Challenges and Opportunities in the World of Tourism From the Point of View of Ecotourism

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Abstract: This article emerges from the analysis of the data corresponding to the tourism activity in the world and in Mexico, considering: the arrival of tourists and international visitors, and the arrival of tourists in the North American region. Subsequently, it is intended to place ecotourism as an option for sustainable development, which helps generate additional income for local communities and contributes to the protection and conservation of natural resources. The analysis of global tourism in the above categories, in addition to the discussion about the criteria and characteristics of ecotourism versus sustainable development, allows us to visualize the potential that this activity poses to emerging economies such as Mexico. The discussion about Ecotourism and sustainability shows that there is a mutually beneficial relationship when the community is incorporated in the development of ecotourism projects, as demonstrated in EcoAlberto Park. Nonetheless, an activity that has no government support or equitable tourism legislation, in addition to the absence of quality research, can overshadow any potential natural resource to practice ecotourism activities in global markets representing tourism.

Keywords: Global tourism, tourism activity in Mexico, slow tourism, world tourism, ecotourism, sustainability, sustainable development

Introduction

The development models that societies have adopted throughout the twentieth century were characterized by encouraging industrialization and promoting economic growth, rather than the maintenance of environmental goods and services provided by the ecosystems. In response to this situation, the international community organized several forums to discuss the effects of these

economic development models, especially in the area of inequity in wealth's distribution and lack of natural resources care.[1]

In this context, and as a result of these meetings since 1995, the Mexican government signed a series of international agreements and pledged to promote a policy oriented towards the conservation of existing biodiversity in the country, recognizing it as an essential wealth for sustainable development and promoting the well-being of rural and native communities, especially those settled in areas of environmental importance or subject to any protection scheme.

The challenge for sustainable development through nature tourism in Mexico is how to design a public policy directed towards the competitiveness of this sector at its national and international level, which results in improved economic and social well-being for the communities where corporations operate. In terms of concrete actions in the case of private companies, it must maximize their social responsibility, while creating support and encouragement to maintain and improve the quality of their operation. In addition, both communities and private companies should generate actions to comply with the standards established in this area, and also seek to obtain certification of service quality, both domestically and internationally.

The objective of this paper is to expound tourism challenges and opportunities in Mexico from the point of view of ecotourism. To accomplish this, first it presents an overview of the global tourism situation, placing Mexico in the same context and analysis categories, such as international tourist arrivals and international visitors to Mexico. To introduce the principal topic of the document, this is followed by the conceptualization of slow movement, ecotourism, and mass tourism; the relationship between ecotourism and sustainable tourism; and their characteristics according to several authors. Finally, it describes the potential of Mexico in terms of ecotourism activities.

Analysis of world tourism in 2008

Tourism is a social phenomenon that promotes the movement of visitors to a region or destination in the world with certain natural or artificial features aimed to leisure and rest. In order to understand the trends in the tourism market, it is necessary to analyze what happened in recent times, taking as a reference the year 2008 given its characteristics, and presenting figures until 2011. Here is a brief summary of the most important events of world tourism, focusing on 2008.

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[1] In 1972, the United Nations World Conference on Human Environment was held in Stockholm Sweden. In 1976, the United Nations World Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat), Vancouver Canada. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development, Tokyo Japan. In 1992, the Earth Summit Rio de Janeiro Brazil. In 1995, the Programme of Action for Sustainable Development was approved and developed (Agenda 21).

The arrival and departure of international tourists in 2008 was influenced by socioeconomic and geopolitical events, plus climatic conditions, without considering the implicit constraints the tourism industry faces every day.

Some of the economic factors were not only characteristic of the year under review, like the case of a major source market such as the U.S. and its mortgage crisis which began in August, 2007. The crisis spanned over several years and spread to other financial markets in the world and became a major international crisis, described by some analysts (UNWTO Panel of Experts) as the worst since World War II. In addition, other elements such as the fight against drug dealing, problems related to national security, and climate events such as hurricanes, floods, or earthquakes affected to a greater or lesser extent some international destinations.

Derived from this, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimated that international tourist arrivals recorded worldwide 922 million tourists in 2008, only 2.0% above the level reached in the previous year (World Tourism Barometer). See Table 1.

Results obtained from the analysis on International Tourist Arrivals by Sub-Region (Table 1), have introduced a substantial change in the global tourism map, even though Europe remains firmly in the first place in terms of tourist arrivals: 489 million, located at the bottom in terms of growth rate (0.3%). This represents an important loss of percentage points when compared with a growth of 10.5% obtained in 2007, reflecting that not only the American continent was influenced by the financial crisis originated in the United States, but that it also had an impact on the number of international arrivals to Europe.

