Resolution 060: Improving standards in ecotourism

Critical Analysis and Global Insights for IUCN Intervention in the Tourism Sector

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SUMMARY

Over the past six decades, tourism has grown to become one of the largest and fastest growing economic sectors in the world. Coupled with this growth, parks, protected areas, and biodiversity hotspots across the planet have seen a rise in ecotourism and nature-based tourism development. In many ways, this development is beneficial for economies, human welfare, and nature protection. However, some concerns exist about problems that also arise because of new and increasing pressures on communities, wildlife, and ecosystems. Recognizing these challenges, IUCN members passed WCC-2016-Res-060, *Improving standards in ecotourism* at the 2016 International Union for Conservation of Nature World Conservation Congress, which called on IUCN to expand their role in addressing potential challenges of the ecotourism industry. Even though the resolution passed with nearly unanimous support, there were several unresolved questions regarding the operative goals of the policy. In response to these questions, additional research was completed to assess what a broader field of experts believe is needed to improve the outcomes of the ecotourism sector for people and nature. The results of this global survey of 173 industry professionals, and semi-structured interviews with 42 experts, confirms an opportunity for a concerted intervention in the tourism sector by IUCN. Not, however, to directly address the impacts of ecotourism, but instead, to supply governments and industry with practical tools for self-evaluation and reporting which improve tourism's ability to work as a market-based instrument for natural and cultural heritage conservation. This study provides insight into the reasoning for this intervention and presents cost-efficient measures – summarized here – for IUCN to consider in operationalizing the resolution, should the institution agree there is a need to improve conservation outcomes of the tourism sector:

1. The IUCN Secretariat should convene a collaborative workshop to create or consolidate a shared set of quantitative and qualitative metrics and indicators that stakeholders can use to measure and self-evaluate performance of nature-based tourism operations.

2. In partnership with other organizations, IUCN should develop a self-reporting platform, specific for tourism, that managers, businesses, communities, and visitors could use to report performance towards the criteria compiled in *Recommendation 1*.

3. A multi-agency team should work together to create a step-by-step virtual training tool, customized for each stakeholder group, to inform the significance and use of *metrics and indicators.*

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, people have travelled the planet to see and experience wildlife and natural environments. For just as long, IUCN has discussed the relationship between tourism and conservation [1]. Even before the 1980s, tourism was recognized as an industry that can have benefits which expand far beyond pleasure and entertainment for travelers [2]. When managed responsibly, many administrators and advocates say that the tourism industry can increase human welfare, promote peace and stability, protect ecosystems and wildlife, and support sustainable development [3]–[5]. The Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity adds, "without a doubt, however, the greatest contribution that tourism makes is in opening minds to the wonders of nature" [6, p. 5]. Today, tourism is the reigning industry on the planet, and visits to protected areas to see the wonders of nature have never been higher [7]–[9].

To harness the positive potential of this growth, ecotourism was conceived as a way to identify and brand tourism ventures that provide benefits to conservation, environmental education, and local communities [10]. Although it is not easy to quantify this type of ethical travel, there are indications that ecotourism, at least in name, is experiencing sustained growth in many countries. For example, NGOs in Russia are developing plans to expand nature protection through ecotourism [11]; Rwanda is using ecotourism to strengthen domestic outdoor recreation [12]; Morocco is working on organizing their first international ecotourism conference *(S. Feyers, Personal Communication, 2016)*; Croatia is bringing ecotourism to the Lastovo Islands [13]; and Jordan has begun to consider ecotourism development as a way to improve stability in the region [14]. Already, 80% of Chinese nature reserves employ ecotourism as a tool for economic development [15], and 20% of Australians have expressed a desire to participate in more ecotourism trips [16]. It is clear there is growing international interest in this responsible travel market [17]–[20].

However, it is just as well known that ecotourism is not a panacea. Despite its intended use for conservation, environmental education, and benefits to local communities, ecotourism is a commercial industry, and as such, it has struggled to adhere to its strict tenets and lofty altruistic goals [21]–[25]. There are ongoing concerns that ecotourism is not achieving the positive benefits people had hoped. Emerging research and reviews are revealing that in some cases there could be more negative, than positive, outcomes for wildlife [21], [26]–[30], and claim that, "in reality success stories are few and far between and are generally isolated to individual species and relatively small areas of habitat rather than a comprehensive contribution to conservation" [31,

p. 263]. When some ventures are closely studied, evidence of negative impacts to local communities also become apparent [32]–[35]. One researcher found that, "participation without consciousness-raising, continuous and uniform education, and information appraisal easily translates to growing community resentment not only towards ecotourism, but also to each other" [36, p. 665].

Yet, proponents claim even with these risks and impacts, ecotourism may still be one of the best alternative forms of land use to assimilate conservation with advances in human welfare. Ecotourism is commonly regarded as an important source of financing to support protected areas [37], [38]; it has had some measurable success in protecting endangered species [39], [40]; and, when done right, it offers the potential to create new jobs and markets for developing countries and communities [41]–[44]. It appears true that, under the right conditions, ecotourism can have positive outcomes for communities, wildlife, and ecosystems.

Still, from an ecological perspective, the ecotourism industry has tradeoffs [45], [46] which have led researchers and practitioners to reiterate the need for additional interventions as the industry grows larger. Some suggest that better aligning ecotourism with conservation outcomes requires a stronger definitional consensus [47], or global standards and guidelines [47]–[49], while others claim further advances in policy and market development are necessary to ensure ecotourism is a benefit industry [23], [50], [51]. In reality, realizing the positive outcomes of ecotourism is complicated and probably requires a mixture of these strategies, and more [52]–[54]. But no matter what the impacts of ecotourism are, calls for improvement continue.

Inspired by these calls, a motion was proposed to IUCN at the 2016 World Conservation Congress to amplify this message and bring attention to the potential for IUCN to address impacts of the sector. As a follow-up to what became WCC-2016-Res-060, *Improving standards in ecotourism,* research was conducted to provide further insight towards operationalizing the resolution and to fulfill the Yale Tropical Resources Institute's sponsorship pledge of supporting additional research. This report is a product of that research.

To understand WCC-2016-Res-060 in its final form, the background of the motion is presented here. The report then outlines the research design and methods. After the results are presented, the authors discuss how the findings correspond to, and differ from, what is called for in the resolution. Finally, the report concludes with reflections on the operative goals of the resolution and offers specific measures that IUCN could take, should the organization agree with the need to intervene in the relationship between tourism, people, and nature.

BACKGROUND

Since the World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas in 1992, ecotourism actors have recommended the same remedies to prevent and mitigate the impacts of ecotourism that are still suggested today: definitional consensus, a global standard, more evaluation, and stronger policy and market mechanisms [55]–[58]. In an effort to advance these recommendations, in 2000, leading international experts in environmental certification drafted the *Mohonk Agreement*, the first document to establish consistency among ecotourism standards and certifications around the world [59].

