

Belated Journeys: Ecotourism as a Style of Travel Performance

Helen Gilbert

Judith Adler argues that the history of travel is best seen as an account of "coexisting and competitive, as well as blossoming, declining, and recurring, styles whose temporal boundaries inevitably blur" (1989b: 1372). Her insistence that travel styles are built on earlier traditions and that apparently new kinds of travel, even in their most radical departures from tradition, involve changes in only a few conventions (1989b: 1372-73), suggests that an examination of specific contemporary tourism practices must take into consideration those past travel styles through which patterns of historical precedence might be traced. Such connections lie in any of a great number of factors: in intellectual and aesthetic orientation, in the physical activities undertaken, in the social relations created through travel, in the myths attached to certain destinations, in the transportation technologies utilized and the modes of perception they facilitate, and in the particular domains of practice in which the travel becomes instrumental. These factors are of course closely related, so that shifts in travel "performance"—to use Adler's term—are rarely isolated to one area.

In this essay, I want to propose that contemporary Western ecotourism is based on specific travel modalities that reflect, and even consciously replay, aspects of European imperialism, especially as manifest in the exploration and subsequent domestication of distant natural environments and their native populations. My purpose in attempting to historicize this purportedly new form of

tourism is twofold: to understand some of the imperatives underlying specific ecotourism practices and, at a broader level, to identify constraints that have contributed to the ecotourism industry's generalized failure to follow the very models of ethical and environmentally responsible travel on which it is based. This project seems particularly urgent at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as ecotourism becomes a key part of the development strategy for a number of so-called third-world countries, many of which have a history of colonization by European powers. In this instance, my case examples are drawn from the Caribbean and Central and South America, though a cursory survey of ecotourism in other developing regions suggests that practices are broadly comparable across a range of destinations. In dissenting against the popular view that ecotourism represents a paradigm shift in Western travel styles, my argument borrows from eclectic theoretical sources while remaining grounded in an analysis of travel brochures, traveler's memoirs, policy and planning documents, and academic studies of the field. This textual focus is designed to interrogate the mythologies surrounding ecotourism, not to devalue its proponents' efforts to find a way around the economic malaise and environmental degradation that has been an all-too-common legacy of imperial modernity.

Official definitions of ecotourism tend to focus on its environmental impacts, revealing only a little about the characteristic ways in which this form of travel is undertaken. David Fennell synthesizes opinions of geographers, environmentalists, and tour operators to provide a succinct explanation of the term:

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 conservation or preservation of such areas. (1999: 43)

While definitions akin to this are widely supported at the level of policy, the practice incorporates all of its elements only rarely. As a result, in popular and even analytical discourses, ecotourism mostly functions as a portmanteau term for any activity that can be marketed as nature based. Circulating under the "eco" label, which sells just about anything these days, are specified forms of

travel—*ethical travel, environmental travel, green tourism, low-impact tourism, alternative tourism, and soft-adventure tourism*—that collectively indicate not only the diversity of practices discussed under the purview of ecotourism but also the industry's concentrated attempts to capture a niche market by selling a (fantasized) dissociation from the rituals of mass tourism. In the following discussion, I use this broader, more common conception of ecotourism while keeping in mind the ecologically based model to which it ideally refers. My commentary pertains generally to organized forms of ecotourism though this is not to exclude the significant category of "do-it-yourselfers" likely to be influenced by the commercial discourses of the field.

To make a convincing case for ecotourism's lines of connection with colonial travel, it is necessary first to unpack Adler's notion that specific journeys are situated, whether compliantly or oppositionally, in relation to recognizable historical styles of travel. By style, Adler means the particular manner in which one artfully *performs* a journey and its attendant activities in culturally conceived space (1989a: 7). Aesthetics are important here: to perform a journey does not, in Adler's terms, suggest the simple functional act of getting from one place to another but rather a movement between places in conventionally stylized ways that are consciously practiced and perfected. In any travel performance, the baseline elements are "space, time, and the design and pace of the traveler's transit through both" (Adler 1989b: 1369). Possible styles are determined to a great extent by the technologies available to the traveler as well as by the purpose of the journey, the traveler's preconceptions about a particular locale, and the prevailing mythologies attached to the concept of travel itself. According to Adler, significations of particular travel styles are articulated through choices of dress, transport, accommodation, and foci of interest, as well as through "cultivated forms of sensibility" and aspects of social interaction (1989b: 1370). As a form of self-fashioning, travel performances also anticipate specific local (foreign) and home audiences whose reception is constitutive in the formation and maintenance of the overall style.

