Ecotourism Business’s Effects on Environmental Justice

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Abstract

When researching environmental justice in Belize, it is essential to find out how ecotourism business plays a part. While reading about the village and finding out how much has changed there since ecotourism has taken over, it is interesting the impact it has had on the environment, and more specifically, environmental justice. In Belize, more of the direct impacts of ecotourism on the environment was investigated due to personally being the ecotourists and experiencing its impact firsthand. Overall, it is interesting to discover what role ecotourism plays in environmental justice and how big of an impact it is compared to other factors. Aspects of ecotourism that are most present in Belize were also investigated. Another important thing discovered in research is how the people of Belize view ecotourism. This was found out by asking questions and also observing their behaviors and attitudes toward ecotourists and business while we are there. Some things focused on in our research includes environmental justice, sustainability, sociology of environmental justice, and ecotourism. When looking at these the impact ecotourism has on the environment can be seen.

Environmental Justice

Environmental Justice plays a huge role in any country, there are both environmental costs and environmental benefits, or as commonly referred to, environmental goods and bads. Typically, we see a trend in environmental bads impacting poorer countries or communities within these countries. There are two ends of the spectrum, those who are impacted by the bads and those who aren’t as impacted. Environmental bads are things like chemical toxins, hazardous wastes, pollution (of all types), loss of species, loss of land (or intimacy with the land), and many others.
When considering environmental justice, we look at the environmentally privileged or those who are not impacted by these environmental bads, or as research has proved, not as impacted as others, because research has shown that even people of middle to upper class have chemical toxins in their blood despite having never knowingly being exposed to toxins, such as living by a hazardous waste site, or working by one. (Bell & Ashwood, 2016. P. 40) Sociologists have coined the term “environmental racism” to “describe social heritage differences in the distribution of environmental goods and bads, due to either intentional or institutional reasons.” (Bell & Ashwood, 2016. P. 31). This means that based on race, you may be subject to more environmental bads than another race. In fact, according to much research “environmentalism racism has shown that people of color are more likely than not to live in communities with hazardous waste problems” (Bell & Ashwood, 2016. P. 31). Over time, researchers have considered if this in fact an issue of race or an issue of income, however race and income are closely related. Basically, the main issue revolving around environmental justice is that the poorer are the ones who are taking the hit of the environmental bads even though trends show that it is in fact the rich that create more of the issues such as pollution than the poor. This is due to the fact that the richer of the country the more they consume and the more power they have. This is called the global consumption gap, the rich countries keep consuming because they can afford to, when things run low there are two options, either limit your consumption of it, or buy or produce more of the product. The rich can afford to keep this up, but with the consumption gap comes the pollution gap. It is not as if the rich intentionally want to make the pollution gap widen, but the sociology of environmental justice explains the cycle.
It is interesting to compare the two countries because if we consider environmental justice and how the rich create more pollution than the poor, but the poor experience the environmental bads, we can see a direct correlation between the two countries. According to global economic data, the United States ranks number 12 on the list of richest countries, with their gross domestic product (gdp) being 22.321 billion whereas Belize falls at number one hundred and twenty-two on the list with their gdp being four million. However, we do have to take into account the population sizes of these countries, the United States being 382.2 million and Belize being 408,487. (Ventura & Binh, 2019). It obviously is a big difference population wise between the two countries, but it is still evident that Belize can be considered a poorer country than the United states. Not only basing this off the fact that the poorer experience more environmental bads, but also looking at environmental racism and comparing the demographics of the two countries, Belize’s demographics are “Latinos are the largest group, with its share of the total population growing from 49% to 50%. Creoles accounted for 21%, down from 25%. Maya and Garifuna made up 10% and 4.6% respectively. The number of Garifunas and East Indians remained at their 2000 levels. About 19 thousand persons or 6% of the population claimed to be of mixed ethnic origin (Belize Demographics Country Profile: With Belize Census Data). The United States’ demographics are 62% white, 16.9% Hispanic, 12.6% black, 5.2% Asian, 2.3% mixed, 1% other (Race and Ethnicity in the United States). We can clearly see the dominant races being white in the United States and Latinos in Belize. This is evidence of environmental racism.

