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## Ecotourism A Colonial Legacy?



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THE ARGUMENT THAT MODERN TOURISM frequently functions as a form of neocolonial enterprise is by now commonplace. John Frow, among others, has explored the ways in which tourism, at its most general level, sells a commodified relation to an ontological Other – be it a natural environment, a species of wildlife, or a foreign culture. This relationship, often manifest in ritualized practices such as sightseeing and souvenir-collecting, is secured via the aestheticization of various physical and cultural features of a tourist destination and by the commercialization of immaterial resources such as hospitality. The tourist's position as consumer assumes *a priori* access to sufficient capital to purchase an encounter with Otherness; hence, it follows that most tourists come from relatively affluent societies while it is the Others of Western modernity who are often called upon to supply the requisite quotient of exotica for the collective tourist gaze. As Frow maintains, the logic of tourism thus becomes "that of a relentless extension of commodity relations and the consequent inequalities of power between centre and periphery, First and Third Worlds, developed and underdeveloped regions, metropolis and countryside."<sup>1</sup>

As a relatively new form of leisure activity – at least under its current nomenclature – ecotourism has sought to define itself in opposition to the

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<sup>1</sup> John Frow, "Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia," *October* 57 (1990): 151.

kind of mass tourism that Frow's analysis implicitly decries. In its purer forms, ecotourism is even premised on behaviours and subject-object relations which are designed to break the relentless cycle of inequality that commodification perpetuates. The recent rapid growth in this form of travel, especially in developing countries and those regions of developed nations populated largely by indigenous minorities,<sup>2</sup> suggests the rhetorical force of ecotourism as a discursive field and its appeal to both ethical-minded tourists and potential host communities. While the gap between what ecotourism tends to promise and what it characteristically delivers is evident, even to an armchair analyst, it is not my intention here to examine the political, economic, or social efficacy of this form of travel.<sup>3</sup> Nor do I want to devalue the considerable investment of money, technology and personnel that has gone into developing ecotourism in an attempt to find a way out of the economic malaise and environmental degradation that has been an all-too-common legacy of European imperialism, particularly in the Caribbean and various parts of Africa. Instead, this essay examines the discursive tensions between ecotourism's stated claim to environmental responsibility and its simultaneous imperative to provide predominantly Western clients with an 'authentic' wilderness experience. By reading some of the key visual images and narrative tropes associated with ecotourism alongside their counterparts in colonial discourses such as travel writing, I hope to establish connections that might historicize the current rhetorical purchase of ecotourism as well as provide the basis for an anticolonial critique of the field.

Ecotourism has been variously defined and is at best a slippery term whose modishness has clearly led to a fair amount of indiscriminate application, particularly in some sectors of the tourist industry where ecotourism has come to mean any activity that can be marketed as nature-based. A cursory glance at various literature in the field reveals the ubiquity of descriptors such as *alternative tourism*, *environmental travel*, *green tourism*, *low-impact tourism*, *ethical travel*, and *soft-adventure tourism*, which collectively indicate not only the diversity of practices which have been discussed under the purview

<sup>2</sup> In Australia, Canada and New Zealand, for instance, a great number of organized ecotours involve visits to territories primarily populated by Aboriginal, First Nations, and Maori peoples respectively.

<sup>3</sup> For an extended discussion of ecotourism's general failure to deliver its promised solutions to the current crisis of environmental sustainability, see Joe Bandy's provocative survey of the field, "Managing the Other of Nature: Sustainability, Spectacle, and Global Regimes of Capital in Ecotourism," *Public Culture* 8 (1996): 539-66.

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. Analysts and industry regulatory bodies adopt much narrower definitions of ecotourism, generally stressing relationships between resource conservation and specific kinds of tourist infrastructure and activity.<sup>4</sup> According to the Ecotourism Society, an international body of tour operators, conservation groups, local communities and host governments, ecotourism is properly defined as "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."<sup>5</sup> Central issues in the definitional debate include the degree to which ecotourism encompasses both natural and cultural heritage experiences, and whether certain so-called eco-activities properly belong to the distinctly different genre of adventure travel.<sup>6</sup> In this discussion, I follow the broader usages of the term, 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 ecotourism's commercial discourses.