Meanwhile, the Middle East, despite being the last in terms of tourist arrivals, 55.1 million, ranks first in terms of growth rate in 2008, which was 18.2% lower than the growth experienced between 2006 and 2007, it means 23.3%.

The African continent is located in third place in terms of growth rate as 2008 recorded 46 million 600 thousand arrivals, 3.6% above the level reached in 2007. This growth is particularly due to the low prices available in comparison to the Mediterranean region. In this regard, the Panel of Experts from UNWTO estimates that factors such as economic crisis and internal problems in the continent hinder the growth settle the arrival of international tourists during the first half of 2009 (UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, 2009).

The American continent, according to the mapping of the UNWTO, occupies the third position with regard to its rate of growth in international tourist arrivals, but in contrast registers a fall with 2.9% compared with the levels recorded in 2007 (UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, 2009).

Table 1. *International Tourist Arrivals*

	2006 (Million)	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2008 Share (%)	2011 Share (%)	07/06 (%)	08/07 (%)	*11/10 (%)
World	805	904	922	881	939	980	100	100	12.3	2.0	4.4
Europe	441.6	487.9	489.4	461.1	474.6	502.3	53.1	51.2	10.5	0.3	5.8
Northern Europe	52.8	58.1	57.0	57.8	58.2	61.4	6.2	6.3	10.0	-1.9	5.5
Western Europe	142.6	154.9	153.3	148.5	153.8	158.1	16.6	16.1	8.6	-1.0	2.8
Central/Eastern Europe	87.5	96.6	99.6	90.2	93.6	101.0	10.8	10.3	10.4	3.1	7.9
Southern/ Medit. Europe	158.7	178.2	179.6	164.5	169.0	181.8	19.5	18.5	12.3	0.8	7.6
Asia and Pacific	154.7	182	184.1	181.1	204.5	217.1	20.0	22.1	17.6	1.2	6.2
North-East Asia	87.5	101.0	101.0	98.0	111.6	115.9	10.9	11.8	15.4	0.0	3.9
South-East Asia	48.5	59.7	61.7	62.1	69.9	77.1	6.7	7.9	23.1	3.4	10.3
Oceania	10.5	11.2	11.1	10.9	11.6	11.7	1.2	1.2	6.7	-0.9	0.9
South Asia	8.1	10.1	10.3	10.1	11.5	12.4	1.1	1.3	24.7	2.0	1.8
Americas	133.4	142.9	147.1	140.7	149.7	156.0	15.9	15.9	7.1	2.9	4.2
North America	89.9	95.3	97.8	92.1	98.2	101.0	10.6	10.3	6.0	2.6	2.9
Caribbean	18.8	19.8	20.2	19.5	20.0	20.7	2.2	2.1	5.3	2.0	3.5
Central America	6.4	7.8	8.3	7.6	7.9	8.3	0.9	0.8	21.9	6.4	5.1
South America	18.2	20.1	20.8	21.4	23.6	26.0	2.3	2.6	10.4	3.5	10.2
Africa	37.3	45.0	46.6	46.0	49.9	50.0	5.1	5.1	20.6	3.6	0.2
North Africa	13.9	16.3	17.2	17.6	18.7	16.9	1.9	1.7	17.3	5.5	-9.6
Sub-Saharan Africa	23.3	28.7	29.5	28.5	31.2	33.1	3.2	3.4	23.2	2.8	6.1
Middle East	37.8	46.6	55.1	52.1	59.9	54.8	6.0	5.6	23.3	18.2	-8.5

Note. Based on figures from the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer.

Preliminary data indicates that Central America (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama) and South America (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela) had the best growth rates, 6.4% and 3.5% respectively, in tourist arrivals.

On the other hand, the Caribbean can barely reach a growth of 2.0% compared with 2007, while for Canada, Mexico, and the United States, comprising the North American region, an overall growth of 2.6% is likely. Regarding the above, and in accordance with the Panel of Experts on Tourism of the UNWTO (World Tourism Barometer, 2008), it was possible to observe a significant slowdown in U.S. tourism. Indeed, business travel declined due to a failure of low cost flights, more than leisure travel.

Finally, in 2008, the Asia-Pacific region showed 1.2% in international tourist arrivals, very poor results compared to the level reached in 2007.

International Tourism in Mexico

Despite the following circumstances: 1) the financial crisis, 2) the drop in tourism movements worldwide, and 3) the tightening of immigration regulations, it is considered that the influx of tourists to Mexico in 2008 showed a positive balance of 22,637.4 tourists, corresponding to an increase of 5.9% over the previous year (UNTWO Tourism Highlights, 2009). See Table 2.