Analyzed in relation to a history of travel styles, it becomes apparent that one of ecotourism's trademark features is its tendency to adopt modalities of travel that are typical of the pre-industrial era, both in their physical/mechanical characteristics

and in their associated forms of perception. Ecotravelers deliberately go on foot, by horseback, bicycle, pedicab, canoe, sailboat, camel, donkey, or, if by motorized means, then generally in open-air land, sea, or air craft. Such modes of travel, though entirely ordinary in many present-day situations, are generally positioned as anachronistic within the context of ecotourism, at the levels of both discourse and praxis. In this respect, the terms *odyssey*, *expedition*, and *safari*, which are the lexical staples of the ecotourism advertising industry, notably in names of tour companies and descriptions of specific itineraries, tend to function as framing devices through which various modes of transportation might be conceptualized. At the same time, model ecotravel experiences are carefully structured to invest various means of travel with a sense of the past, often according to their degree of mechanical simplicity. For instance, if you (the Western tourist) have chosen to visit the exclusive Kumalu eco-lodge in Surinam, you go first by bush plane, then by foot through the jungle, then by dugout canoe, to finally reach a vantage point where you can watch "bush negroes" (Saramaccans) whose rustic villages are just across the river from your own resort—itsself furnished with beds, electricity, and toilets (Mets 1998: n.p.). This kind of progressively "wild" travel is described as part of the attraction of the particular resort. Alternatively, on the "Black River Safari" (a day tour in Jamaica), you can venture through coastal wetlands in an air-conditioned vehicle but change over to a "jitney drawn by tractor" as you approach your destination, hidden waterfalls where, according to the website of the tour company, "a tarzan-like experience could be yours if you're up to it" (I.T.S. Tours Ltd 1999: n.p.). In these examples, movement through specific spaces is transformed into a journey back in time through a mutually constitutive process: decreasing mechanical complexity in the modes of transport signals an increasing temporal distance from contemporary urban life in the Western world, a process which, in turn, casts specific destinations as belonging to the past. At the same time, the highly codified eco-experiences—watching subsistence jungle-dwellers or performing like Tarzan in a wilderness area—imbue transport modes used to gain access to them with an increasing sense of the quaint, the primitive, the pre-modern.

The stylization of modes of travel within ecotourism is demonstrated from another angle in industry reports and policy docu-

ments on how to develop successful ecotours. An attempt by the Audubon Society to define the infrastructural needs of the typical ecotourist reveals some of the complexities involved in commodifying the wilderness in a manner that will appeal to the targeted clientele's aesthetic sensibilities and their moral obligation to travel responsibly. The Audubon report warns, for instance, that tourists will be dissatisfied if walking tracks are too rough, but that "care should be taken not to overdevelop the trails [as] ecotourists prefer the conditions to *appear* to be as rugged as possible and to fit the environment" (Ashton 1991: 95; emphasis added). This example represents the more conventional side of ecotourism's interest in what one might call "transportation challenges." That participating in a range of unusual and/or physically strenuous forms of travel is seen as essential to the performance of a genuine ecotourism style is evident in Martha Honey's assessment of the recent generalized shift from hard-core ecotravel to what she designates as "ecotourism-lite." To illustrate this shift, Honey cites changes in a Costa Rican company's offerings from activities such as hiking up a dormant volcano and rafting on a wild river to more sedate natural excursions. Though she makes no reference to the comparative ecological effects of the company's different tours, those involving less challenging forms of travel, or less interesting ones, are assumed to be less environmentally responsible (Honey 1999: 52-53). Honey's condemnation of a trend towards "softer" styles of ecotourism in Nepal's Himalayan foothills is equally revealing. Though she is clearly alarmed that trekkers have wreaked immense environmental damage in the area, particularly through the degradation of walking trails and the deforestation of hillsides as wood is used for cooking, heating, and bathing, she nevertheless scoffs at the introduction of helicopter tours that bypass well-worn walking routes to deposit passengers on remote mountain peaks for a brief wilderness experience. Honey may be justified in claiming that such tours do little to educate travelers or develop local economies (1999: 54), but her chief objection seems to rest on the substitution of comfortable, mechanized transport for the rigors of trekking.