Probably the most consistent thing that ecotourism sells is a first-hand experience of nature, an opportunity to feel, see and appreciate a *natural* – that is, supposedly unaltered – landscape. That many tourist destinations which promise access to this particular eco-experience are located within former European colonies invites a revisiting of some of the existing arguments about imperial constructions of "nature" as an ontological category. The broad field of postcolonial studies has delivered useful and sophisticated accounts of the tensions and contradictions surrounding representations of nature in colonial contexts as, variously, a rich resource to be exploited for the benefit of distant capital interests, a threat to the civilizing march of

<sup>4</sup> Peter S. Valentine, "Ecotourism and Nature Conservation: A Definition with some Recent Developments in Micronesia," in *Ecotourism: Incorporating the Global Classroom*, ed. Betty Weiler (St Lucia & Brisbane: U of Queensland P, 1992): 5; Robert C. Scace, "An Ecotourism Perspective," in *Tourism and Sustainable Development: Monitoring, Planning, Managing*, ed. J. G. Nelson et al. (Waterloo: University of Waterloo, 1993): 64–65.

<sup>5</sup> Megan Epler Wood, Frances A. Gatz & Kreg Lindberg, "The Ecotourism Society: An Action Agenda," in *Ecotourism and Resource Conservation: A Collection of Papers*, comp. Jon A. Kusler (Berne NY: Ecotourism and Resource Conservation Project, 1991): 75.

<sup>6</sup> Scace, "An Ecotourism Perspective," 63.

imperial modernity, a necessary refuge from this very process, and an enigmatic – even capricious – force which may occasionally yield its secrets to the careful naturalist/observer. It is the anodyne version of nature which interests me most here, since its perceived capacity to re-energize the imperial adventurer sapped by the demands of a rapidly industrializing world also speaks to a sense of Western spiritual malaise to which ecotourism more subtly offers a corrective.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger has argued that modern tourism's valorization of nature in its pristine forms dates back to the writings of European Romanticism, which cemented the textualization of the notion that an encounter with forms untainted by human handiwork could provide an (impossible<sup>7</sup>) antidote to the effects of modernity. The Romantic authors, he maintains, "transfigured freedom and removed it into a realm of imagination, until it coagulated into a distant image of a nature far from all civilization, into a folkloric and monumental image of history."<sup>8</sup> That colonial discourse tends to be animated by elegiac and pastoral modes of representing nature is amply demonstrated by the plangent laments of numerous nineteenth-century travel writers engaged in a utopian quest for some sort of Edenic wilderness located in Europe's distant colonies. Moreover, Enzensberger's claim that the sense of a "pristine landscape and untouched history have remained the models of tourism"<sup>9</sup> seems to be more prophetic than he might have imagined when he first published his findings in 1958. More recently, environmentalists such as David Rothenberg have examined the binary relation between hegemonic models of "civilization" and idealized versions of untouched nature as crystallized in the Western concept of "wilderness." Rothenberg insists that "the idea of wilderness has shown itself time and again to be the creation of human consciousness, malleable in the extreme, used to fulfil our deepest desires and worst fears."<sup>10</sup> His contention that wilderness is "an ethnocentric concept that has little to do with

<sup>7</sup> Enzensberger sees the quest as impossible because it is caught up in a dialectic of process that means nature's restorative effect is already destroyed at the instant of human contact.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "A Theory of Tourism," tr. Gerd Gemünden & Kenn Johnson, *New German Critique* 68.2 (1996): 125.

<sup>9</sup> Enzensberger, "A Theory of Tourism," 125.

<sup>10</sup> David Rothenberg, "Wildness Untamed: The Evolution of an Ideal," Introduction to *Wild Ideas*, ed. Rothenberg (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995): xviii.

the more profound and direct ways in which nature is experienced by the world's peoples"<sup>11</sup> raises questions about ecotourism's obsessive interest in wilderness destinations and, indeed, its mandate to contribute to the preservation of wilderness itself.