Worldwide, tourism in that year, according to the UNTWO Tourism Highlights 2009, reflected a growth rate of 2.0%, a figure much below than the one recorded in Mexico. See Table 1.

According to the Ministry of Tourism of Mexico's database figures (DataTur, 2011), the number of international visitors to Mexico registered in 2008 was 91,462.2 which reflects a decrease of -0.8% compared to that recorded for the previous year. Continuing the trend, the number of international tourists rose 5.9%. The contribution of inbound tourism was 2.7% growth and 11% for cross-border tourism. Nevertheless, in the category of international hikers, there was a decrease of 2.8%, especially noticeable in cruise ship passenger volume, amounting to 6,430.9 thousand, a decline of 5.6%.

The downward trend in economic growth, combined with the current uncertainties (extreme market volatility and decline in both consumer confidence and business), is expected to continue to affect tourism demand, at least in the short to medium term.

Faced with these dark forecasts according to the Panel of Experts on Tourism of UNWTO (Tourism Highlights, 2010) Mexico is the North American country that showed better numbers at the end of 2008, a 5.9% improvement occupying first position in terms of growth, followed by

US (growth of 3.5% above 2007) and Canada, in third position, recording a decrease of 4.4%. See Table 3.

Given the decline suffered by the Canadian market 4.4% due to the U.S. financial crisis, which affected international tourist arrivals in this region, all the countries in the American continent were positioned in third place with a 2.9% growth, surpassed by the Middle East and Africa with 18.2% and 3.6% respectively. See Table 1.

It is clear that efforts to attract international tourism to the North American region must be complemented by a serious search for new markets, besides promotion to existing destinations. This requires joint and decisive action of the governments in the region. Such is the case of ecotourism, with a strong environmental focus, which has positioned countries like Costa Rica, Nepal, Kenya, and Canada, among others, as representatives favoring this type of activities over conventional (mass) tourism or "sun and beach" tourism, as it is called. In the following sections, we will address the so-called "slow tourism", which is gaining strength in Europe, and consider ecotourism as a special category of nature tourism and mass tourism.

Slow Tourism, Ecotourism, and Mass Tourism

The idea that ecotourism offers a fair deal to communities, providing financial rewards and being useful to certain groups of influence, is a notion that is not far from the principles of social justice and sustainability. This, actually, is the basis of the efforts of many countries concerned by these issues (Wearing & Neil, 1999).

Following the position of Fullagar et al. (2012), one of the components that can assist in achieving some of the objectives mentioned above is what they call the "slow movement"

The "slow movement" concept stresses the issue of recovery and assessment of the roots of many native and rural people, who have been powerless in the invasion of major building projects at the hands of foreign investors mostly. The "slow movement" promotes the return to the contact with nature through practices involving the total interaction of people with the environment, without damaging or modifying its pristine condition. These experiences can be translated into practice through activities with or without physical effort, based on a socially responsible form of tourism, such as Ecotourism.

In order to make sense of the practice of traditional tourism ("sun and beach") and orient it towards productive goals, we must first review how it was generated through travel dynamics. When local communities are involved in tourism-related interactions, the sense of belonging and the desire to incorporate social values is made explicit and clear, improving tourism practices that seek to appraise local over the foreign culture (Wearing, Wearing, & McDonald, 2012, p. 42). This behavior is evident when the community manages a kind of hierarchy, similar to organizations, in an attempt to define their roles within the group of tourist services.

Table 2. *Number of International Visitors to Mexico.*

	Units	International Visitors to Mexico								
		2004	2005	*Var. % 05/04*	2006	*Var. % 06/05*	2007	*Var. % 07/06*	2008	*Var. % 08/07*
No. of Persons	(Thousands)	99,249.7	103,146.1	3.9	97,701	-5.3	92,179.5	-5.7	91,462.2	-0.8
International Tourists		20,617.7	21,914.9	6.3	21,352.6	-2.6	21,369.7	0.1	22,637.4	5.9
Inbound Tourism		11,552.7	12,533.9	8.5	12,607.6	0.6	12,955.7	2.8	13,299.6	2.7
Cross-Border Tourism		9,065	9,381	3.5	8,745	-6.8	8,414	-3.8	9,337.9	11.0
International Hikers		78,632	81,231.2	3.3	76,348.4	-6.0	70,809.8	-7.3	68,824.7	-2.8
Border Hikers		72,139	74,524	3.3	69,832	-6.3	63,995	-8.4	62,393.8	-2.5
Cruise Ship Passengers		6,439	6,707.2	3.3	6,516.4	-2.9	6,814.8	4.6	6,430.9	-5.6

Note. Based on figures from DataTur, Ministry of Tourism of Mexico (September 2012).

