

The Spirituality of Green Travel and Tourism

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Abstract:¹

In today's world of climate change and increasing pollution, the concept of green travel and tourism has been proposed as a possible mitigating solution. However, the pace with which tourists embrace this new concept is slow. It can be argued that the reluctance to embrace is linked to the inability to understand the spiritual side of green travel and tourism. It is said that humankind has the tendency to separate itself from nature. Nature is considered as 'others' and does not merit the same level of respect. Nature is there for humankind's use and consumption, a thinking that easily leads to abuse and destruction. The same can be applied to tourism. While international travel includes a substantial number of tourists who would consider themselves to be religious and spiritual, it is argued that not many of them will be able to decipher the spiritual aspect of opting for green travel and tourism compared to mass tourism. This paper attempts to demonstrate the close link between green travel and tourism with spirituality. It tends to explain why more people who believe in religion and spirituality should strongly consider the concept in their travel decisions. The hope is to increase public awareness on the spirituality of green travel and tourism so the concept will soon become the order of the day.

Keyword: green tourism, green travel, spirituality

¹ To be honest, I am not an expert in spirituality or the philosophy behind it. However, I have had experiences of feeling absolute awe and gratitude towards a higher being whenever I am in the midst of an awesome and beautiful nature. I think nature is a gift to humankind – its beautiful, honest, and unassuming and it creates a balanced ecology that helps sustain the well-being of humankind. This is why I think it is absolutely essential that we recognize the interlink between nature and humankind. Nature can survive without us, but we cannot survive without nature.

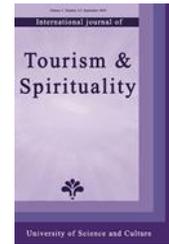
Introduction

Human activities have impacted nature in many ways. Tourism, initially recognized as a smokeless industry and therefore has minimum impact on nature, has proven to open door to human encroachment to pristine and sensitive natural areas, with development of services and facilities to cater for tourists needs and wants. Facilities such as hotels, roads, immaculate landscaping and others can alter the balance of the natural ecology through destruction of habitats and can introduce waste, pollution, excessive lighting etcetera. With continuously increasing domestic and international travel, passing the landmark of 1 billion in 2012, the need for more facilities and services to cater for tourists needs and wants will continue, which means disruption to the balance of natural ecology will also continue.

Content

Tourism is a high-growth industry with a very good prospect for further growth. In 2012, one billion tourists were recorded crossing international borders. This marks the dynamic growth of international travel, which could bring about greater diversity of value systems, faith and spirituality to cross paths and bring about more exchange, dialogue and understanding that could assist transformational spiritual growth via mutual understanding, respect and tolerance. On the contrary, in the world of increasing affinity for material gain and wealth, humankind often fails to associate travel with spirituality. Instead, they tend to separate humankind from nature. Nature is often considered as 'others' and does not merit the same level of respect. Instead, it is there for humankind's use and consumption, a thinking that easily leads to abuse and destruction. Consequently, finite resources have become threatened with destructive human activities that escalated towards pollution and climate change. Tourism is one of many human activities that have led to many types of pollution. Despite being a 'smokeless' industry, the close link between tourism activities with nature have led to overconsumption and degradation of the environment. Against this development, green travel and tourism has been proposed as a possible mitigating solution.

However, the pace with which tourists embrace this new concept is slow. It can be argued that the reluctance to embrace it is linked to the inability to understand the spiritual side of green travel and tourism. While international travel includes a substantial number of tourists who would consider themselves to be religious and spiritual, it is argued that not many of them will be able to decipher the spiritual aspect of opting for green travel and tourism compared to mass tourism. This paper attempts to demonstrate the close link between green travel and tourism with spirituality. It tends to explain why



more people who believe in religion and spirituality should strongly consider the concept in their travel decisions. The hope is to increase public awareness on the spirituality of green travel and tourism so the concept will soon become the order of the day.

What is green and green tourism and its components

Owing to the fragmented nature of tourism, there are so many components that could be categorized under green tourism. Among the popular ones are ecotourism, responsible tourism and sustainable tourism. Each of these shares a similar trait i.e. nature-friendly, responsible tourism that minimizes the well-known impacts of mass tourism. Responsible tourism, for example, advocates accommodation providers particularly hotels to become more environmentally friendly via adoption of green measures in their daily activities (see Kasim, 2009). This trait is becoming more relevant and important today, as we face the global environmental degradation and climate change because green tourism advocates sustainability of the environment, the community, the local businesses, and the tourists. It benefits the environment through conservation, mitigates waste accumulation, and provides income to the locals. For businesses, being green means attracting new segments of consumers, improves company image and reduces operating costs. Business of all sizes has increasingly engaged in green practices now as their business strategy. The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility, for example, advocates the importance of environmental management to address business' environmental responsibility. Green tourism denotes not only nature, but also nature-friendly practices that could contribute towards sustainability.