That wilderness is a highly saleable commodity in the ecotourism business is evident in the plethora of travel brochures that use adjectives such as *pristine, isolated, remote, unspoiled* and so forth, to extol the virtues of their specific destinations, all of which are marketed as unique in an uncannily similar fashion. Such transparent manipulations of wilderness tropes would make it easy to focus a critique of ecotourism on its strategic marketing but, ultimately, that seems a soft target. Perhaps more telling are the multiple contradictions which this discursive harnessing of wilderness tropology reveals. First, the fact that ecotourism brings into the circuit of commodity relations a form of nature – the wilderness – which is, by definition, outside that circuit, supports Enzensberger's view that "the pristine is an ideological mystification" designed to appeal to the modern tourist's sense of nostalgia for a pre-industrial world.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, the very designation of areas as wilderness presumes a prior commodification of natural resources as potential eco-destinations.

Secondly, in a related dialectic, ecotourism in wilderness areas sells an encounter with "unspoiled nature," but one which is structured so that visitors can wilfully ignore the fact that their mere presence is incompatible with the concept being sold, since "unspoiled" in this context implies outside the realm of human activity. (Hence, successful ecotours typically offer low levels of contact with other tour groups.) A recent attempt by the Audubon society to define the infrastructural needs of the 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."<sup>13</sup> Descriptions of model accommodation, modes of travel and

<sup>11</sup> Rothenberg, "Wildness Untamed," xv.

<sup>12</sup> Enzensberger, "A Theory of Tourism," 127.

<sup>13</sup> Ray E. Ashton, "Defining the Ecotourist Based on Site Needs," in *Ecotourism and Resource Conservation: A Collection of Papers*, comp. Jon A. Kusler (Berne NY: Ecotourism

restaurant facilities are framed by similar imperatives to find just the right balance between the comfort of "civilization" and the frisson of a wilderness experience. What this report inadvertently betrays is that ecotourism must distance its clientele from that to which it promises proximity. Hence many travel brochures anxiously stress issues such as security and comfort, usually in the same breath as they proffer a genuine encounter with the wild, the untamed. Wilderness, it seems, is clearly more palatable to the Western consumer in its commodified form, a point incidentally demonstrated by a recent proposal to put up a series of "wildernesses" inside California's shopping malls. These fabricated nature preserves, complete with "wild" flora and fauna, and even the facility for camping, are purportedly designed to fulfil the needs of consumers who "yearn to get back to nature but don't have the time." The experiment will be called (apparently without irony) "The American Wilderness Experience."<sup>14</sup> This postmodern "tendency to blend a nostalgia for an earlier and simpler era with a reassurance that modern conveniences and progress are never far away"<sup>15</sup> resurfaces regularly in ecotourism, as seen in the habit of ending tours with an add-on stay in an adjacent luxury resort. Some seasoned ecotravellers even see such a finale as almost mandatory: "If you've been on a rugged field trip in the tropics [...] do your body and spirit a *big* favour after your tour – check into a deluxe hotel with air-conditioning and a pool."<sup>16</sup>

A third problem is raised by ecotourism's tendency to conceive of the wilderness in terms which exclude routine human activity, an equation which fails to account for the historical presence of indigenous peoples living in "pristine" ecosystems worldwide.<sup>17</sup> Most often, this contradiction is addressed by drawing such peoples into the field of sites on the ecotourist's itinerary. Hence visits to archaeological remains and to "traditional" villages are a popular feature of many ecotours, particularly in developing regions. (It is

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and Resource Conservation Project, 1991): 95 (my emphasis).

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller description of the entire proposal, see "The American Wilderness Experience," *Wall Street Journal* (7 August 1997): 23, and <http://www.ogdencorp.com/news/050296G.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Brian E.M. King, *Creating Island Resorts* (London: Routledge, 1997): 214.

<sup>16</sup> Alice Gieffen & Carole Berglie, *Eco Tours and Nature Getaways* (New York: Clarkson, 1993): 15.

<sup>17</sup> R. Edward. Grumbine, "Wise and Sustainable Uses: Revisioning Wilderness," in *Wild Ideas*, ed. David Rothenberg (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995): 10.

interesting to note here that Caribbean ecotourism has been most strongly developed in Dominica, Belize and Guyana, countries which all have remnant native Carib populations that are visited as part of each region's standard ecotours.) While the coupling of wilderness with indigenous cultures may accurately reflect some groups' epistemological approaches to nature,<sup>18</sup> it also has the effect of positioning them as objects of a neo-imperial gaze. Like their ancestors, modern-day 'traditional' societies function in many travel-related discourses as primitive Others against which the civilized Self can be defined. The fact that ecotourism replicates mass tourism's interest in this kind of sightseeing confirms the enduring currency of primitivism as a hot commodity whose malleability, like that of the wilderness, always serves the needs of the present. As Marianna Torgovnik has pointed out, "The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist's dummy – or so we like to think."<sup>19</sup>