Table 3. *International Tourist Arrivals in North America*

Region/Country	2007	2008	07/06 (%)	08/07 (%)	2009	2010	2011	11/10 (%)
	(1000)					(1000)		
Americas	142,866	147,847	5.2	3.5	141,697	150,707	156,600	3.9
North America	95,287	97,717	5.2	2.6	93,042	99,183	101,704	2.5
Canada	17,931	17,142	-1.8	-4.4	15,737	16.097	15,976	-0.8
Mexico	21,370	22,637	0.1	5.9	22,346	23,290	23,403	0.5
United States	55,986	57,937	9.8	3.5	54,958	59,796	62,325	4.2

Note. Based on data from World Tourism Barometer (2009), World Tourism Barometer Interim update (2010, World Tourism Barometer (2012), and UNWTO Tourism Highlights (2012).

These practices can be contrasted with reality, in projects like EcoAlberto Park (2011), located in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico. It has achieved outstanding results in upholding their socio-cultural heritage. This is handled in a clear hierarchical system with clear roles, highly defined services, active participation of all families, and a community that stands as a great example of the rescue of customs and cultural traditions. The Park's managers are active advocates of natural resources and a model of Ecotourism activities based on principles of sustainable tourism.[2]

"Slow movement" can create a new sense of time, place, and experience in local communities. For instance, "slow travel can create for tourist and host alike a different and potentially deeper set of experiences in contrast to the fleeting and highly commodified tourism [packaged] by many travel agents" (Wearing et al., 2012, p. 43).

According to Butler (in Scace, 1993, p. 65), Ecotourism must meet the following criteria:

- It must be consistent with a positive environmental ethics encouraging adequate behavior.
- It does not underrate the environmental resources, avoiding erosion of resource integrity.
- It concentrates on intrinsic rather than extrinsic values.
- It is biocentric rather than homocentric in philosophy, in that an ecotourist accepts Nature largely on its own terms, rather than significantly transforming the environment for personal convenience. It must benefit the resource. The environment must experience a

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[2] Research Project conducted for the subject of Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism, in the town of Ixmiquilpan, State of Hidalgo, Mexico (2011).

net benefit from the activity, although these are often spin-offs of social, economic, political or scientific benefits.

- It is a first-hand experience with the natural environment.
- It must fulfill expectations of gratification measured in appreciation and education, not in thrill-seeking or physical achievements.
- It brings highly cognitive (informative) and affective (emotional) dimensions to the experience, requiring a high level of preparation from both personnel and participants.

According to Blamey (as cited in Weaver) with these criteria, we can distinguish three elements that recur in ecotourism: Nature orientation, a learning-educational component, and sustainability requirements (2008, p. 7).

The first component refers to ecotourism as nature-oriented. The 'eco' prefix is precisely the term used to refer to "ecology" and "ecosystem". According to Weaver, the condition of 'eco' recognizes that ecotourism does not need to be developed in a particular ecosystem or habitat (2008, p. 10).

The motivation and the interaction between the visitor and the features often bring an element of education, learning, or appreciation of the natural aspects as integral parts of the ecotourism product. (Weaver, 2008, p.11). In this interaction, the tourist can be involved in a learning process, often unintentional, but that ultimately generates an exchange of experiences enriching both sides.

The last component refers to the term 'sustainability' that first appeared in 1987 under a report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (UNWCED), "Our Common Future", better known as the Brundtland Report. In the Report, the Commission used the term 'sustainable' (or "sustainable development"), defined as "the one that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UNWCED, 1987, p. 27). It implies a major change in the meaning of sustainability, mainly ecological, and also a framework that emphasizes the economic and social contextual development.