A year later, in preparation for United Nation's International Year of Ecotourism (IYE 2002) [60], thousands of people gathered at nearly two dozen conferences to participate in ecotourism planning and research discourse. The following year, 130 countries convened at the *World Ecotourism Summit* where the first globally collaborative effort for ecotourism took place, greatly expanding the inclusiveness of the dialog process. From the summit, the *Québec Declaration on Ecotourism* was written, and thereafter ecotourism was designated as a tool to address challenges of conservation and poverty around the world [61].

Emerging from the *Declaration,* the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council, which later became the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), was created, and international organizations found new hope in positive progress for the field. Following suit, over the next fifteen years voluntary standards became the primary method to disseminate best practices and technical guidelines for the industry, and hundreds of different ecolabels were created for the ecotourism and sustainable tourism sector [62]. In combination, these mechanisms were believed to provide the incentive and guidance to motivate the industry towards better outcomes for local people and the natural environment.

In the years after the summit, international certification and accreditation firms such as GSTC, Earth Check, and Green Globe 21 focused their attention on the broader sustainable tourism standards, rather than ecotourism, recognizing that these offered a way to capture more operations and greater impacts at scale than the niche market [63]. However, although each of these programs are collaborative and create effective pathways towards sustainability, biodiversity conservation is not the mission of these organizations or their initiatives. While these programs, and many others, include biodiversity criteria, they are too general to advise on specific conservation measures. Unfortunately, this has left the goal of net-positive impacts for nature conservation behind.

Yet, as the ecotourism sector continues to grow, and visits to protected areas and sensitive natural environments continue to increase, so too does the need for tools to assist, and insist, that ecotourism ventures are not only minimizing impacts, but positively contributing to conservation outcomes. Some research has found that as much as 91% of ecotourism operations take place in protected areas [64]. In these sensitive natural areas especially, net-positive benefits are critical. Protected areas and other nature-destinations cannot achieve their long-term conservation goals if the outcome of a tourism venture is degenerative without more restorative countermeasures in place. No matter the size of the market, negative impacts to biodiversity have serious consequences that cascade across ecosystems [65].

Returning to the recommendations long proposed by researchers and practitioners on the subject, after two months of consultation with experts, it was decided that these unresolved issues in the ecotourism industry could potentially be addressed through a renewed intervention by IUCN. A motion was created proposing that IUCN undertake efforts to build a stronger consensus, global standardization, and uptake of ecotourism best practices through an IUCN branded certification program. After additional months of online discussion, this proposal was brought to the 2016 IUCN World Conservation Congress for further negotiation. At the Congress, discussion groups formed, and the motion was amended to its current, final text, removing the certification mechanism while keeping in place the need for specific ecotourism standards. This was believed to be the most practical means for an intervention in the nature tourism sector.

Nevertheless, even upon passing as a resolution with nearly unanimous support, numerous comments were made about its unlikely advance. Although the resolution was accepted, it was said that it would not translate to action because "it identifies the right problem, but the wrong solution." The resolution was merely reinventing the results of the *World Ecotourism Summit* and the work already being done by GSTC for sustainable tourism. Furthermore, because there is some belief, but limited evidence (with the exception of a few programs), that standards and certification work for ecotourism [66]–[68], the effectiveness of the operative goals of the resolution remain in question.

As a result, the research project, which was planned to support the operative goals of the resolution, was redesigned. Instead of mobilizing knowledge development for global ecotourism standards, the authors decided to conduct research which would help determine the most effective way, if any, for IUCN to participate in improving the ecotourism industry's impact on biodiversity and local people beyond the use of sustainable tourism standards.

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODS & ANALYSIS

Design for this research project built upon on the exploratory research used for the motion that indicated needs and opportunities for improvement of the ecotourism sector. Resuming the review of literature covering topics of principles, global standards, and reports of actualized effects (social and natural), a scoping study was undertaken to establish research design. Research objectives were developed to (1) clarify broader expert perspectives about ecotourism and its management, (2) further assess perspectives towards an intervention by IUCN, and (3) gauge the usefulness of standards, while simultaneously using global outreach as a capacity building tool for cross-sector collaboration. Although there was risk that sampling current ecotourism stakeholders could perpetuate an "echo-chamber" effect, because a central goal of this research was to build support for additional collaborative action around ecotourism, it was decided that engaging current experts would be the best way to increase the likelihood that findings would be deployed for operational purposes. A practitioner-based study population would also allow the chance to assess the current use of standards and how they correlate to improved outcomes.

Questions were developed, piloted, then revised using feedback from ten tenured researchers. Final survey questions focused on the concept of ecotourism as well as its current and potential impacts. Questions also asked about the use of standards, their usefulness, and what other mechanisms are used or needed to improve the effectiveness of ecotourism for people and nature. The tenets of ecotourism used in questions were adapted from Donohoe and Needham (2006), and grouped into fields of nature conservation, animal welfare, environmental education, local culture, local welfare, and local economic benefits [47], which are assumed to be accepted as ecotourism's basic tenets [25], [69]. To determine if there were any significant differences in how people perceived the conceptual underpinnings and connotations of ecotourism versus sustainable tourism, open ended questions were asked about their definitions.

The study population was based on direct linkages and active involvement in professional ecotourism and sustainable tourism networks. No sampling frame was used. Instead, a voluntary online survey in English, Spanish, and French was distributed to IUCN members, UNWTO staff, GSTC, TIES, CREST, and STI networks through newsletters and announcements. Social Media accounts were created, and individual messages were delivered to additional ecotourism professionals. The survey was available for two months, from March-April 2017.

Responses to open-ended definition questions were coded into the same categories described above and processed through comparative analysis against themselves (i.e., ecotourism: ecotourism, sustainable tourism: sustainable tourism) and against each other (i.e., ecotourism: sustainable tourism). Results of other questions were analyzed using total responses and cross tabulation for independent variable comparisons. 486 surveys were administered. After duplicate and unfinished surveys were removed, 173 surveys remained for analysis.

Structured interviews were then used to further understand the reasoning behind survey responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and content was examined, coded, and grouped based on sentiments towards ecotourism, connotative delineation, tools for improvement, quantitative or qualitative gaps, and perceptions of an IUCN intervention. This additional data gathering was used to investigate survey results and better understand stakeholder perspectives and ideas in order to capture the social and geopolitical complexity of the ecotourism industry. Because qualitative analysis is "iterative and reflexive," this process was anticipated to improve the quality and accuracy of results [70]. Interviews took place for two months, from June-July 2017.

Limitations

Research was non-probabilistic and predominantly descriptive in nature. Because this was a voluntary online survey, non-response rate cannot be calculated. Since survey access is not expected to have extended beyond internationally involved industry practitioners, there is possibility of social response bias, with the potential that results are limited to individuals with strong opinions or fixed views, or those interested specifically in standards or international campaigns. There is an indication of response error because of contradictions to survey responses that emerged during interviews. It is possible that perceptions of standards differ between survey responses and interviews because of a potential bias by respondents in interview versus survey sampling (e.g., fewer proponents of standards in survey than interview). Considering these limitations together, this research is not to be perceived as a representative sample nor a definitive response to the challenges of the ecotourism industry, but must be regarded simply as a synthesis of respondent perspectives.

