

## **The Ethics and Politics of Defining Ecotourism: Not Just an Academic Question**

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### **Abstract**

*How ought ecotourism to be defined for the purpose of policy regulation? This question concerns ethics not just because whatever definition is adopted will have an ethical component expressing some normative view of what ecotourism should be but because it will certainly have an impact on various stakeholders – local communities, governments, environmentalists, tour operators, and tourists -- with an interest in, or concerns about, ecotourism. Defining ecotourism for policy purposes is a choice, and because that choice concerns values and engages the values and interests of many stakeholders it is an ethical and political choice. Our aim in this paper is not to add yet another answer to the question ‘What is ecotourism?’ but to clarify the nature of the question. Using conceptual analysis, we argue that the question, ‘what is ecotourism?’ is not one that can be answered descriptively by examining a phenomenon to determine its essential defining features.*

**Key words:** ecotourism; ethics; stakeholders; ecotourism policy

### **1. Introduction**

Over the past quarter century or so, ecotourism has grown to the point that, according to several authorities, “it is now widely considered the fastest growing sub-component” of tourism (Donohoe and Needham, 2006). It is a testament to the scope and importance of this industry that the United Nations proclaimed 2002 to be ‘The International Year of Ecotourism’ (UN, 2002). The growth of this industry has been rivalled by the growth of research and commentary on ecotourism in academic and non-academic publications. The International Year of Ecotourism was also the inaugural year of a scholarly academic journal devoted solely to ecotourism -- *The Journal of Ecotourism*. The academic literature is spread out across a wide variety of other journals in several different fields of study. This burgeoning literature was usefully reviewed by Weaver and Lawton (2007), who noted at the time that in the previous decade “at least 300 refereed English-language journal articles and an equally large number of books and book chapters have been contributed to the expanding ecotourism literature” (p.1175). This figure would be considerably higher if updated to include academic works published since then, and considerably higher yet if it included non-academic works in various trade and travel publications and on the web and the numerous studies and reports by various governmental and non-governmental agencies.

Notwithstanding the considerable growth of ecotourism, and of the research and certification infrastructures that have developed parallel to it, lack of agreement, and in some measure active disagreement, with respect to an embarrassingly fundamental question surrounds ecotourism in all of its aspects: what is ecotourism? For example, the claim noted at the opening of this paper that ecotourism is “the fastest growing sub-component” of tourism is open to dispute depending on how ecotourism is defined. De Vincente (2004, p.5) notes that a 2002 World Tourism Organization (WTO) study of US tourists found that growth is less than generally believed, and about the same as tourism in general. However, the experts he interviewed for his study all agreed that the proxy “definition used by [the] WTO is too narrow and that the ecotourism market is the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry” (de Vincente, 2005, p.5). The count of ecotourists that you get will depend on what you count as ecotourism.

As de Vincente (2004) notes, “The absence of [a] widely accepted definition of ecotourism has in turn led to a lack of both current and reliable statistics” ( p.4). Our aim in this paper is not to add yet another answer to the question ‘*What is ecotourism?*’ but rather to clarify the nature of the question. The question, we argue, is not one that can be answered in the manner that some definitional questions can be answered descriptively by examining a phenomenon to determine its essential defining features. In the case of ecotourism, such an approach is hopelessly circular because there is a lack of agreement about what the phenomenon to be defined is. Descriptive definitions that aspire to get at the essence of the thing are bound to differ depending the range of examples taken to count as instances of the thing to be defined; according to different definitions, different instances will be counted as instances of ecotourism.

The concept of ecotourism falls in the category of ‘essentially contested definitions’, which are not amenable to descriptive definition. To answer the question ‘what is ecotourism?’ is not to simply to say something about what *in fact* is counted as or called ecotourism but rather what, normatively speaking, *should be counted* or called ecotourism. The answer to this question matters not just for statistical purposes but also for policy purposes insofar as policy seeks to shape, manage and control the growing ecotourism industry by proclaiming normative standards of one sort or another -- regulatory or self-regulatory -- to which a given tourism operation must conform if it is legitimately to be counted or called ‘ecotourism’. Such normative standards will be used to discriminate legitimate or genuine ‘ecotourism’ (operations that meet the standards, and therefore deserve whatever benefits might come from being thus legitimated as ecotourism) and illegitimate or pseudo ‘ecotourism’ (operations that do not, and therefore do not deserve to derive benefit from being called or calling themselves ‘ecotourism’). Insofar as the question ‘what is ecotourism’ is linked to the development of policy standards, it is itself an ethical and indeed political question. To answer the question ‘what is ecotourism?’ is to go a good deal of the way to answering the question what should count as ecotourism for policy purposes. Ultimately, the definitional question is an ethical and indeed political question.