According to Newsome, Moore, and Dowling (2002), "tourism comprises either mass or alternative tourism. The former is characterized by large numbers of people seeking replications or their own culture in institutionalized settings with little cultural or environmental interaction in authentic settings" (p. 10). See Figure 1.
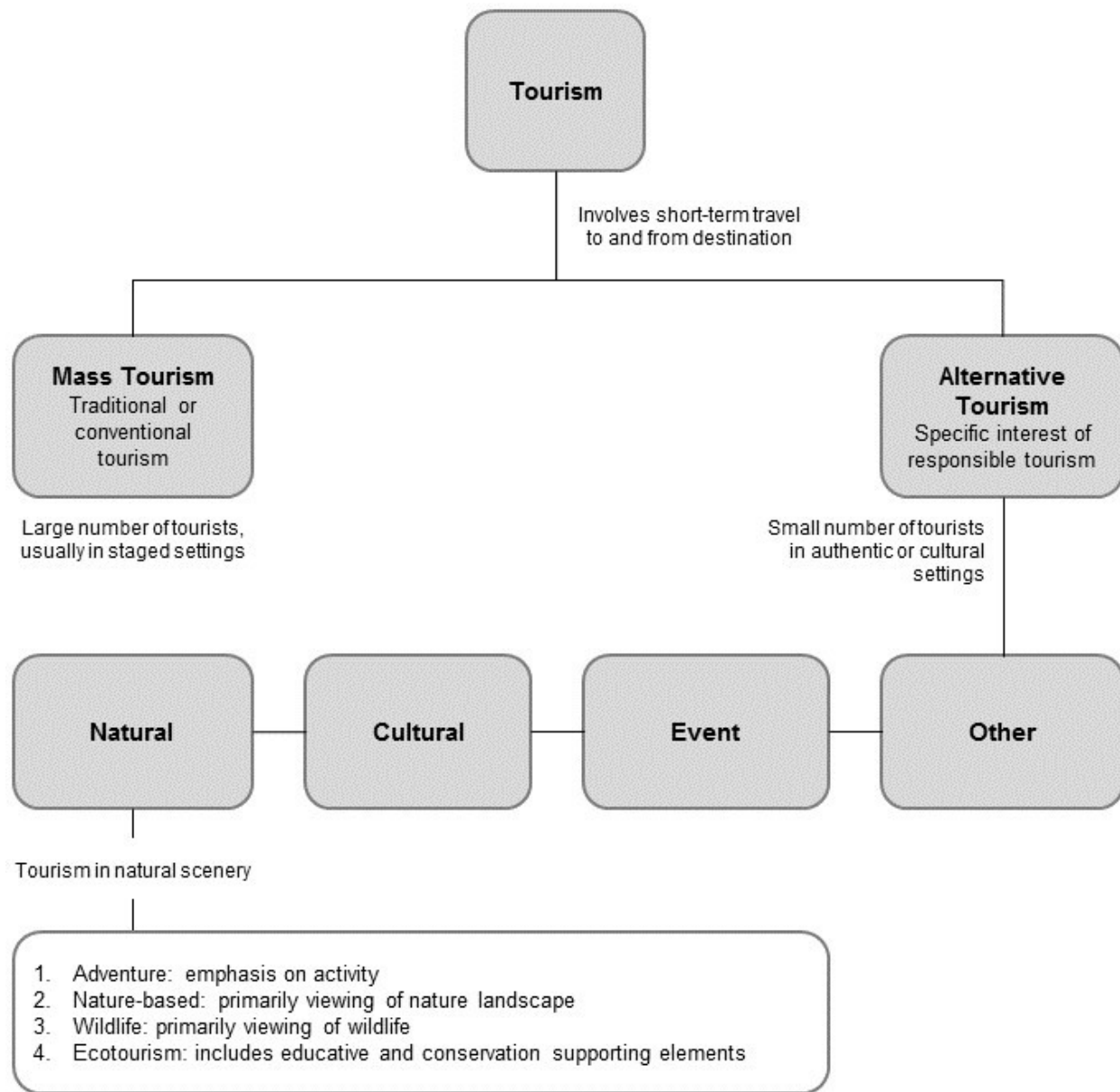
Figure 1. An overview of tourism (Newsome, Moore & Dowling, 2002, p. 11).

According to Smith and Eadington (as cited in Newsome et al., 2002), "alternative tourism is sometimes referred to as 'special interest tourism' or 'responsible tourism' and it is usually taken to mean alternative forms of tourism which place emphasis on greater contact and understanding between hosts and guests as well as between tourists and the environment" (p. 10).

As Newsome et al. (2002) state it, "the primary goals of ecotourism are to foster sustainable use through resource conservation, cultural revival and economic development and diversification" (p.14); although it is designed as a solution for local communities and its definition is generally confused with nature tourism, ecotourism itself has a number of features that give it a privileged status in sustainable development terms.

Newsome et al. (2002) emphasize that "ecotourism comprises a number of interrelated components all of which should be present for authentic Ecotourism to occur" (p. 15). They also point to five key principles fundamental to Ecotourism:

- Ecotourism is Natured- based,
- It is ecologically sustainable,
- It is environmentally educative,
- It is locally beneficial, and
- It generates tourist satisfaction. (2002, p. 15)

According to Dowling (as cited in Newsome et al., 2002), "the first three characteristics are thought to be essential for a product to be considered Ecotourism, while the last two characteristics are viewed as being desirable for all forms of tourism." (p. 15).

For Newsome et al. (2002), "the educative characteristic of ecotourism is a key element that distinguishes it from other forms of nature- based tourism" (p. 17). A representation of this characteristic can be found in EcoAlberto Park, located in the region of Ixmiquilpan (Hidalgo, Mexico), where the community offers their visitors the opportunity to learn about their culture and customs. This is achieved through exhibition of practical and active involvement as well as wisdom deeply rooted in the location.