RESULTS

Sample

Survey responses from the non-profit sector constituted almost a quarter of the respondents, 24%, whereas those working in research/academic sectors and business were the next two largest groups in the study, making up 20% of the responses each. Consultants, 17%, and governments, 11%, were somewhat represented. Intergovernmental organizations, 2%, parastatal organizations, 2%, and community representatives, 4%, constituted the smallest groups of respondents.

Overall, research/academic were the most cited professional role of respondents, 21%, followed by business, 19%, technical consultants, 16%, environmental managers, 15%, and community developers, 15%. Local/indigenous roles were the least well represented in our sample. Only 2% of respondents identified their role as local/indigenous. When sector was broken down by role there is no clear relationship besides the obvious: the university sector engaged in research and the business sector engaged in business development.

The majority of respondents, 38%, reported that they worked globally in the ecotourism industry. Asia was the second most reported region, 12%, followed by Europe, 9.7%. The Caribbean, North, South, and Central America all represented a similar percentage of respondents, with Middle East, North Africa, and Russia the least represented. When region was broken down by sector, location and roles did not appear to be related, although 55% of people who reported working on ecotourism globally also worked in a university setting.

Most respondents, 46%, have worked in ecotourism for more than 11 years. Almost a third of respondents, 30%, had 1-5 years of experience in the industry, and 20% had 6-10 years of experience. IUCN Members made up 30% of the respondents.

Continuing data collection, 42 structured interviews took place from survey respondents and other industry experts, capturing perspectives from around the world including Canada, US, South America, North Africa, South Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, East Asia, Oceania, and Small Island Developing States. Many interview participants had global and local experience. A variety of professional roles were represented, with auditing/certification making up 10%, community development, 14%, business development, 24%, technical consultation, 19%, research/academic, 17%, environmental management, 12%, and policy/regulation roles representing 5%.

Impact of Ecotourism

From the survey results, it was found that most respondents believe ecotourism is currently providing at least some benefits for nature conservation, animal welfare, environmental knowledge, local culture, welfare, and jobs and economic growth. Another substantial portion believe it is having a net positive impact across the ecotourism criteria. More respondents who did not believe ecotourism was having a positive impact selected a neutral, rather than negative, impact. Some respondents, 13%, believe ecotourism has some negative impact on animal welfare (Figure 1).

When broken down by sector and role, there are no clear relationships to perception of impacts. However, those with roles in business most frequently associated ecotourism with having "some benefits" across all aspects of its impacts. Length of time working in the industry had no influence on the perception of impacts. A greater percentage of IUCN Members believe ecotourism is having some negative effects on animal welfare than non-members (24% vs. 9%), but generally, responses were
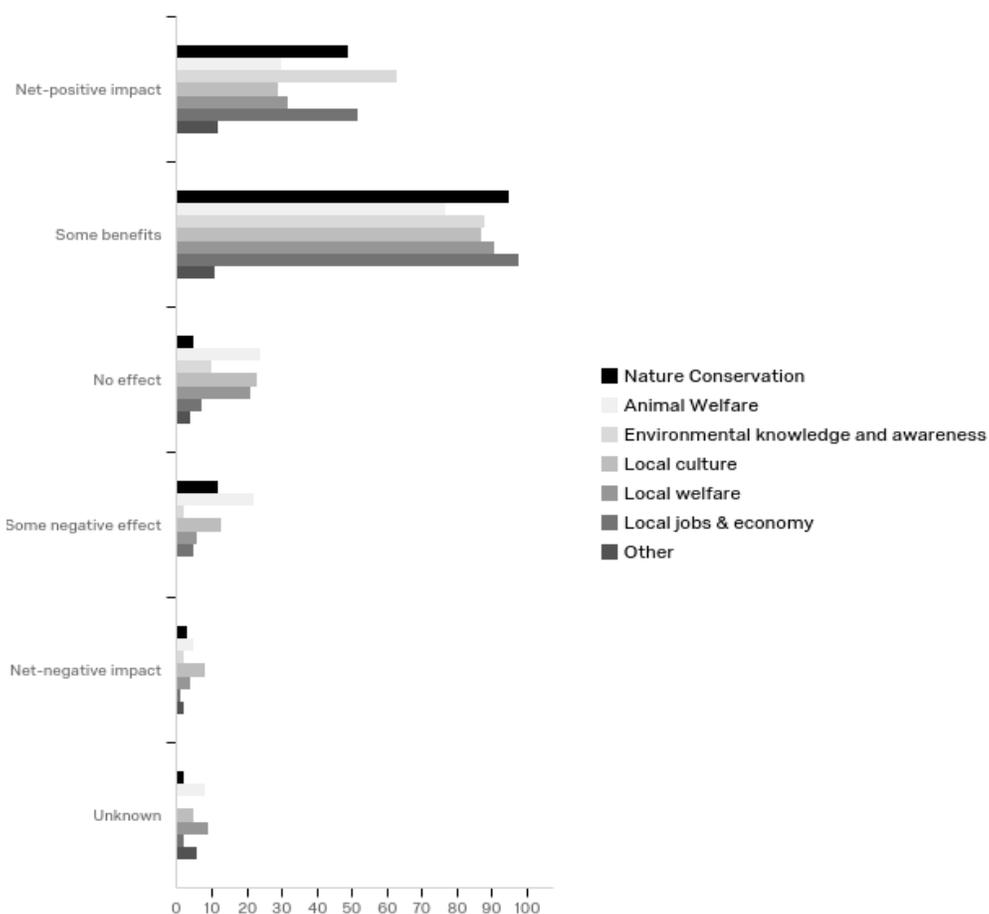

Figure 1: Perceptions of current impact of ecotourism for each tenet

widely distributed across all other ecotourism tenets, and membership did not appear to be associated with other perceptions of impact.