In this paper, we take a critical look at how the definitional issue has been approached in the academic literature, illustrating a tendency to approach this issue in such a way both as to privilege the normative views of academics and to occlude or obscure that it is an ethical and political question.<sup>1</sup> Laying out the ethics and politics of the question as clearly as possible is essential to deciding on a definition that is just and fair to all parties having a stake in emerging and contested ecotourism policy.

## **2. The Problem of Definition**

In the academic literature on ecotourism it is a commonplace that the meaning of the term is not settled, and it is almost *de rigeur* to allude to the problem of definition at least in passing on the way to whatever specific topic is at hand. Several articles contain sustained elaborations of the concept (e.g., Björk, 2002; Bottrill & Pearce, 1995; Fennel, 2001) and many more yet advance a definition. Indeed, there have been several articles that review the virtual deluge of definitions that flow through the literature (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Orams, 2001; Fenell, 2001; and Sirakaya, Sasidharan & Sönmez, 1999). In their review of definitions, Donohoe and Needham (2006) note that “25 years after the definition of ecotourism was first published and since the subsequent appearance of a plethora others, there remains little consensus among experts and a great deal of confusion about its meaning” (p.192). There may well be confusion, but we believe the situation would be better described as ‘contestation’. Ecotourism, we believe, is what Gallie (1956) called an ‘essentially contested concept’. Gallie identified several characteristics of essentially contested concepts, the most important of these being that the concept must “be *appraisive* in the sense that it signifies or accredits some valued achievement” (p.171). Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu (2006) usefully highlight this normative aspect as follows: “The strong normative valence associated with some concepts, often combined with other considerations, motivates users to strongly prefer a particular meaning. They may energetically defend their own usage, where others will contend that an alternative usage is correct – hence the idea of a contested concept” (p.212).

The reason essentially contested concepts are contested is because something hangs in the balance. How the concept is understood or defined will have normative implications as concerns matters subject to ethical or political dispute. People with differing ethical views will therefore tend to load the definition or understanding of the concept to lead it toward their preferred future. In the case of ecotourism, what is at issue is how ecotourism should be controlled and regulated.

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<sup>1</sup> We don’t wish to comment on how common this is in the literature; for present purposes we think it is enough to have illustrated this tendency by carefully and critically reading a paradigm case of it, leaving it to readers to decide for themselves how prevalent the tendency we identify is.

What rules and standards should regulate or govern the ecotourism industry? That is a squarely ethical, and indeed political question. The answer to this question requires a definition of ecotourism on the basis of which to stipulate what should be able to count itself or be counted, or market itself or be marketed, as ecotourism. Accordingly, definitions will be charged with “strong normative valence”. Much of the discussion about definition in the literature fails to recognize or acknowledge this fundamental dynamic. The problem of definition tends to be treated independently of the normative question, as if the definitional issue could be resolved in some ethically and politically neutral way and then plugged into the normative issue concerning policy.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, in the literature it is widely acknowledged in a limited sense that the definition of ecotourism is linked to normative policy. For example, noting the lack of consensus and certainty about a definition of ecotourism in his content analysis of definitions, Fennell (2001) rightly points out that the “principle implication of this uncertainty is the inability to instill meaning and control in the ecotourism industry” (p.404). In their study of definitions, Donohoe and Needham (2006) correctly note “that definition is the essential basis for policy development” (p.195). However, in neither case do the authors acknowledge that, in virtue of the significance of definition for normative policy, the question of what definition should be adopted for policy purposes is itself an ethical and political question. Donohoe and Needham (2006) specifically comment that “a re-examination of the definitional debate is required in order to facilitate contemporary ecotourism policy developments.” (p.195). However, they fail to acknowledge that, given the link between definition and normative policy, and that different policy rules, standards and regulations will pair with different definitions, any debate about definitions is bound to be a normative debate.