Ecotourism's emphasis on employing particular modes of transportation which can be cast in a pre-modern mould demonstrates Adler's thesis that apparently new travel performances are always marked by historical contiguities. Of course, ecotourism is

not the first style of travel to eschew the technologies heralded by industrialization; since the European nature tours of the Romantic period, the history of modern Western travel has been marked by a nostalgic investment in objects and activities that might be used to recreate experiences from a bygone era. What is significant about ecotourism is the extent to which its discourses occlude historical connections with earlier styles of travel even as they are evoked to authenticate the contemporary traveler's experience of a particular environment. It is not difficult to see in the travel modalities of ecotourism's stock-in-trade tours to developing regions—the wilderness treks, wildlife safaris, and botanical excursions—stylistic remnants of the imperial voyages of discovery in the "New World" or the naturalists' expeditions to the colonies. Indeed, ecotravel marketing brochures, while touting their products as thoroughly modern, even avant-garde, commonly make explicit reference to European explorers and/or missionaries, notably Columbus for Caribbean destinations and Livingstone for the typical African eco-safari, thus positioning the contemporary (Western) ecotourist as heir to a great (imperial) tradition. A guidebook to the Galápagos Islands draws a similar line of connection (in this instance clothing past travelers in a contemporary habit) by suggesting that early European visitors to the area "may have called themselves sailors, scientists or adventurers, but in many ways they walked like, talked like, and looked like ecotourists" (Pearson and Middleton 1996: 9).

According to Adler, the preservation of such fragments of earlier travel styles "owes as much to their being built into travel technologies and into the infrastructure on which travellers depend as it does to continuities of intellectual and aesthetic orientation" (1989b: 1373). She further suggests that the preservation process is often unconscious and that changes in conventions defining a style tend to require corresponding changes in travel technologies (1989b: 1373). In the case of ecotourism, it seems that elements of colonial travel are reproduced both consciously and adventitiously by the use of specific means of transport and that overt technological change is precisely what is to be avoided. This is confirmed by the ubiquity of terms such as *traditional*, *unspoiled*, *pristine*, and *unchanged* in just about any text promoting or analyzing the industry. To maintain a sense of appropriate style in traveling within apparently unaltered regions, ecotourists are guided by

the proscriptive (what you shouldn't do) as well as prescriptive (what you should do) norms of their audiences, just as many colonial travelers were influenced by public expectations, especially concerning gender, race, and class. Adler notes, referring to travel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that such regulation typically occurred through travel manuals, formal institutions, and informal networks of fellow travelers (1989b: 1378). During the expansionist phases of European imperialism, Royal Societies and Academies were the primary regulatory centers, publishing instructions about "travel method" as well as reports of significant journeys. Their modern-day analogues within the field of ecotourism are commercially published handbooks—Evelyn Kaye's *Eco-Vacations: Enjoy Yourself and Save the Earth* is but one example¹—and non-governmental organizations such as Earthwatch and The Ecotourism Society.

Ecotourism's particular web of historical connections suggests that its preference for anachronistic methods of transport perhaps speaks less to an ecological imperative to conserve the environment from pollution and resource depletion (though this is, of course, part of the project) than to a definitional imperative of ecotourism itself: that it must seem to offer access to nature as it was prior to the global environmental stress wrought by progressive waves of industrialization and economic development. This requires a first-hand *experience* of nature as wilderness. As Fennell says, the ecotourist must be able to *get into* nature, to have some concrete, tangible link to the natural world (1999: 43). To develop their experiential knowledge of specific natural sites (which often include indigenous inhabitants), ecotravelers need to occupy and move in the same empirical space as the objects they perceive, focussing their various senses on the foreground, the minutiae, the immediate. This essentially phenomenological mode of perception, which is deemed to facilitate an intimate relationship between human beings and natural environments, values the physical, mental, and spiritual processes of the individual's journey above the merits of a given destination.

It could be argued that ecotourism's brief to provide travel experiences that engage all human sense modalities deprivileges ocular perception and its characteristic tourist "gaze" (or more properly gazes) as outlined by John Urry (1990),² among others. Yet, if the perceptual apparatus of the Western ecotourist has been

developed within a context of post-industrial modes of visibility and subjectivity, which is usually the case, then the switch to a phenomenological apprehension of nature may not be a simple process. As Chris Jenks notes, the eye is central in Western culture and "looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined" (1995: 1). Moreover, in tourism especially, perception is structured by an extensive grammar of visibility, with its specific ocular vocabulary of spectacular sights, panoramic views, picturesque scenes, eye-catching vistas, and so forth.

Here, in order to lead into an argument about the relationship between ecotourism's travel technologies and their associated forms of perception, I want to draw on Wolfgang Schivelbusch's explanation of the ways in which the industrial revolution, and in particular the popularization of rail travel in the nineteenth century, affected established spectatorial paradigms. Schivelbusch maintains that pre-industrial travel (presumably by coach, horseback, or even on foot) produced a continuous sequence of impressions that gave the traveler an intense experience of traversed space. This is what he calls *landscape*. The railway's "speed and mathematical directness", he insists, destroyed the relationship between the traveler and traveled space, turning landscape into a geographical space that was closed and systematized (1977: 53), much like the space of the map—or for that matter of aerial photography. In railway travel, smells and sounds and synesthetic perceptions disappeared, while visual perception was diminished by velocity. According to Schivelbusch, the railway ultimately "mechanized" perception by positioning the traveler as a projectile shot across a landscape, assailed by a rapid succession of evanescent visual images that could only be apprehended through the development of a panoramic gaze that fixed on distance, necessarily separating the perceiving subject from the sensuous world. The panoramic gaze made it possible to get an overview, to see the great outlines but not the detail. The foreground dissolved, depth lost its dimensions, and travel was marked by a new tendency to see the discrete indiscriminately (1977: 55–61). Subsequent developments in land transportation, and especially in aviation, together sedimented this form of mobile visibility as the normative mode for the modern traveler.