Even though most reported that ecotourism is currently having some benefits, respondents largely believed the benefits could be greater, with a significant majority indicating they believe ecotourism could have net-positive impacts across all of its tenets, including nature, wildlife, and locals. For example, 30% said that ecotourism *is currently* having a net-positive impact on nature conservation, whereas 75% think it *could potentially* have a net-positive impact for nature conservation. Nearly a third, 30%, believe it is having a neutral or negative impact on animal welfare, whereas 94% of respondents believe it could have some benefits, or even net-positive impacts, for animal welfare. The same holds true for human elements: more than half all respondents believe it is providing some benefits to local culture, welfare, and jobs and economies (53%, 56%, and 59% respectively), while an even greater number of respondents believe it could have net-positive impacts for these factors (58%, 62%, and 71% respectively) (Figure 2).
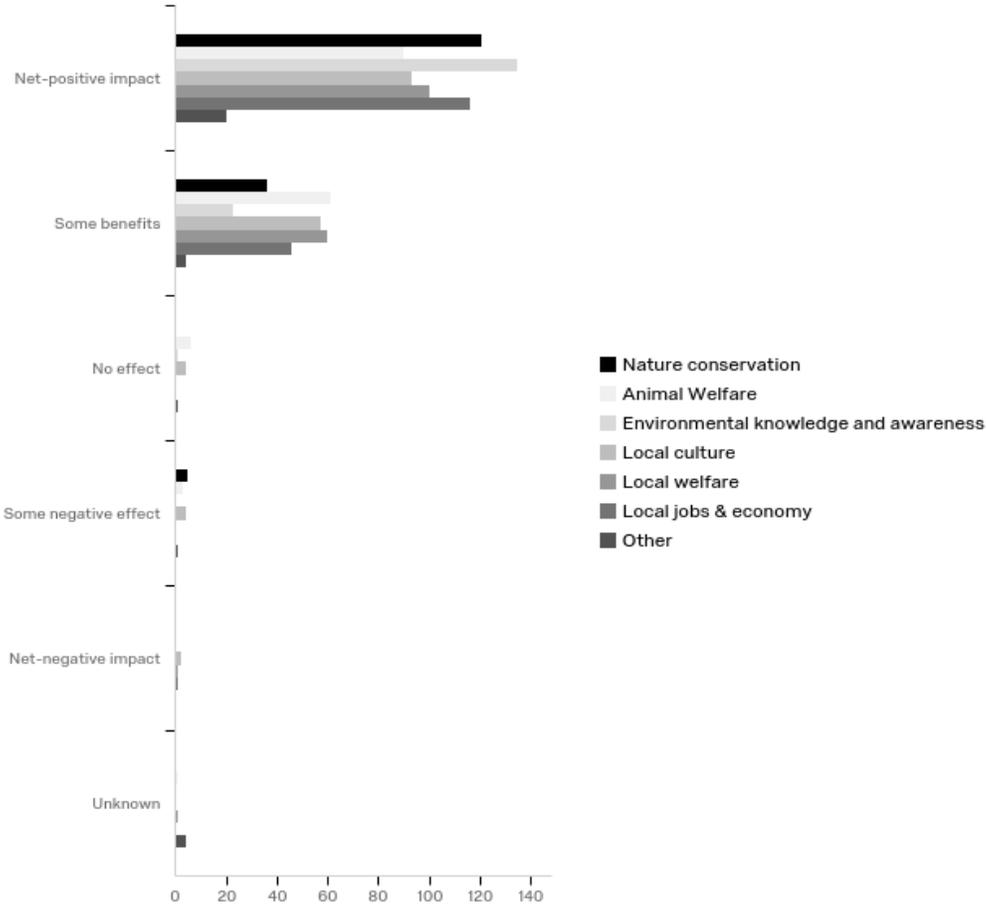

Figure 2: *Perceptions of potential impacts of ecotourism for each tenet*

Across the interviews people agreed that ecotourism could be a socially beneficial industry and a "positive force for conservation." Interviewees expressed the belief that ecotourism works as an alternative to more consumptive land uses, supports environmental education and awareness, and can build appreciation for nature. In doing so, it is a "pathfinder" for the sustainable tourism industry *(Interview 4; Interview 5)*. People believe in some cases ecotourism is the main justification to protect and manage a space, and can incentivize nature conservation and wildlife protection while benefiting communities.

Many voiced the belief that greenwashing is a problem, and some brought up the point of negative impacts that are unaccounted for. One participant claimed that when operations are assessed carefully, "the actual negative impact is much worse if we quantify it than the positive impact [ecotourism] has on nature" *(Interview 17)*. Another stressed, if we want responsible tourism, "then it needs to leave the human and non-human communities better than it finds them" *(Interview 13)*. But other respondents explained that ecotourism is amorphous; although the term is not universally defined, it is globally applied by businesses and governments, sometimes in an arbitrary way. Because there is no way to regulate all the industry which calls itself ecotourism, and there is still weak market presence, improvements remain elusive. It can have benefits, but the scale at which they are measured matters.

With the opportunity to select the top three (out of eleven) ways to improve the positive effects of the ecotourism industry, 51% of respondents identified internationally recognized ecotourism standards, 39% selected improved management, and 36% selected improved monitoring. The next two most frequently selected methods to improve the industry were stronger oversight and regulation and an open source evaluation system (Figure 3).

Definition and Delineation

Responses to questions about the definitions of ecotourism and sustainable tourism were categorical but varied. Of the 152 entries collected for the definition of ecotourism, individual responses could be grouped into 26 different combinations of tenets described above. The combinations of local welfare and nature conservation (n=30), only nature conservation (n=28) and culture, welfare, jobs and economy, and conservation (n=12) were the top three most frequent combinations. Of the 139 entries for the definition of sustainable tourism, individual responses could be grouped into 17 different combinations, with local welfare and nature conservation (n=30), only nature conservation
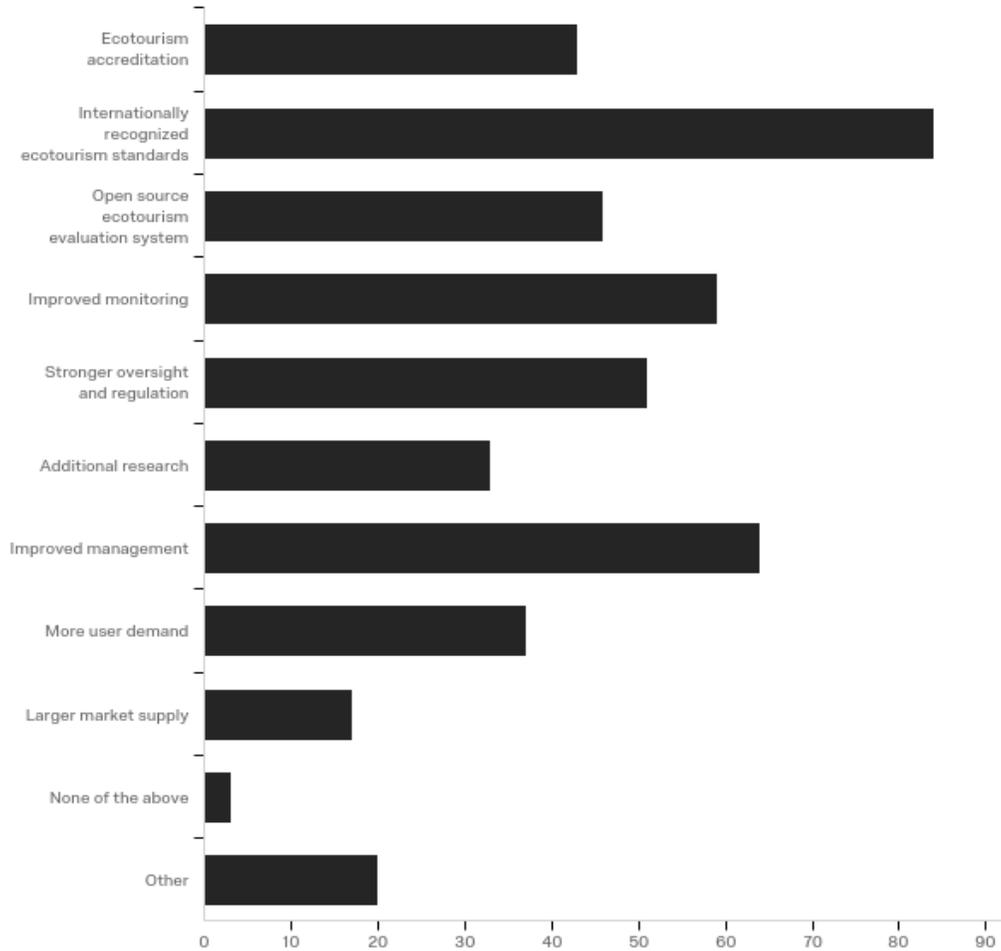
Figure 3: Desired strategies to improve the positive effects of ecotourism.