We grant also that there is widespread recognition in the literature that different definitions incorporate different normative perspectives. For example, Stewart and Sekartjakrarini (1994) distinguish two schools of thought as concerns the activity of ecotourism: “One is descriptive and investigates that which ecotourists actually do; the second school is normative and investigates that which ecotourists *should* do” (p.840). Given that different definitions will have different normative implications, and that to describe what ecotourists actually do presupposes that the researcher has at least implicitly adopted a definition in terms of which what he or she is describing counts as ecotourism, we are doubtful that a distinction between descriptive and normative approaches can be rigorously maintained. Regardless, if some definitions can be said to be descriptive in the sense that they are derived from observation about what tourists the researcher counts as ecotourists actually do or believe, we agree with Orams (2001) that “inherent in almost all definitions of ecotourism is the suggestion that ecotourism is attempting to ‘do the right thing’” (p.29).<sup>3</sup> However, while rightly recognizing that definitions tend to differ about precisely what the “right thing” to do is, Orams fails to recognize that if different definitions tend to incorporate normative elements, the problem of definition – of deciding what definition to adopt for policy purposes – is itself a normative problem.

### **3. The Role of Academics in Policy Debate?**

How ought ecotourism to be defined for the purpose of policy regulation? This question concerns ethics not just because whatever definition is adopted will have an ethical component expressing some normative view of what ecotourism should be but because it will certainly have an impact on various stakeholders – local communities, governments, environmentalists, tour operators, and tourists -- with an interest in, or concerns about, ecotourism. Defining ecotourism for policy purposes is a choice, and because that choice concerns values and engages the values and interests of many stakeholders it is an ethical and political choice. The challenge of ecotourism policy is to design an ethically and politically appropriate process for deciding what definition to operationalize. Who are the stakeholders and how should their interests and values be expressed in answering the definitional question as it pertains to developing policy and regulatory guidance? Academics with relevant expert knowledge can contribute to this political process in many ways, from describing and analyzing various practices counted as ecotourism to gauging the environmental and economic implications of various definitions. Expert knowledge of all sorts is relevant to the political process of deciding on a definition. However, academics cannot furnish a definition of ecotourism for policy purposes because arriving at a definition is not a matter for expert knowledge but for ethical and political debate. There can be no question of discovering or simply finding out what ecotourism is, as if were something to be known; this is something that must be decided.

<sup>2</sup> To be sure, some commentators clearly recognize the value-ladenness of the definitional question as concerns ecotourism. For example, Pforr (2001) writes: “Definitions are always a matter of perspective, interests, and values which ultimately lead to distinct and often conflicting perceptions of a complex and dynamic concept, such as ecotourism” (69).

<sup>3</sup> In their study of definitions, Donohoe and Needham (2006) also note that “an ethics-based approach to tourism” appears to be a “common core” of ecotourism (pp.193-194). However, like Orams (2001), in recognizing that ethical norms figure in various definitions they fail to recognize that for this reason the problem of definition is itself normative.

Academics working in this field will of course have their own values and beliefs about what ecotourism should be and how the industry should and should not develop. There are good reasons to worry about the tourism industry – perhaps even in collaboration with governments or local communities -- seeking to exploit or capitalize on the ethical feel-good association of the ‘eco’ in ecotourism without regard for shaping what is thus marketed so that the ‘eco’ feel-good is not illusory (Wight, 1993). However, precisely what shape ecotourism must have to justify the use of ‘eco’ and the benefit of the association with moral virtue – what essential features it must have or what standards it must conform to – is properly subject to ethical and political debate. The ethical views of academics on the definitional issue do not enjoy any special authority deriving from such authority as they may have in virtue of having expert knowledge. As concerns the ethical and political decision to be made about what should count as ecotourism, academics are at best one stakeholder group among others. Indeed, we have less claim to the decision than do stakeholders like local communities, governments, and tour operators – who will be directly impacted by the decision – and individuals and groups representing the interests of the environment by proxy.

Nonetheless, there is a tendency for academics to generalize such authority as they rightly have in matters of knowledge to matters that are properly the subject of ethical and political decision-making, and to gain illegitimate authority for their value judgements by presenting them as if they were matters of expert knowledge. In effect, this is to depoliticize what is essentially a political decision. It pre-empts what should rightfully be a political debate involving a broad range of stakeholders by surreptitiously treating the definitional issue as one to be settled by academics, privileging their values and partisan views under the cover of knowledge, science or expertise.<sup>4</sup> We will illustrate and elaborate this claim in a detailed analysis of the definitional problem as it is developed in the work of Donohoe and Needham (1996; 2008) and Donohoe and Lu (2009).

