participate actively in decision-making concerning the planning and management of their activities to develop their resources and continue to attract ecotourists.

Due to its specific characteristics, ecotourism should have positive effects on the natural and socio-cultural environment. Under these conditions, the measurement of the economic, ecological, and social costs and benefits of ecotourism is different from that of traditional or mass tourism. The usual ratios, especially in terms of economic profitability, should be able to be assessed in a different context that evaluates the benefits of ecotourism activity not only in terms of financial profitability but perhaps more importantly in terms of its impact on the income, activity, and social conditions of local populations (UNWTO and UNEP, 2002).

#### ***Environmental impacts***

Tourism is often perceived as being responsible for the degradation of the natural environment, at least in part (Lequin, 2001). Measuring the ecological costs and benefits of tourism projects is thus one of the major challenges of ecotourism. Indeed, ecotourism represents one of the few forms of tourism development that, under certain conditions, can promote the protection of natural areas thanks to the conservation programs it generates and can finance (WTO and UNEP, 2002).

The interest of these different indicators is that they allow a real ecological monitoring of ecotourism products and also provide a global vision of the different products created in the same geographical area by several operators (UNWTO and UNEP, 2002).

#### ***Economic impacts***

In any ecotourism project, economic benefits can be of particular importance to local people. However, examples show that these benefits only become substantial after many years. Case studies also show that in the short term, revenues from ecotourism are modest and not sufficient to finance the environmental protection needed to ensure high-quality ecotourism products (UNWTO and UNEP, 2002). They also reveal that it is very difficult to ensure the distribution of financial benefits between private and public sector stakeholders (UNWTO and UNEP, 2002). Furthermore, although ecotourism has a high potential to generate economic benefits, a large proportion of this money is more often than not spent at the place of origin of the tourists (e.g. for air tickets) (Wall, 1994, Page, 2002). Thus, the economic impacts of ecotourism are not always substantial and may not even be positive at all (Honey, 1999).

## **Ecotourism in Morocco**

### ***Case of Atlas Kasbah - Agadir - Morocco***

The ecotourist differs from a visitor in the sense that, in most cases, he or she is aware of his or her environment and contributes to the conservation of the ecosystem.

The Atlas Kasbah Agadir ecolodge, is a guest house on a human scale based on the principles of sustainable development, with a human dimension as a key foundation. Its objectives are to support local communities by boosting the economy of the area in which it is located, preserving the environment, and enhancing the value of local heritage. Staying in it represents awareness and commitment to humans and the planet, a real willingness to participate in the local development of the region visited, here the magnificent Argan tree forest that is unique in the world and that is all the more vulnerable. Traveling as a family and staying in an ecolodge helps the ecotourist to be aware of the values of respect, ethics, ecology, and the environment in general. It is the transfer of the concept of sustainable development to future generations, participating in the development of a solidarity economy to help the local population and especially women.

Several awards are given to ecological hotels in the world, but the most important one is the World Trophy of Responsible Tourism that Atlas Kasbah won in London in 2015 as the first French-speaking accommodation in the world to win such a prize in sustainable tourism. The Atlas Kasbah Agadir ecolodge is an ecological accommodation that combines the comfort of hotels and the authenticity of the Amazigh (Berber) heritage to make the stay in Morocco unforgettable. Opened in 2009 and located only 10 minutes from Agadir and 2 hours and a half from the imperial city of Marrakech. From the ecological construction of master craftsmen with ancestral know-how, specialists in adobe, stone, wood, to the sustainable philosophy of the eco-lodge, everything is designed to enhance both the human, its traditions, the heritage of Morocco, and its unique know-how. There is also a great deal of respect for the environment with natural materials that contribute to well-being and resourcing and the conservation of nature. The team is therefore made up of Berbers coming from villages near Agadir. The team's investment and human qualities have brought authenticity, benevolence, and sincerity to this unique ecological guest house.

The founder of this unique ecolodge in Morocco, Dr. Hassan Aboutayeb works as a consultant in sustainable development and business development with high ecological potential. He has participated in the creation and monitoring of several eco-lodges in Morocco, riads in Marrakech and Taroudant, hotels in Morocco, and ecotourism projects in Morocco. He is involved in various regional and international actions to discover the richness of the natural and cultural heritage of the Agadir region. A pioneer of nature tourism in Morocco, Dr. Hassan Aboutayeb invests his life in promoting responsible tourism in Agadir and at the international level, his vocation being to promote sustainable tourism in Morocco.

Nestled in the heart of an exceptional ecosystem where permaculture gardens, olive trees, argan trees, palm trees, fruit trees, aromatic and medicinal plants and other crops coexist, the ecolodge offers a natural heritage of great beauty. The word ecolodge has its



full meaning because it advocates a way of life that respects the human being and the values that bind him to the earth. It is also an inspiration for future generations. To participate in the evolution of consciousness and to promote the practice of solidarity that respects the environment. The choice of raw materials, whether for development, food, or cleaning, is natural and ecological, with a view to enhancing the value of local natural resources. The care and beauty products in the rooms and the SPA come from women's cooperatives and are organic based on noble oils and wild materials from the Agadir region and Morocco. Participation is fully made in the protection and enhancement of the natural and socio-cultural heritage of the argan forest. The key criteria used relate to water, energy, waste, purchasing policy, landscape integration and environmental awareness, particularly in the neighboring territory of Agadir.

## Conclusion

A pioneer of nature tourism in Morocco, Dr. Hassan Aboutayeb is investing his life in promoting responsible tourism in Agadir and at the international level, to promote sustainable tourism in Morocco. The Atlas Kasbah Agadir ecolodge has been designed to privilege, preserve and share with you the local resources of the Souss Massa region and to promote ecology in Morocco. Ecotourism is an interesting solution because it helps to reconcile the objectives of preservations with economic and social development. The beauty and rareness of the surrounding landscapes (the Argan tree being an endemic species unique in the world), as well as the generosity and benevolence of the local Amazigh communities, give all their meaning to this concept of holidays in Morocco, with respect for nature and human beings.

It is a relatively complex sector with which protected area staff and communities need to become acquainted with form partnerships, whose common denominator between mass tourism and other types of tourism is to: achieve economic benefits. Ecotourism brings together all forms of nature-oriented tourism in which the main motivation of the tourist is to observe and appreciate nature as well as traditional cultures that reign in natural areas. It fits perfectly into the theme of sustainable development; it is a very young concept, in development.

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