Schivelbusch's argument that the apparatus (the machine and motion it created) which moved travelers through the world be-

came integrated into perception (1977: 64) confirms that particular travel modalities are crucial to the ways in which any eco-destination is experienced. What fascinates me here, however, is the question of how the modes of transport preferred by ecotourism mesh with the modes of visibility that seem to inescapably shape postmodern perception. That remote wilderness sites in "exotic" non-Western regions have rapidly emerged as preferred destinations for Western ecotourists suggests that "third-world" countries may offer particular historical as well as geo-social contexts in and through which the tensions between pre- and post-industrial travel modalities can be mediated. European imperialism, despite its diverse and sometimes conflicting projects, played an important role in this process of mediation in so far as it produced as truth ideologically-loaded views of specific (colonizable) regions of the earth as underdeveloped, pre-modern, and even pristine spaces that potentially offered bourgeois travelers a corrective to the stresses wrought by imperial modernity. Most ecotourism marketing materials, as well as a large number of policy documents, maintain this discursive construction of many former colonies (and their inhabitants) as always already marked by a sense of belatedness, which, I would suggest, functions to mask some of the contradictions on which the ideal ecotravel experience is based.

This discourse of belatedness is currently articulated in a number of ways. Legacy Tours, for instance, draws on the myth of Eden to manipulate perceptions of time/history in a description of the ASA Wright Nature Centre in Trinidad, winner of the 1998 Islands ecotourism award:

[The centre's] origins date back to a period when it served as a cocoa and citrus estate before becoming a beautiful NATURALIST'S PARADISE. ... Witness countless species of birds dancing in mid-air bliss over a 'GARDEN OF EDEN.' ... Time is infinite when you are lured into this world untouched, a paradise for nature lovers. After returning from the trail, sip a cool drink on the balcony of the Colonial Estate House suspended over a valley of feathered fantasy. (Tour Brochure 1992: n.p.)

Here, the sense of time being "infinite" puts this destination so far back in the past that agricultural and architectural signs of colonial occupation can be foregrounded while the area is still constructed

as absolutely pristine—a precolonial Eden.

My second textual example of belatedness, this time in reference to an ecotourism lodge and scientific research station, Karanambo Ranch, in Guyana, uses history itself to conjure the site's temporal distance from American life in the late twentieth century. The writer, Tom Hanscom, visiting on secondment from the Zoological Society of San Diego, describes his experiences at the station in a series of reports posted on the Internet. His assessment that "Guyana has changed little since the seventeenth century, when Dutch and English settlers reclaimed the swamps along the northern coast and established agriculture" (1998: 4) is buttressed by the seeming antiquity of Karanambo's inhabitants, both human and animal. The ranch, Hanscom tells us, is owned and operated by Diane McTurk, "a grand lady whose great-great-grandfather [emigrated] from Scotland around 1790" (1998: 1). Its salient feature is that it contains an important habitat for rare giant river otters, several of which are named after historical figures: Peter the Great, Vlad the Impaler, and Attila the Hun. The reports mostly detail the difficulties Western visitors face when undertaking conservation work in Guyana, where the American chain-stores "Home Depot and Ace Hardware are yet to catch on" (1998: 2). Hanscom's efforts are not only impeded by heat, mosquitoes, razor grass, vampire bats, and piranha fish, but also, and more crucially, by apparently backward bureaucrats. His description of the Guyanese capital, Georgetown, is revealing in this respect:

Now we've entered the more treacherous jungle of Georgetown, seat of government and industry. Here the predators wear business suits and sit, deceptively calm, claws extended but hidden below the conference table, waiting to strike upon their unwitting, tree-hugging adversary at the slightest chance. (1998: 4)

Hanscom is quick to contrast these seemingly ancient functionaries with the "young, foreign volunteers" (like himself) who "just wanted to do a good thing in an exotic spot" while they are traveling (1998: 5). This discourse of Western benevolence is consistent with the construction of the whole country as locked in a primeval past, as yet unable to reap the benefits offered by the developed world.

Other texts harness images of indigeneity—in its more tradi-