(n=26), and only local welfare (n=21) as the top three most frequent combinations identified in individual definitions.

When comparing definitions of ecotourism to sustainable tourism, there was a clear difference in how an individual defined each— overlap between a respondent's definitions was not prevalent. However, when comparing definitions of ecotourism to sustainable tourism as a whole, there was significant overlap in the most frequently identified combinations of tenets. Specifically, the combination of local welfare and nature conservation tenets were mentioned by 30 respondents in ecotourism definitions and 30 respondents in sustainable tourism definitions, and the mention of nature conservation alone was provided by 28 respondents in ecotourism definitions and 26 respondents in sustainable tourism definitions.

Overall, even when broken down by total percentages of each tenet identified in a definition, ecotourism and sustainable tourism were

shown to contain nearly the same elements, though sustainable tourism definitions had somewhat fewer mentions of animal welfare and environmental knowledge. The highest variation appeared in jobs and economy (Table 1). The difference between sustainable tourism and ecotourism appears primarily to be a tradeoff between local jobs and economy for animal welfare and environmental knowledge.

	Local Culture	Local Welfare	Local Jobs and Economy	Nature Conservation	Animal Welfare	Environmental knowledge and awareness
Ecotourism	29.60%	57.89%	28.28%	98.68%	16.44%	14.47%
Sustainable Tourism	30.93%	61.15%	53.23%	84.17%	2.87%	6.47%

Table 1: Percentage of tenets included in ecotourism and sustainable tourism definitions.

Coinciding with this overlap, a majority of people, 52%, reported that ecotourism and sustainable tourism should be monitored, managed, and evaluated *the same*. A little over one-third of respondents, 34%, believe ecotourism should be monitored, managed, and evaluated *differently* than sustainable tourism. Of the 14% that responded "other" to the question, a number of respondents believed that, while interrelated, additional or stronger parameters for nature and wildlife conservation may be needed to effectively monitor, manage, and evaluate ecotourism compared to sustainable tourism ventures.

In both the interviews and survey results, some declared that ecotourism is outdated and that the term is not used in western countries *(Interview 6; Interview 9)*. Accordingly, these respondents believe that sustainable tourism standards are sufficient because they encompass wider needs of improvement such as energy consumption, water use, and waste. Another group of thinking concluded that "there may be arguable differences between the two," but operationally there is no need for delineation *(Interview 10)*.

In the interviews, only a few respondents specifically said there is reason to maintain ecotourism initiatives distinct from sustainable tourism. Overall, it seemed like most respondents did not think the difference in designations mattered. Ecotourism, sustainable tourism, all the subsectors of tourism are simply "a branding exercise which tries to gain market share or market profile. And that will continue in the tourism industry" regardless of what it is called *(Interview 20)*. Some posed that the real question is, more people are travelling and spending time in sensitive places—how do we deal with that without losing diversity *(Interview 12; Interview 15)*? Instead of focusing on one type of

tourism and trying to achieve positive contributions to conservation, others said that we first need to work on encouraging the industry to simply adopt sustainable practices *(Interview 25)*.

Standards, Guidelines, Certification Programs

In relation to the use of voluntary standards and ecolabels, 37% of respondents create or promote standards, guidelines, or certification programs in their work, while 27% use guidelines and 9% are certified. A number of respondents, 14%, do not use guidelines, standards, or certification programs and 27% of respondents indicated these were not applicable to their work (Table 2).

Answer	%	Count
We create or promote guidelines, standards, or certification for use by others	36.99%	64
We use other guidelines or standards	26.59%	46
Not applicable	26.59%	46
No certification, standards, or guidelines are used or promoted	14.45%	25
Our ecotourism activities are certified	9.25%	16
Total	100%	173

Table 2: The use of standards, guidelines, or certification programs by respondents.

Of the 126 respondents who created or used standards, guidelines, or certification programs, 53 different individual standards or certifications were reported as being used. The majority were only mentioned by one respondent, and some respondents mentioned multiple standards. GSTC criteria were used by nine respondents, six reported using Ecotourism Australia, four reported using Green Globe, and four reported using the STI/STEP Program. The length of time of use varied greatly, from less than one year to more than 25 years.

Almost three-quarters of respondents, 69%, applied these standards, guidelines, or certification programs to the promotion, creation, or management of hotel accommodations, 68% to parks and protected areas, 62% to tour operations, 45% to attractions or excursion suppliers, and 41% to private destinations. Others are applying the standards, guidelines, or certification programs to other subsectors of tourism, or use them for a specific experience or venue. Nearly a third, 30%, of respondents involved with standards also monitor operations using these criteria; 26% use them to assist management, 26% in evaluation, and 9% take other measures in relation to these standards.

The majority of those using standards believe standards provide minor improvements for nature conservation, animal welfare, local cultures, local welfare, and local jobs and economy. The majority, 53%, using or promoting standards believe that they lead to major improvements for environmental knowledge and awareness. A minority of respondents, 9%, see no changes for nature conservation, 15% see no changes for local culture, 13% see no changes for local welfare, and 10% see no changes for local jobs and economy. Almost a quarter of respondents, 24%, saw no change in animal welfare resulting from the use or promotion of standards, guidelines, or certification programs. A low percentage of respondents, less than 2% each, believe standards, guidelines, or certification programs have a negative effect for local culture, local welfare, and local jobs and economies (Figure 4).