What is spirituality

What is spirituality? Spirituality is not necessarily religion. It is a way of being, attained via cultivation of body, mind, emotions and energies that blossoms within us (Sadhguru, 2014). 'Spiritual' refers to the experience of being related to or in touch with an 'other' that transcends one's individual sense of self and gives meaning to one's life at a deeper than 'intellectual level. Spirituality requires seeing things in a different light. The feelings of being overwhelmed by a powerful and blissful experience. A spiritual seeker seeks experience that makes them joyful and peaceful – an encounter with 'the other' that is greater than one's individual self. 'The other' is something that cannot be described in traditional religious terms. It can be something supernatural or natural, objective or subjective. A spiritual encounter is not casual. Instead it brings about meanings to our life and gives meaning to our lives in relation to the world. It is deep, abstract, indescribable, heartfelt and powerful. Natural settings most likely provide this encounter as it is the primary setting for spiritual experiences. Mountains, oceans, the forests, caves, the deep

sea are apt context for a spiritual journey. A spiritual journey allows one to be inspired and be filled with love, peacefulness and wisdom. Schroeder (n.d.: 25) offers the following definition for spirituality: 'Spiritual refers to the experience of being related to or in touch with an 'other that transcends one's individual sense of self and gives meaning to one's life at a deeper than 'intellectual level'.

Is spirituality the same as religiousness? Not exactly. Religiousness involves the quest by an organized group or culture to follow and preach specific teachings and doctrines. The group often nurtures and follows specific way of life. Spirituality embodies religiousness because it loves all manifestations of a higher being (god) but look beyond the outer appearances to find more meaning and significance of everything. It relates to human's personal search for greater purpose of his/her own existence. When we are spiritual, we cease the urge to control others beliefs and way of life. We become more loving and respectful of everything and everyone and perhaps even begin to feel that all images of deities presenting religions are essentially just a manifestation of our own, eternally ever-present God.

How the two intersect?

The Dalai Lama, the well known Buddhist spiritual leader is correct in his assertion that loving our environment is akin to taking care of our own home. It is crucial for our own survival because nature makes our earth liveable. If we are not concerned about the wellbeing of our own planet, then we are sealing our own doom since there is no other planet as perfect as earth to sustain humankind.

[There is] no need to study philosophy, these professional, complicated subjects. By simply looking at these innocent animals, insects, ants, bees, etc., quite often I develop some kind of respect for them. How? Because they have no religion, no constitution, no police force anything. But they live in harmony through the natural law of existence or nature's law or system. We human beings, what is wrong with us? We human beings have such intelligence and human wisdom. I think we often use human intelligence in a wrong way or direction. As a result, in a way, we are doing certain actions which essentially go against basic human nature.

Sometimes I call love and compassion a universal religion. This is my religion. Complicated philosophy, this and that, sometimes create more trouble and problems. If these sophisticated philosophies are useful for the development of good heart, then good: use them fully. If these complicated philosophies or systems become an obstacle to a good heart then better to leave them...human nature affection is the key to a good heart (EDDIIR 2007: 28)

Putting the Dalai Lama's words into the context of tourism, we can argue that tourists need to be more engaged when they travel. They need to engage in a more immersive form of tourism activities that fulfil people's natural quest for meaning and wisdom. Green tourism offers such experience. Green tourism is argued to expand one's consciousness about nature. Mr Imtiaz Muqbil, a seasoned travel industry observer and journalist, has proposed tourism industry is no longer about traditional 3S. Rather it is about *serenity, sustainability and spirituality* (www.theguardian.com). In other words, tourism providers need to transform tourist experiences from shallow and meaningless to deep and meaningful.

Examples of spiritual green tourism

Among the alternative green tourism concepts that have revolutionized the industry over the last three decades are ecotourism, responsible tourism and voluntourism. Another emerging concept is spiritual tourism. Often contextually defined, spiritual tourism has been associated with immersive activities associated with faith, religion and believe system. However, there is little evidence to show that people understood the link between spirituality and green tourism. This is what tourism providers must change.

Ecotourism, for example, can provide tourists with greater insights on the impacts of humans onto the environment. It helps foster appreciation of nature via experiences that reach to deeper change (Allen, 1993). An authentic ecotourism experience can lead to greater awareness of the environment (Honey, 2008). It focuses not only on sustainability but also greater understanding about human-nature relationship as well as a fresh take on the role of humankind towards ecology and social welfare.

Green tourism is a form of spiritual tourism because it offers opportunities for humankind to interact with the environment meaningfully. Since humankind is driven by our continued tourists seek new knowledge and understanding via immersive experiences, such interaction could make humankind more caring and ethical, to be more interconnected and conscious about nature and the earth's life support system (Nowaczek et al., 2007). Engaging often in green tourism could thereby gradually transform us into tourists with personal ethics and a worldview that respects all beings including nature. Travellers with personal ethics are travellers that have spiritually developed via enhance understanding and literacy about the richness, diversity and interconnectedness of nature and humankind. They will develop a much greater respect for 'the others' and cease to separate nature from themselves (humankind).