**Benefit of Ecotourism**

Ecotourism can help alleviate the impact of development on resource depletion in Belize because ecotourism can help protect natural habitats and environments. When tourists come to Belize, their money is poured into Belize’s economy. With this influx of cash, Belize can spend
money on preserving and protecting habitats and wildlife. It is important to protect these ecosystems because tourists come to Belize to see them. So, if the ecosystems are protected and maintained, tourists will continue to come to Belize. While in Belize, it can be observed that its residents are very welcoming to tourists, due to tourists stimulating their economy as well as providing funds to help protect the land and animals. Protecting natural habitats becomes a priority in Belize in order to keep the tourists coming. One must also consider the jobs made for the people of Belize in order to support and provide for the flow of tourists coming in. Jobs needed include those in hotels, tour guides, and also employees to help maintain and protect the protected land areas. Many career paths are also tourist oriented. A local shared that his daughter went to get a higher education in tourism management, and now she works at a resort at one of the beaches in Belize. Getting involved in careers that are centered around Belize’s ecotourism are very popular and very available to the people of Belize. Having enough people to work in this field helps support and maintain the very high flow of tourists coming into Belize, whether the ecotourists are there for a few nights stay, or visiting for a day from a cruise ship. The people of Belize can also benefit directly, by receiving tips from the ecotourists, or by the purchase of their homemade goods. There is a shopping center on the coast in Belize city that is very popular for cruise ships, where locals set up shops of their goods to sell to the tourists.

Ecotourists that come to Belize also don’t hurt the local environment at the expense of their visit, so this makes the situation largely beneficial, as this tourism isn’t going to end up being costly to Belize, only profitable. The money gained from ecotourists can go right to preserving and protecting wildlife, helping to preserve resources instead of deplete them. This can also create a culture in Belize where its native people will care more about the ecosystems, as it is a way for their country to make money, as well as provide many jobs at the ecotourism
sites. Having value in preserving these ecosystems to keep visitors coming will further keep the wildlife healthier and safer. It would help prevent Belize’s own people from destroying the ecosystems, since it is something of value to the country. This will help the people of Belize come together and fight for environmental justice in their country, as they are thriving off of ecotourism. It is a way to unify the people of Belize to stand together in protecting their land in order to keep up their business with ecotourists, as it is a way to upregulate their economy. This can help reduce pollution, litter, and illegal hunting of the protected species people come to Belize to see. So, ecotourism benefits not only the economy, but local protection of the land as well.

Ecotourism is also partly involved in saving species like the Scarlet Macaw. In the book titled “The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw: One Woman’s Fight to Save the World’s Most Beautiful Bird,” Bruce Barcott describes a village in Belize called Red Bank, and their experience with Scarlet Macaws. The people in Red Bank were eating the Macaws, whose population was already low. At this time, there became a demand in ecotourism for the sighting of these scarlet macaws. Once the people in the Red Bank village realized that profit could be made from ecotourists coming to see the Macaws, they were no longer considered a food source. They instead became a valuable resource and asset in benefiting from ecotourism, since people would pay to come into the village and observe the Macaws. Ecotourism can be thanked for saving this species, and can also be responsible for maintaining ecosystems where many species can safely live in today. During the trip to Belize, a motion activated camera in a protected area caught a jaguar on the road a few days prior to the visit. Jaguars are extremely rare to see, yet this animal felt safe enough to be on a road commonly travelled by people. It is a hope that
sightings like this may become more prominent as areas continue to be protected and wildlife continues to populate and become more comfortable as people become less of a threat.

Ecotourism can also benefit Belize in the long run. The money being funneled into their economy and protected areas can help sustain these areas for years to come. Through investing in protected areas and groups that help to maintain and protect them, such as Programme for Belize, it allows a solid base to be established that will hold steady for hopefully quite some time. Forming groups that fight for environmental justice and protecting ecosystems will unite people with a common cause to help fight for and promote the importance of keeping these areas protected. The members of these groups may then go out in their communities and advocate for this cause and keep it alive. This will then alert more people to the importance of protecting the land and wildlife, which they will pass on to their children and to further generations. It is important to promote this mindset because Belize relies heavily on ecotourists visiting and stimulating the economy. Economical benefits are important, but there are other benefits to sustaining this as well. If protected areas continue as they are and more protected areas are established, it is possible for the rare species to begin to breed more and populate the areas, perhaps bringing some species out of endangerment or at least bring them further from extinction. This would have to be done over a long period of time, so it is essential to look into sustainability and being able to maintain the protected areas in Belize in order to achieve this.
References