If the commodification of pristine forms of nature reveals a fracture at the heart of ecotourism's ideological project, the rhetoric of discovery that goes hand in hand with images of wilderness suggests further points of contact between ecotourism and colonial travel, at least as the two practices have been textualized. Terms such as *expedition*, *exploration* and *odyssey* – frequently used in tour companies' registered names as well as in their descriptions of particular itineraries – are the lexical staples of ecotourism advertising, reminding us of its ideological links with conquest narratives and nineteenth-century travellers' tales. In her work on colonial travel writing in the Caribbean, Claudia Brandenstein examines the ways in which Charles Kingsley, for instance, casts himself in the roles of discoverer and explorer, modelling his travels on those of historical figures such as Columbus.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the modern ecotourist is characteristically offered the "opportunity of a lifetime" to discover – apparently for the first time – various unique and spectacular features of a remote region. In some ecotravel literature, explicit reference to European explorers and/or missionaries (notably Columbus

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<sup>18</sup> This position tends to be commensurate with deep ecology's rethinking of the nature-culture binary along the lines of various indigenous philosophies that do not draw ontological distinctions between the two.

<sup>19</sup> Marianna Torgovnik, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990): 8.

<sup>20</sup> Claudia Brandenstein, "Imperial Positions in Charles Kingsley's *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies*," *SPAN* 46 (1998): 6–7.

for Caribbean destinations and Livingstone for the typical African eco-safari) positions the contemporary traveller's act of discovery not merely as a mode of learning about an environment that is new to the individual but rather as a way of actually participating in an ongoing historical endeavour. Thus the ecotourist implicitly extends the great imperial voyages and treks of discovery. But if the main object of colonial exploration was to identify potential resources for the expansion of the Empire's "great estate," the end-point of eco-discovery is more personal and potentially much more ethical: self-discovery. This emphasis on self-discovery aligns ecotourism with adventure travel and indeed the latter is often featured as a subset of the former.<sup>21</sup> Where adventure travel differs markedly from the purer forms of ecotourism is in its philosophical attitude to the environment: the true ecotourist seeks wilderness in order to commune with nature rather than to master it.

If the concept of wilderness and its associated rhetoric indicates one connecting point between ecotourism and colonial travel, the shared interest in learning points to another. In industry definitions as well as in marketing material, ecotourism stresses the potential of travel as an epistemological mode. A 1991 Queensland symposium titled "Ecotourism: Incorporating the Global Classroom" supports this notion in its very nomenclature and more than one commentator has drawn on the classroom metaphor to explain the links between ecotourism's experiential focus and its presumed educational value. An old Chinese aphorism apparently says it all: "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand."<sup>22</sup> Policy and planning documents in the field also argue that ecotourism's hands-on approach has high cognitive dimensions and that tourist gratification is measured largely in terms of education. In simple terms, then, the ecotourist wants and *needs* to learn, and it is the function of tour operators and host communities to provide ample opportunities for that to happen. Sally Grotta's naive assessment of the motivations behind standard eco-activities nonetheless emphasizes the perceived strength of the ecotourist's gnostic drive:

<sup>21</sup> According to Tourism Canada, adventure travellers "expect to experience varying degrees of risk, excitement and tranquillity and to be personally tested or stretched in some way. They are explorers of both an outer world, the unspoiled exotic parts of our planet, and an inner world of personal challenge, self-perception, and mastery"; quoted in Scafe, "An Ecotourism Perspective," 64.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Roger Grant & Terry O'Brian, "Ecotourism – Educational Travel: A Growth Business," in *Ecotourism Business in the Pacific: Promoting a Sustainable Experience*, ed. John P. Hay (Auckland: Environmental Science Occasional Publications, 1992): 71.



the ecotourist is also the most intelligent and the most caring of tourists. The fact that he or she has chosen a tour that visits isolated mountain villages or a cruise that explores small, undeveloped islands indicates his [sic] disposition and inclination to learn. [...] Ecotourists don't just travel to have a good time, but to have a good time by learning.<sup>23</sup>