Of those not currently using standards, 40% have considered using them and 52% have not considered formally adopting standards, guidelines,
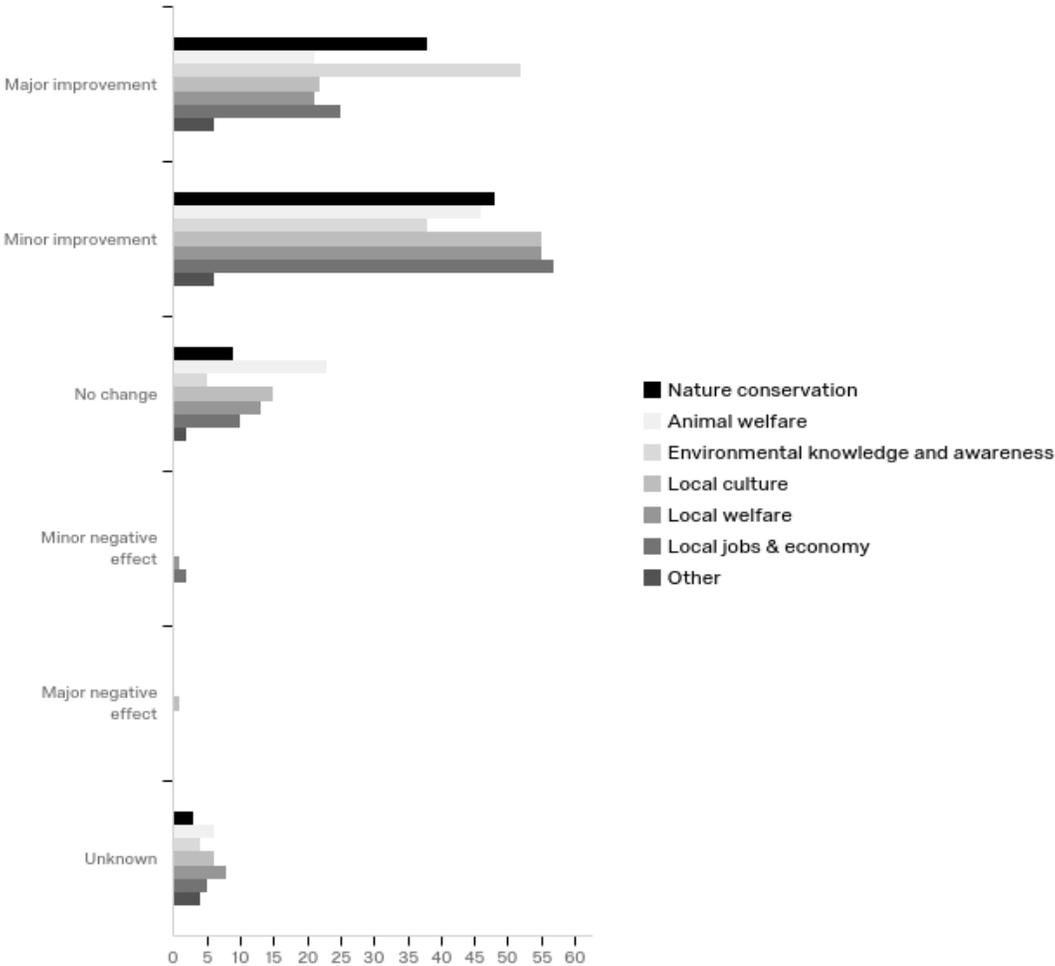

Figure 4: Perceived effect of standards, guidelines, and certification programs

or a certification program. The top three limiting factors for using these were lack of knowledge, cost, and lack of human resources.

The majority of those not using standards, guidelines, or a certification program are involved in other efforts to improve positive outcomes of ecotourism. These alternative efforts are undertaken by a combined 70% and vary widely, though can be grouped as awareness and education programs; training programs and technical support; and restoration or volunteering activities.

Several respondents in the interviews explained that a global standard for ecotourism could be useful in achieving benefits in the nature tourism sector. A global standard could provide more guidance resources for ecotourism developers and operators, and could be a way for IUCN to establish greater presence in the tourism industry. These responses noted that, more than just having a global standard however, it would also be about how the standard is implemented and how operations are monitored and managed in relationship to that standard, pointing out that there is still little in place, besides costly audits, to ensure current standards and certifications are working effectively.

Frequently, however, interviewees also made comments specifically *against* standards. Almost half the respondents, 40%, said that no additional standards are needed or that ecotourism tenets should be added to sustainable tourism standards. Some respondents noted that a global standard would box the industry in, negatively impact entrepreneurship, and potentially homogenize the industry, jeopardizing the unique components that are central to ecotourism. These respondents believe standards are too rigid, not realistic or necessarily fair, and they require all or nothing outcomes. They claim additional standards would create confusion, could not be met by small-scale businesses, and that the high expectations of standards limit their technical and financial viability. They stressed that a global standard would not be equitable to small operators and would preclude people with an aspiration to help nature, but who may not be able to afford auditing and certification: "What do you do about the very small poor operator or lodge that is in some very remote area, that has absolutely no resources and may not be connected? Most people are not aware of the different certifications, standards, and definitions. And all they know is the general concept of ecotourism and that's what they are doing, and it still makes a difference" *(Interview 5)*. Additionally, they point out, there are enough standards that already exist, but which do not work. "The one-size-fits-all approach was tried in the 20th century and it failed miserably," commented one respondent *(Interview 30)*. Creating a global standard for ecotourism would not be difficult, but achieving results from it would be.

Quality Assurance and Impact Control

As an alternative to standards, what came up in almost every interview were one of the next three top strategies: improved monitoring, improved management, and stronger oversight and regulations. Interviewees also emphasized the need for collaboration and partnerships. "Where you have people working together is the gold standard and is when you will achieve the greatest things. Spirit of cooperation, spirit of support, spirit of shared endeavor. And if you get that, that's when things work very well" *(Interview 3)*. Collaboration is how conflicts and impacts are mediated and is how to ensure accountability and compliance. Partnerships are the central element to bringing people together to achieve a similar vision and holding each other to that vision.

Across the interviews people stressed that ecotourism could be more effective and have a more positive impact, but this would require getting businesses to "walk the talk" *(Interview 36)*. Businesses and tour operators are the primary connection between tourists and their destinations; they act as educators, providing firsthand insight into local contexts, and they are often directly responsible for tourism-related benefits and the mitigation of negative impacts *(Interview 9)*. They play a key role in planning, creating, and facilitating positive outcomes. The market can support contributions to conservation and livelihoods, but businesses will have to believe that there is money to be made in providing responsible travel experiences. This will require that more tourists are paying for these services which also means creating greater awareness and normalizing the conversation about responsible tourism across the industry, and among tourists especially.

Another theme throughout interviews was that policy is more effective than voluntary standards, and that the greatest improvements will come from local governments mandating sustainable business practices. Without regulation, operators and developers may not feel compelled to contribute net-positive benefits to conservation over time.

Nevertheless, top-down regulation – that which is imposed – is not something businesses and tourists want. Regulation is important, but it must be carrots, not sticks *(Interview 1)*. The point is not to tell people what to do, but to make the industry better. Governments and policy institutions "need to give [operators] a system of improvement, not to tell them they are doing badly, but to know where to go" *(Interview 22)*. If governments created incentives such as longer permitting programs, licensure prioritization, or other tax benefits, businesses would be more likely to adopt practices that lead to more positive outcomes.

Many respondents suggested that voluntary evaluation and reporting would be the best way to create these market incentives, partnerships, and policies. Self-evaluation helps businesses to know their true impacts and opportunities for improvement. By reporting their performance, the transparency would support a reward system allowing for the development of marketplace incentives, thus creating a reason and clear direction to improve management and outcomes of their operations *(Interview 9)*. Governments could select and reward good operators, creating an incentive to increase performance, and then competition would form in the market to reduce negative impacts.

DISCUSSION

Impact of Ecotourism

The results of the survey support the premise that ecotourism provides benefits across the spectrum for nature conservation, animal welfare, environmental education, local communities, and local economies. Evidence also supports that, in many places, ecotourism has been used as the basis to create, fund, and improve the management of public and private protected areas. Both literature and this research indicate that people believe ecotourism provides more positive outcomes than many other forms of extractive or transformative land-uses, and that "ecotourism promotes ecosystem integrity that is essential for the protection of biodiversity" [53, p. 292].