#### **4. Depoliticizing the Policy Decision**

Donohoe and Needham (2006) review the literature on approaches to defining and conceptualizing tourism and supplement this with their own content analysis of thirty “academic definitions of ecotourism” and twelve “supply side” definitions” (p.198). They find variation in the academic sample, but also significant repetition. From this sample, they identify “a set of six distinct themes”, listed as follows according to the frequency with which they recur: ‘nature-based’; ‘preservation/conservation’; ‘education’; ‘sustainability’; ‘distribution of benefits’; and ‘ethics/responsibility’. These themes range in frequency from eighty to fifty per cent. Buttressing this data with findings and opinion from other academic works, they conclude that “we appear to be moving towards definitional consensus” (p. 206).<sup>5</sup> There are numerous methodological issues one might quarrel about here. What frequency of mention is high enough to claim consensus? Is fifty per cent enough? Is eighty? Moreover, these percentages concern the mention of these themes individually; the percent of definitions that mention all six themes would be considerably lower. Additionally, one could question whether consensus is the correct word to describe such repetition as might occur across definitions in the sample, given that this represents at best passive agreement noted by the researcher rather than some active agreement reached through a dialogical process of coming to agreement.

More importantly, even if one hundred per cent of this sample agreed on all six themes identified, and came to this agreement through a process of dialogue, this would be at best *the consensus of a sample of academics about how ecotourism should be defined*. What authority or normative force would and should the ethical views of even a unanimously agreed sample of academics have as concerns resolution of the definitional issue for the purpose of setting ecotourism policy? Donohoe and Needham (2006) appear to give this sample not just considerable weight but also normative authority and force. From this sample, and supported by their reading of the academic literature, they assert that “it becomes clear that a set of evolving themes may be considered central to the ecotourism concept” (p.204). This categorical assertion would have greater plausibility if they limited it by adding some such qualification as “according to the views of academics whose definitions we sampled, and buttressed by the finding and opinions of others who have written on the definitional issue”. Such a qualification would more precisely capture the empirical data they report; absent this qualification the ‘centrality’ of these themes to the ecotourism concept comes across as being more generalized and normatively weightier than justified by the limited sample.

<sup>4</sup> Hawkins, Chang and Warnes (2009) have a useful discussion of stakeholder theory as it applies to sustainable tourism (esp. p. 75). It should be noted that the ‘experts’ whose ratings of World Heritage sites are compared with those of local stakeholders in their do in fact have appropriate expertise relevant to the rating they are asked to undertake. The situation is quite different as concerns the views of experts on policy questions, in which case it is their ethical beliefs, and not their expertise knowledge, that is being brought to bear.

<sup>5</sup> They conclude this notwithstanding their claim at the beginning of the paper, already quoted, that “there remains little consensus among experts and a great deal of confusion, about its meaning” (p. 192). Presumably, they believe that their study has moved the situation from “little consensus” to “approaching consensus”?

As Donohoe and Needham (2006) develop their analysis, they inch their limited empirical findings toward authoritative normative status, almost imperceptibly crossing the line that divides empirical knowledge or science and ethical or political value judgment. Having at best answered the question the empirical question “what do academics believe should be counted as the defining features of ecotourism?”, they slide the answer to this question into the answer to the qualitatively different question “what should be counted for policy purposes as the defining features of ecotourism?”, which is not an empirical question at all but a policy question. The “themes” they identified through empirical analysis go from being “central” to being “the essence of the ecotourism definition”, and morph from being “themes” to “key ecotourism tenets”: “In fact, these six themes may be considered the essence of the ecotourism definition and as such, they are introduced here as key ecotourism tenets” (p. 204). Later in the paper, having morphed from “themes” to “tenets”, they become “normative tenets” (p. 205). What occurs in and throughout this analysis is that the authors move from describing their findings from the literature -- arguably a legitimate move for academics with competence or expertise in content analysis -- to propagating “tenets” that are normative not just in the sense that they express the ethical views of some sample about what ecotourism should be but in the sense of being in some sense authoritative.

That the authors themselves are promoting, and not just reporting, these tenets is obvious from the use to which they put them. These tenets, which at best represent the ethical views of a more or less representative sample of academics, are presented as the “theoretical” underpinning of the concept, giving them an aura of authority, as if the decision about what the normative tenets of ecotourism should be were a theoretical question, presumably to be resolved by academic theorists. Thus promoted, the authors use these tenets to “evaluate” supply-side definitions. Not surprisingly, they find that “the concept is being operationalized in such a way that what is occurring in the field may not accurately reflect the concept’s theoretical underpinning” (p. 193).<sup>6</sup> They worry that ecotourism is “manifesting itself as one thing in theory – another in practice” (p. 193). As they approach their conclusion, these worries are stated more forcefully and as if the normative force of these tenets were settled: “These tenets are disregarded, perverted or manipulated in application, thereby threatening the legitimacy of the industry” (p. 206). They caution that “the tourism industry should be careful not to allow the ecotourism sector to be corrupted by ‘pseudo’ ecotourism providers who do not apply the fundamental principles” (p. 207), referring of course to the tenets they have advanced.<sup>7</sup> The link with theory thus adds legitimacy to the academic sample’s ethical views about what ecotourism should be, and correspondingly devalues the ethical views of those who are operationalizing ecotourism in “practice”.