Wilson, McIntosh and Zahra (2013) have examined the concept of spirituality as it is lived by an individual tourist. They sought to understand how people seek meaning and

life purpose for themselves, through experiences of transcendence and connectedness as subjectively lived through their travel. Their phenomenological study revealed that the spiritual meaning of the tourist's travel experiences could be learnt through their religious and non-religious personal meaning of their travel. A spiritual person will have the tendency to make responsible decisions that contribute towards sustainability. Green tourism offers tourists the chance to be involved in a form of tourism that encourages responsible and sustainable use of natural assets of a destination. It provides opportunities for tourists not only to contribute to nature preservation, but also to community sustainability and development via employment opportunities. A sustainable community would be able to prevent negative issues such as youth migration to the city, poverty, preservation of livelihood and traditions, culture and heritage. In other words, via engagement in immersive green tourism activities, tourists will be empowered to make responsible decisions that contribute towards the environmental and social sustainability.

According to Williams (1990), nature provides us with spiritual experiences through the projection of our unconscious minds onto nature and all its elements. This brings wholeness and balance to the psyche that could give rise to embodiment of beauty, balance and symmetry that evoke powerful emotions and meaningful significance to human. Shroeder (n.d.) has proposed examining our own beliefs about deities associated with nature, when identifying the significance of spiritualism in nature. He mentions the Greek gods and goddesses, which have been associated with vegetation, fertility and agriculture, woods and fields. He proposes that this association will personify the beliefs and values of environmentalists and manage to capture modern society's imagination. He cited Hughes (1990) who nominated Artemis as the Goddess of Conservation; and Lovelock (1979) who proposes Gaia as the Earth Goddess. In Hinduism, special groves and big trees have been associated with gods and been turned into shrines. This kind of symbolism brings protection to the worshipped nature, as it is considered sacred and inviolable.

If we love nature, we will experience an awe-inspiring fascination and reverence that makes us see nature as the perfect magical paradise that takes us away from the normality of boring everyday life (Shroeder, n.d.). Nature also offers us with the chance of experiencing solitude and peacefulness (Vest, 1983) – something that human often seek in their religious engagement. Solitude and peacefulness provide important health benefits from the psychological perspective. It draws humankind to be connected and 'at one' with nature. On the other hand, conscious ego and separating humankind from nature can bring about heavy handed manipulation of nature without understanding and

respect of the functions and value of nature to our own survival. Shroeder (n.d.: 27) provides the following example from the Greek mythology.

Erisichthon, who angered the goddess Demeter by cutting a grove of sacred trees. Heedless of Demeter's pleas, Erisichthon cut an ancient oak at the very center of the sacred grove, thereby killing the Dryad (wood-nymph) who inhabited the tree. In retribution Demeter called upon the goddess of famine to afflict Erisichthon with insatiable hunger. Driven by the craving for food, he spent all his wealth and repeatedly sold his own daughter as a slave in order to feed his hunger. But the great quantities of food that he ate gave him no satisfaction. Ultimately, he died when he tried to devour his own body (Graves 1960, Bulfinch 1959, Hamilton 1942). This myth can be interpreted as a symbolic depiction of our culture's devaluation and repression of the intuitive, spiritual aspect of nature and of the psyche, and the consequences this has produced.”

The role of nature as a factor for emotional regulation and its impact on our sense of well-being has been known as ‘Green psychology or Eco psychology’. It was first coined by Theodore Roszak in his book ‘The Voice of the Earth’ in 1992. (www.greentourism.ro). Green psychology promotes the connection between nature and mental health. For example, a stroll in the wooded area would promote a sense of escape, relaxation and stress reduction. Williams (1990) proposes that valuing nature provides us the opportunity to reconnect and value our own unconscious nature. This is true because if we could balance our quest for the physical and materialistic world, with our inner spiritual side, we could see how essential nature is to our own civilization and survival. From here we could develop deep sense of respect and lesser tendency to destroy something that is so valuable to our own existence. Human disconnection from nature (for example from rapid urbanization) is one of the contributors of mental disorder such as depression and anxiety. It leads to a lack of reverence and compassion for nature. Humankind that disengages from nature will not attain any essence of respect for nature. Lack of respect is the mother of all sorts of environmental degradation. Spirituality is crucial to help us find a strong reason to tackle environmental destruction and promote nature protection and conservation.

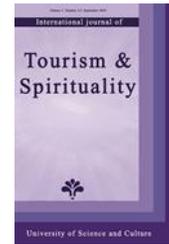
Conclusion

Tourism providers and managers need to highlight the spiritual dimension of green tourism. Their marketing and communication strategies need to associate the beauty that nature offers with a better sense of being, joy and blissfulness one attains from being able

to 'escape' their mundane routine to be in midst of beautiful nature. Tourists must be reminded of the psychological and emotional benefits that nature could provide them, which may bring them closer to their respective deities or aspirations. They must be made aware that it is nature that makes the earth functions to its optimum best thereby enabling humankind to live and enjoy the earth like we do today. Once nature is spoilt, humankind will be affected to varying degrees. Therefore, protecting nature through our choices will make a big difference to our own survival.

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Eco psychology or Green psychology (<http://www.greentourism.ro/eco-psychology-or-green-psychology/>)

What part does spirituality play in the green movement?
<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/ethicallivingblog/2008/jan/16/whatpartdoesspiritualitypl>)