However, ecotourism is also drawing new activity and development into sensitive places that are unprepared for these changes *(Interview 12)*. For some people, this seems to be causing more problems than it solves *(Interview 13)*. Like all industries, a trait of the tourism sector is a constant desire for growth. Some believe that "the industry is very voracious, and like a tidal wave, [it] could wipe out some of the most important places in the world" *(Interview 20)*.

Today, there is emerging evidence that direct and indirect negative impacts could be having repercussions on biodiversity and ecological health as a result of invasive species, habitat loss, and many other complex factors that are still poorly understood [28], [71]–[74]. Furthermore, "most research on the mechanisms, measurement, and management of tourism's environmental impacts is still rather crude" [75, p. 409]. Many of these impacts are neither properly accounted for, nor properly managed. But they could potentially be reduced once people are more aware of these impacts and how to address them, and once incentives for their reduction are created through policy mechanisms.

Teams of scientists continue to urge, "as this field grows, it should do so in a way that facilitates the calculation of net effects (positive, negative or neutral) reflecting the degrees to which ecotourism simultaneously meets goals related to economy, culture, environment and biodiversity" [76, p. 326]. They explain, "despite the fact that ecotourism arose at least in part as a creative and socially responsible means for conserving biodiversity, a rigorous assessment of ecotourism's conservation potential is still awaited" [76, p. 326].

Some believe that no additional resources should be expended on ecotourism, that it is working well enough. Nevertheless, in light of the insufficiently researched, but real impacts of the ecotourism sector, whatever the name designation that is used for a tourism venture, we must critically assess how it affects biodiversity loss, which scientists know is just as great a threat to human welfare as the climate change crisis we face today [77]. Before ecotourism can truly achieve its mission, there is a need to more clearly understand the impacts of the industry.

Definition and Delineation

Our research found that ecotourism and sustainable tourism are both understood to include local community welfare and nature conservation, and that net-positive contributions to conservation were rarely mentioned. Their differences are primarily expressed through the criteria of environmental knowledge and awareness, animal welfare, and economic growth, rather than conservation. This evidence supports the notion that ecotourism and sustainable tourism are perceived as interrelated and promote equally positive, but not necessarily net-positive, outcomes for people and nature.

Because there was apparent variation in how individual respondents defined ecotourism and sustainable tourism, it is likely that the terms will continue to be understood subjectively and that the discourse around the definitions will revolve indefinitely. Taken together, these results suggest that any further refinements of the ecotourism definition will not likely have corresponding improvements in the realization of benefits. Consequently, the findings of this research do not indicate a need for a renewed definition.

Notwithstanding, although IUCN does not normally focus on the subsets of sustainable tourism *(Interview 16),* some people may still suggest that a revitalized definition could have a symbolic effect for building stronger policies and regulations in countries where ecotourism is being developed. Or, alternatively, that renewing the definition could be done

to emphasize biodiversity protection and conservation in sustainable tourism efforts. Additionally, a new definition could modernize the concept of ecotourism to reflect a more accurate global application.

If IUCN does perceive value in creating a new definition, the goal should be to simplify the current definition to support partnerships and strengthen consensus across countries, institutions, and initiatives. It should be done in collaboration with other ecotourism actors and sufficiently capture the social and natural dimensions of ecotourism while adhering to its tenets, widening its scope of application, and clearly connecting it with the UN *Sustainable Development Goals* and IUCN's *Sustainable Tourism Best Practice Guidelines* series [78], [79].

Standards, Guidelines, and Certification

Some respondents claimed that "having standard operating procedures developed for ecotourism ventures is the need of the hour" *(Interview 41)*. This frame of thinking believes that a global standard would reinforce the expectation that ecotourism operations go beyond sustainability and aspire to restore and improve the natural environment *(Interview 21)*. Other researchers add that "the persistent problem with certification is that it must have a uniform, international standard…to adequately serve a diverse set of ecotourists. While attempts to achieve this conformity have been made, conservation research has played a minor role in this process" [76, p. 326]. In this case, the idea is that global ecotourism standards developed by IUCN would be a way to better incorporate ecological data and strengthen the universal brand of an industry that seeks net-positive impacts for people and the natural environment *(Interview 4)*.

However, for others, the discussion of a global standard is not complete "until you talk about the entire implementation side…and the capacity for organizations and communities to put this into practice" *(Interview 13)*. That is where the idea of a previous global ecotourism standard failed. A global standard is a great idea, but who implements it, "who policies this? Who manages it, who looks after it, who promotes it and improves it" *(Interview 4)*?

Although a global standard was the most frequently selected choice for ecotourism improvements in the survey, the interviews did not confirm the necessity of global standards. Rather, interviews contradicted the survey results, in some cases even when interview subjects selected this survey response. Instead, they revealed that many respondents believe global ecotourism standards would not likely be an effective tool to achieve industry-level improvements. Because there is an abundance of

standards and guidelines already, theory for improvement is sufficiently robust. "Everything we need to know to improve tourism effectiveness, we know… The problem is getting it implemented" *(Interview 26)*.

The general belief by most respondents seemed to be that setting, monitoring, and enforcing a global ecotourism standard is not financially viable, and that businesses may not have sufficient incentives or receive proportionate benefits for using them. Respondents did not seem to believe current standards are a hindrance, but rather that additional standards would not be the most useful way to attract customers or change the industry in a major way *(Interview 15; Interview 24)*. Additional standards may encourage raising the bottom line, but they would not address the underlying issues of the ecotourism sector, the most pertinent of which are the lack of empirical data about the impacts of the industry, and a lack of policies and capacities to regulate those impacts.

Recent research conducted by the Rainforest Alliance supports that current sustainable tourism standards, when coupled with training, can lead to measurable gains in biodiversity protection in nature destinations [80]. The findings of this research coincide with those results. Although this global analysis did not quantitatively assess the effect of standards, if the survey results are any indication, the majority of practitioners report positive improvements for nature and animal welfare as a result of using a variety of standards for both ecotourism and sustainable tourism.

Since a number of other biodiversity guidelines for tourism are already available in resources such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (2007) *Managing Tourism and Biodiversity* and (2015) *Tourism Supporting Biodiversity,* UNWTO (2010) *Tourism and Biodiversity – Achieving Common Goals Towards Sustainability*, and IUCN (2008) *Biodiversity: My Hotel in Action*, and others, there is likely to be sufficient instruction for anyone seeking general procedural guidelines for best management practices in their operations [6], [81]–[83]. Consequently, the findings of this research reveal that, although there is interest in the *idea* of a global standard for ecotourism, alternative strategies for intervention are more desirable and possibly more effective than ecotourism standards created by IUCN.

Quality Assurance and Impact Control

Instead of just following guidelines or standards, an organization also needs to "periodically examine, reflect, review, and revise" their operations *(Interview 14)*. Governments, businesses, and NGOs "can't

manage what [they] don't measure" *(Interview 1)*. There is a need to evaluate and communicate both successes and opportunities using a systematized framework so that – through internal management and external pressures – tourism businesses can participate in the philanthropic aspirations of this industry. By doing so, those who are committed to adhering to the goals of ecotourism will be able to share their achievements and inspire others to improve.