Although it is not a popular tourist destination in central Mexico, this park yet attracts students, tourists and professionals who want to have a direct contact with Nature. They can increase their knowledge about the ecosystem, the lifestyle of the community, and its services. Emphasis is on the appreciation and enhancement of the natural heritage of the place. In the words of the park manager during an interview with the person in charge of the Park Administration, "what we have achieved is an interaction with various types of tourists where the influence of natural environment has not only motivated and educated visitors themselves but also the local community living in the area of influence, known as Los Albertos".

Local benefits have quickly surfaced: with only seven years of operation, the park has been able to generate income and decent jobs for the community, allowing the decline of the phenomenon of migration to the United States (at least 70% of the original community) (Interview with the Manager of EcoAlberto Park, 2011). Something that was impossible ten years ago, when the main economic activity was focused on hunting, deforestation, handicrafts in a small-scale, and inflows of money transfers from North America in the first place.

Sustainable Development and Sustainable Tourism

Going back to key terms in the creation and evolution of sustainable development, we could emphasize: local communities, future generations, and availability of natural resources. But how could we envisage the possibility of such a development when, according to the United Nations Development Program (Fighting Poverty), more than 2.8 billion people, or about half of the world's population, live on less than two dollars a day?

Reviewing the concept of sustainable development, a variety of interpretations has emerged from the 90's. According to Hunter (2002), the debate of sustainable development "has revolved around such inter-related issues as: the role of economic growth in promoting human well-being; the substitutability of natural resource capital with human-made capital created through economic growth and technological innovation; the criticality of various components of the natural resource- base; the potential for substitution; the ability of technologies and environmental management methods to decouple economic growth and environmental degradation; the meaning of the value attributed to the natural world and the rights of non-human species; and the degree to which a systems perspective should be adopted entailing a primary concern for maintaining the functional integrity of ecosystems" (p. 8).

All of these issues had been discussed in different debates, namely on "how best to achieve, or strive to achieve, equity in the nature of opportunities to access natural resources which create human well-being, and in the distribution of the costs and benefits (social, economic and environmental) that ensue from the utilization of resources" (Hunter, 2002, p. 8). However, it depends on whose perspective is adopted: the investor, the researcher, the environmentalist, or the community itself.

The interpretations of human needs and desires vary from one extreme to the other, forming the starting point of the debate about sustainable development. For instance, Williams (as cited in Hunter, 2002) stresses that "under some interpretations of [sustainable development], equity also applies across species barriers, in particular the inherent right of non- humans to exist above and beyond any utilitarian value imposed by humans" (p. 9).

Considering the real needs of human groups and their natural environment, we can at this point highlight the vision of sustainable development and sustainable tourism as an equilibrium; finding the right balance between the need for development and the need for environmental protection.

Butcher (1997) (as cited in Hunter, 2002) developed a scathing attack on the whole concept of sustainability, arguing that:

The denigration of human progress embodied in the sustainability paradigm is likely to hold back humanity from facing up to and solving the problems of poverty and

underdevelopment. It is hence a far bigger problem than some of the troublesome by products of unplanned tourism development. (p. 15)

This, indeed, is not the most pleasant postulate about the debate on sustainable development and tourism, but it somehow leaves ample consideration about what constitutes development or not. Assuming we represent different institutions or agencies in the public or private sectors around the world, the discussion of sustainable tourism and its potential compatibility with sustainable development continues its march, especially nowadays when governments are seeking alternative economic development attached to the principles of sustainability. Under the tutelage of the World Tourism Organization, direct efforts are promoted by each continent towards green economies. By encouraging businesses that respect the principles of sustainable development, perhaps in the operation of sustainable tourism from a multidisciplinary approach, answers can be found.

According to Griffin (2002):

The emerging destinations of the less developed world are less likely to have their long-term interests protected as tourism develops. Less developed nations are particularly vulnerable for a number of reasons. They possess environmental and cultural features that tourists from the developed world wish to experience, given the right health, safety and security conditions. [….] If sustainable development is open to interpretation and is a multidimensional concept incorporating economic, sociocultural and ecological considerations, the less developed nations are understandably likely to place higher priority on the economic dimension. (p. 28)

The growth of tourism is inevitable; however, as Griffin points out, emerging economies often do not have the budget to develop tourism projects that respect the principles of sustainability (2002, p. 29). Therefore, to attract capital, they offer a wide variety of concessions such as reduced taxes, free access to land purchase, ease to obtain licenses for land use, and fewer restrictions on environmental matters (Griffin, 2002, p. 29). For this author, "the result can be a failure to capture much of the income stream generated from tourism" (Griffin, p. 29). However, although "there is no easy solution to this dilemma, […] ironically it may lie in the growth of tourism itself (Griffin, 2002, p. 29).