While valorization of the quest for knowledge about the environment stems partly from ecotourism's early grassroots connections with organizations such as Earthwatch and the Smithsonian Institution, the central tenets of the travel-learn concept can once again be traced to key features of specific sub-genres of the colonial travelogue. This is not an incidental comparison but rather one which illustrates the Western imaginary's continued investment in a view of nature guided by Enlightenment forms of rationality.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Gieffen and Berglie introduce their 1993 guide by arguing that an ecotour is "a naturalist's expedition in twentieth-century terms."<sup>25</sup>

In her study of travel writing and imperial expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Mary Louise Pratt identifies the naturalist as a paradigmatic figure whose will to learn via travel to "exotic" locations to catalogue specimens established a particular eurocentric world-view, thereby naturalizing the bourgeois European's own global presence and authority:

One by one, the planet's life forms were to be drawn out of the tangled threads of their life surroundings and rewoven into European-based patterns of global unity and order. The (lettered, male, European) eye that held the system could familiarize ("naturalize") new sites/sights immediately upon contact, by incorporating them into the language of the system.[...] Natural history extracted specimens not only from their organic or ecological relations with each other, but also from their places in other peoples' economies, histories, social and symbolic systems.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sally Wiener Grotta, "The Ecotourist as Ambassador," in *Ecotourism and Resource Conservation: A Collection of Papers*, comp. Jon A. Kusler (Berne NY: Ecotourism and Resource Conservation Project, 1991): 102.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Dobson argues that the spread of Enlightenment rationality underpins our exploitative relationship with the natural world. From this (Baconian) point of view, "nature has no meaning in itself; rather its meaning comes from our instrumental apprehension of it"; Dobson, "Critical Theory and Green Politics," in *The Politics of Nature: Explorations in Green Political Theory*, ed. Andrew Dobson & Paul Lucardie (London: Routledge, 1993): 193.

<sup>25</sup> Gieffen & Berglie, *Eco Tours and Nature Getaways*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992): 31.

The particular power of natural history travelogues, Pratt argues, stemmed in part from the "conspicuous innocence of the naturalist," an innocence constituted "in relation to the presumed guilt of conquest."<sup>27</sup> Beside the seafarer or the conqueror, the naturalist appeared decidedly benign, interested only in a non-exploitative relationship with nature via the scientific classification of species.

In a somewhat similar fashion, the presumed neutrality of scientific inquiry has functioned in Third-World destinations as an 'anti-conquest' narrative that sets the modern ecotourist apart from the implicitly neo-imperial mass tourist. In the Caribbean, for example, an Earthwatch tour to San Salvador involves "monitoring of oceanic pollution" during a visit to local seagrass meadows, while the American Oceanic Society offers a "research swim with dolphins" as part of its Bahamas expedition, and the London-based Field Studies Council conducts "botanizing" trips to remote mountain regions of Jamaica.<sup>28</sup> Such scientific endeavours transform idle tourist pleasures such as snorkelling, swimming and wildlife-viewing into purposeful "work" that speaks to the ecological imperative for everybody to do his or her bit to "save the planet." If the proportion of the ecotourism market originally served by these researched-based organizations has shrunk due to the rapid expansion of wholly commercial ecotour companies, the spirit of scientific inquiry is nonetheless harnessed to sell a range of contemporary eco-destinations, even though research activities have morphed into other forms of environmental education that suppose ecological outcomes to follow naturally from an individual's travel-learn experience. Both kinds of ecotourism tend to see knowledge acquisition as an important way of preventing the negative environmental effects of a modern industrialized and technologized world. But, as a variety of literature in the field shows, the division between instrumentalist and ecological uses of nature is not so easily maintained, even in the discursive realm, much less in actual practice. Just as Pratt's naturalist eternally invokes the guilt of conquest by trying to distance "himself" from imperial exploitation,<sup>29</sup> the ecotourist comes into being as an ontological category only within the broader referential frame of mass tourism's apparent environmental ignorance and irresponsibility.

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<sup>27</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 57.

<sup>28</sup> Gieffen & Berglie, *Eco Tours and Nature Getaways*, 91–93.

<sup>29</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 57.