Currently, this type of self-evaluation system is lacking. "There are no generally agreed parameters or accounting protocols to quantify and compare the various different types of environmental costs and benefits which ecotourism may generate" [52, p. 665]. After decades of repeated calls and proposed frameworks [48], [52], [56], [84], [85], a reliable, replicable, and easy-to-use self-evaluation tool remains absent. Even as of 2017, the authors of *Ecotourism's Promise and Peril: A Biological Evaluation,* which examined the positive and negative effects of ecotourism, admitted they "largely failed in fulfilling one of the main goals of [their] book project: to develop an integrative framework to objectively evaluate ecotourism's costs and benefits" [86].

While a successful evaluation system has remained elusive, researchers point out that "numerous authors have proposed parameters, criteria or approaches to measure the success or failure of individual ecotourism projects," and that "it would be valuable to combine or select from these parameters and criteria, and to test them robustly, so as to develop metrics widely applicable under changing global, national, local and internal factors" [64, p. 12]. For example, after empirically testing one evaluation program, Baral (2015) suggests that "international conservation organizations who work in the field of ecotourism such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC), World Conservation Union (IUCN), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Conservation International (CI) could test and cross-validate the scale in a range of protected areas worldwide with assistance from international research consortiums." Baral explains, "this effort would provide a comparative framework for evaluating ecotourism worldwide and an objective, structured way to receive feedback from visitors about ecotourism development." [84, pp. 290–291].

Making this data available to scientists, managers, and policy makers could help "identify and address topics that are of actual concern to the non-academic community, and to ensure that the outcomes of such research are made accessible to the latter" [25, p. 26]. This type of evaluation system could also lead to more interdisciplinary collaboration that bridges academic and institutional silos, allowing for much needed synergistic advances in achieving the goals of the industry

[25]. By sharing this information with the public, the appropriate advocacy, governance, and market growth can form around the greatest opportunities and strategies for improvements.

Once this type of self-evaluation system is created, it would make possible the ability to collect robust data and report the social and ecological performance of an operation. This data would bring transparency, so what is being said is actually being done; it would bring the opportunity for partnerships, so that stakeholders can work together to improve their performance.

With more interests working together, accountability is likely to become an intrinsic part of operations. User demand will grow organically from different responsible practices, and new forms of competition could emerge, differentiating operators in the market. As a result, the process of self-evaluation and reporting becomes a way for governments and businesses to identify new incentives and products that improve the positive benefits of ecotourism for wildlife, ecosystems, and communities.

CONCLUSION

Although ecotourism and related forms of nature-based tourism have drawbacks, they will remain an important means for conservation and sustainable development. Some go so far as to say, "without conservation there is no tourism, and without tourism there is no conservation" *(Interview 16)*. Other experts observe that, "from a policy perspective, the role of tourism in supporting conservation both on and off reserve is becoming increasingly critical as human populations continue to expand, wilderness areas continue to shrink, and it becomes increasingly difficult for national governments to declare further public protected areas of any significant size" [75, p. 409]. According to a growing body of literature however, more resources are necessary to ensure that these enterprises are supporting conservation effectively.

Though the findings of this research are not generalizable, the results clearly support a different approach than the creation of global standards for ecotourism; there is ample information available, but insufficient implementation. Researchers explain, "even with the best research to guide programs, ecotourism is likely to fail without broad oversight…to maintain key market forces and provide incentives for generating evidence that ecotourism is clearly benefiting the organisms and communities that serve as its central resources" [76, p. 326].

The current weaknesses are not in certification programs, standards, or definitions, but rather with the motivations to fully adopt these across the industry, and to carefully monitor, manage, and regulate operations to achieve genuine social and environmental benefits. A scientifically designed self-evaluation and reporting system could help remedy these problems together. It is one of the most important but missing pieces in the effort to improve the sustainability of tourism ventures. Numerous systems have been proposed and implemented at limited scales, but none have yet established consistent, collective use.

UNWTO's *Measuring Sustainable Tourism* project, for example, has a framework for biodiversity measurements and is attempting to incorporate this type of environmental accounting into their *Tourism Satellite Account*, but this program is experimental, highly technical, and government oriented [87]–[89]. Web-based interfaces like GSTC's Sustainable Tourism Dashboard offer an interactive way to visualize impact, but conservation and biodiversity data is unavailable. Current standard and certification programs allow businesses to report their social and ecological performance, but most of these programs are membership based and costly, and do not share information apart from the enterprises that are certified by them directly. Trip Advisor offers an open-access GreenLeaders program, which overcomes this limitation, but the certified operations are primarily hotels, rather than parks and nature destinations where these tools are needed the most. So, even though many programs exist to advance the sustainability of the industry, there remains a disconnect between data, oversight, and consumers that needs to be addressed to ensure the industry is truly aware of and actively managing its impacts on local communities and the natural environment.

IUCN could address this disconnection by constructing a resource that ties these programs together. IUCN has the capacity and experience to lead the creation of a practical tool for international actors that can be distributed globally, and customized locally. IUCN is designed to work from the top down and bottom up. They have extensive practice developing partnerships as well as unrivaled access to scientists, researchers, and experts in protected areas and beyond. These are all the right ingredients to develop a tool that is simple, far reaching, and accessible to stakeholders regardless of knowledge and capital. IUCN could create a resource which would not only provide useful for the tourism industry to reduce their impacts, but one which could also supply the market with another way to motivate those changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Translating these findings to distinct actions which support the preambular reasoning and operationalization of WCC-2016-Res-060, the authors recommend:

1. The IUCN Secretariat should convene a workshop with IUCN members and specialist groups, multilateral agencies (CBD, UNWTO, UNEP, GSTC), NGOs, and tourism business representatives, to create or consolidate a shared set of *quantitative and qualitative* metrics and indicators – particularly focusing on local community welfare and biodiversity criteria – that stakeholders can use to easily monitor, measure, and self-evaluate performance of nature based tourism in any type of destination, but especially in public and private protected areas and biodiversity hotspots, which are increasingly needed for biodiversity protection. This workshop would include strategic planning for the creation and management of *Recommendation 2*.

2. Similar to the 10YFP SCP Clearinghouse, but permanent and open-access, IUCN should work in collaboration with an agency or program, such as PANORAMA [90], to develop a self-reporting platform, specific for tourism, that businesses, researchers, and visitors could use to report performance of an operation towards the criteria drafted in *Recommendation 1*. This voluntary reporting platform could be distributed widely across agencies and organizations, creating publicly accessible, crowdsourced data that governments and operators can use, and be motivated by, to improve human and nature benefits of the tourism sector. This data could be added to the Protected Planet database and combined with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Tourism Dashboard. Further mainstreaming this tool, the data could even be connected to Trip Advisor's GreenLeaders Program. Together, this would support advances in the institutional, managerial, and commercial progress of the field.

3. To deploy the reporting platform, a step-by-step virtual training tool, such as "a "do-it-yourself" reference guide for managers and practitioners" [84, p. 291] could be created in multiple languages, customized for each stakeholder group. This training tool would plainly inform the significance and application of *metrics and indicators* and their use in policy and decision making. This tool could then be promoted to planners, governments, operators, and universities with instructions and examples of scientific and policy applications of the tool and its data.

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