The globalization phenomenon, the destination marketing, the accessibility of these attractive rates and solutions for all markets is generating massive displacements of international tourism, which often go against the parameters of sustainability and equitable development much discussed in the early 90's. For this reason, "it is far more difficult to be optimistic about the prospects of tourism developing sustainably in less developed nations than in developed ones" (Griffin, 2002, p. 30). Furthermore, "[t]he need for economic development is far more urgent, and the political and legal means for controlling tourism and its impact far less evident" (Griffin, 2002, p. 30).

The transfer of knowledge will be a cornerstone for the sake of recovering global experiences in sustainable tourism, especially in emerging economies, and this will depend largely on the politics in each country, regarding education and research.

Ecotourism in the Globalization Era

Ecotourism is a planned tourism process in its development, interrelationship, and interdependence with the environment (Chavez, 2005, p. 66; trans. by author). This means that it is closely related to sustainable development as it consciously analyzes existing resources in a given area. It also plans the best development for local communities, ensuring thus human welfare and conservation of the environment, without compromising or jeopardizing the ability of future generations to satisfy theirs (Drumm & Moore, 2005).

The mystery of globalization has allowed many political barriers to disappear, and caused and satisfied an opening of knowledge in terms of civilization. Due to the advances in transportation and information technology, even the most remote places on Earth are getting within reach of the traveler. Tourism is, in fact, the world's largest industry and nature-oriented tourism is the fastest-growing segment.

The travel motivations of tourists can come from a range of possibilities, from a simple photo, to direct contact with nature, communities, culture, and education. Ecotourism is a type of nature tourism, where the enjoyment of activities, the respect for nature and the protection and conservation of the environment are top considerations (Newsome).

This higher appreciation of the natural experiences has determined the setup of a new travel ethics that is now called ecotourism. The term has gained popularity in the fields of conservation and travel, but what does it mean, exactly? The Nature Conservancy has joined the World Conservation Union in adopting this definition of Ecotourism:

Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples [*sic*]. (as cited in Drumm)

Currently, most tourism activities that take place in natural areas do not constitute ecotourism and, therefore, are not sustainable (Ceres Ecotur). Ecotourism is distinguished from simple nature tourism by its emphasis on conservation, education, traveler's responsibility, and active participation of the community (Ceres Ecotur). Specifically, ecotourism is characterized by the following features:

- Visitor behavior is conscious and causes low impact,
- Sensibility and appreciation with respect to local cultures and biodiversity,
- Support for local conservation efforts,
- Sustainable benefits to local communities,
- Local participation in decision-making, and
- Educational components for the traveler and local communities. (Ceres Ecotur)

It is evident that the increase of tourism in sensitive natural areas may become a threat to the integrity of ecosystems and local cultures, if not carried out in accordance with proper planning and management. The growing number of visitors to areas with sensitive ecosystems, from the ecological point of view, can cause considerable environmental degradation. Likewise, the massive influx of visitors can hurt in many ways native cultures. Moreover, variations in climate, exchange rates, and political and social conditions may determine that the reliance on tourism is becoming a risky business (Project Report on Eco-system).

However, the same growth creates significant opportunities for conservation and for the benefit of local communities. Ecotourism can yield much-needed revenue for the protection of national parks and other natural areas, resources that could not be obtained from other sources (Project Report on Eco-system). Similarly, ecotourism can offer a viable alternative of economic development to local communities that have few options for income generation. Also, it can generate a more responsible education and activism among the visitors, turning them into more enthusiastic and effective conservation agents.

Potential for Ecotourism Activities in Mexico

According to a study conducted in Mexico (Centro de Estudios Superiores en Turismo [CESTUR], 2001) that was unique in its field, by the beginning of the millennium the impact of ecotourism and adventure tourism[3] was the following:

- The value of the annual formal ecotourism and adventure tourism activities exceed$750 million Mexican pesos, and 442 companies were identified as operating ecotourism and adventure tourism.
- Spending by international tourists represented 64.2% of the total, equivalent to $486 million Mexican pesos, while spending by domestic tourists represented 35.8% of the total, equivalent to $271 million Mexican pesos.
- Domestic tourists made 667,091 formal practices of ecotourism and adventure tourism, which accounted for 45% of all practices.
- The total expenditure by international visitors in ecotourism and adventure tourism, $51.2 million in US dollars[4], represented 0.62% of the $8.295 billion US dollars in revenue generated by visitors in 2000. (p. 3)

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[3] Those trips made by people motivated to experience challenges posed by the nature, regardless of their athletic prowess.

[4] Currency exchange: $9.5 MXP per USD (October 2000).

According to Sandoval (2006), ecotourism is currently the tourist segment which shows the strongest growth (p. 11). As a result, in recent years, a large number of tour operators have entered the world of alternative tourism[5] (Sandoval, 2006, p. 11). However, the impressive growth in developing countries of this new type of tourism is but a response to the need to generate economic growth alternatives that produce monetary benefits in regions undergoing profound economic crises (Sandoval, 2006, p. 11). On the other hand, a more conscious attitude of many tourism businesses and international organizations (Sandoval, 2006, p. 11), such as the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and United Nations (UN) itself, led to establish 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, celebrated at the World Summit on Ecotourism[6], held in Quebec between 19 and 22 May, 2002 (UNWTO, 2002).

Just a few days before World Tourism Day and their General Assembly in 2009, the UNWTO indicated that:

> *Raising the profile of tourism in both the political and public perception is a critical element in increasing awareness of the sector's economic potential as an efficient provider of employment and the way forward to the Green Economy.*
>
> *More than 900 million international tourist arrivals per year generate millions of jobs. Travel and tourism is one of the few sectors that cuts across the economy mobilizing employment, investment and sustainable development opportunities for emerging economies.* (UNWTO, 2009)

Mexico's potential in the development of ecotourism activities should be accompanied by structural reforms in the tourism legislation, increasing proposed protected areas and supporting local initiatives for development of ecotourism projects.

Clearly, a local system like ecotourism is a concerted effort to promote economic growth for the area, within a framework that includes human development, social integration, and environment harmony. This explains why this activity has raised the interest of the Mexican Public Administration as a strategy to promote local development in marginalized regions.

The design of ecotourism as a sustainable development strategy promoted by the Public Administration, is the result of planning and control, aiming at transforming the traditional areas from individual to associative. In other words, it goes from totally unrelated zones to "globally local" development regions. This is, therefore, the reason for an adequate implementation of ecotourism as a development strategy. The Municipal Management should be part of the local development, which means, according to what Borja and Castells (1998) state, the new frontier of urban management is able to prepare the city to meet the challenges of global competition (p. 14).

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[5] In this new model, the traveler was looking for non-repeatable and unique experiences in a quality environment.

[6] To get more information: http://www.cinu.org.mx/eventos/turismo2002/doctos/dec_quebec.htm

Conclusions

The environmental, along with the demographic issues, are concerns that prevailed during the second half of the Twentieth Century. They have raised questions which have evolved in all shapes or forms that, in the first decade of –the Twenty-first Century, these countries are accepting or rejecting. A clear example is the group of nations led by the United States competing for the exploitation of natural resources. The case of the Space Race or the ownership of the Antarctic "for research purposes" sums it up.

It is clear that tourism could not stay out of this trend, for its economic and social impact positions it globally as a key priority for the late Twentieth and early Twenty-first centuries. The fact that the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) became a specialized Agency of the United Nations (UN) in October 2003 indicates this.

A latent concern for the environmental subject has led governments of emerging economies like Nepal, Costa Rica, and Kenya, among others, to encourage public policies which favor the development of ecotourism projects, linked to the situation in each locality. This view, that began more than a decade ago, has given positive results in positioning these same countries as leaders in the practice of ecotourism worldwide.

It is known that the development of traditional "sun and beach" tourism, lacks an appropriate methodology for planned growth. Such is the case of "sun and beach" destinations like Puerto Plata (Dominican Republic), Acapulco (Mexico), and Cartagena (Colombia), which have been at the mercy of foreign investors in huge resorts. The boom has caused progressive degradation of the beaches, water pollution, and underemployment[7] in the regions where they operate, and a total ignorance of the needs of the communities where hundreds of resorts do not teach the slightest attachment to the principles of sustainable development.

It is urgent for Mexico to promote, plan, and control tourism aimed at economic, social and environmental balance. The philosophy of tourism actually ties in perfectly with the principles of the Mexican Constitution, in terms of leisure and social recreation for its population. However, low cost and massive tourism may affect, and actually have a highly negative impact, on habitats and local communities.

In government programs and plans, the subject of ecotourism remains a pressing need to address, but guidelines and specific actions fail to trigger the activity. Ecotourism is a "product in the stage of birth", and it is imperative to create a culture towards ecotourism in those local regions as well as in international tourist markets.

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[7] The statistics on employment, define people who do not work a minimum number of hours of week, work sporadically for a few days a year or without sufficient regularity, the under employee (http://www.eumed.net/cursecon/dic/S.htm)

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