The obvious question in all of this is what justifies Donohoe and Needham, in comparing the academic sample of definitions with the supply-side sample, in treating the tenets they derive from the academic sample as being authoritative and properly normative, using them to evaluate the supply-side definitions? Why should the academic sample be privileged in this way? After all, the definitions in both samples contain norms and are normative in that minimal sense. However, the authors treat the academic sample as being normative in a stronger sense, as having some greater legitimacy or authority. Donohoe and Needham (2006) clearly recognize the importance of definition for policy. They note that “principles and definitions are the articulated foundations of policy and they must act as such when constructing operational systems sensitive to standards, regulations and guidelines” (p. 206). That is so. The important question is what those tenets should be. They answer this question, or rather pre-empt it from being asked as a properly political question, by putting forward the ‘tenets’ they claim to have derived from their study.<sup>8</sup> These “key tenets”, they assert “should (ideally) become the fundamental roots of ecotourism applications (p. 206). They repeat this in their conclusion, saying that “The key tenets introduced in this paper provide a framework for definition and the evolution of such controls and standards” (p. 207). Believing the definitional issue to have been settled, the problem reduces to one of implementation: “The challenge then becomes implementing and monitoring these tenets in practice” (p. 207). This entirely sidesteps the political issue: the key challenge is not implementing their tenets but rather coming to agreement about what the tenets should be.

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<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that the relatively greater weight given to ‘enjoyment/experience’ in the supply side sample compared with the academic sample is treated as if it were a deficiency. We expect that their value judgment about the importance of this ‘theme’ would not be shared by potential ecotourists, who we think would be quite pleased to know that tour operators considered it important to factor their ‘enjoyment/experience’ when designing ecotours.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that in their content analysis of definitions Sirakaya, Sasidharan and Sönmez (1999) found that academic and supply side definitions were for the most part congruent.

<sup>8</sup> To be sure, Donohoe and Needham (2006) do say that “In no way does the presentation of key tenets for ecotourism negate the fact that this concept continues to evolve in the literature and in application” (p. 206). Nonetheless, these “key tenets” are asserted with considerably less modesty throughout the paper, by the end of which the cement has dried and these key tenets are considered to be virtually established and ready to go for the purpose of setting policy.



The tenets derived from their academic sample are further solidified in a follow-up paper in which they use them to evaluate a Canadian sample of internet-based ecotourism provider marketing. (Donohoe & Needham, 2008). In this paper they are referred to as “established ecotourism tenets”, which conveys not just a sense of greater solidity but also added normative legitimacy. In one place, they qualify what they mean by “established”, referring to “The six ecotourism tenets *established at an earlier research stage*” (p. 29, italics added). However, in other places they omit this important qualification, stating their aim as being “to evaluate the congruency of internet-based marketing with established ecotourism tenets” (p. 25). They conclude from their evaluation that “the Canadian sample of internet-based ecotourism provider marketing is only partially congruent with established ecotourism tenets” (p. 32). The use of the term “established”, especially when its meaning is not qualified, makes the tenets sound more solid and normatively authoritative than warranted and obscures the fact that, at root and at best, they express the ethical norms identified in their academic sample.

Moreover, these tenets, which certainly express norms, are themselves labelled “normative” as Donohoe and Needham (2008) distinguish “normative [based on the “established tenets”] and “operational ecotourism”, using the former to evaluate the latter (p. 34).<sup>9</sup> With these tenets now having the additional merit of being “established”, the authors are bolder in this evaluation. In one place, they speak somewhat cautiously and modestly in this evaluation: “If ‘genuine ecotourism’ is qualified by provider sensitivity to all six tenets, then the majority (60%) of the Canadian sample does not meet the criteria” (p. 34). The use of scare quotes around ‘genuine ecotourism’ and the inclusion of the ‘if’ express a modesty about these tenets and any conclusions that might be drawn by assuming and employing them for evaluative purposes. However, later in the paper, expressing the same statistic in positive form, they drop the scare quotes and drop the ‘if’, categorically and without qualification reporting that: “40% qualify as genuine ecotourism” (p. 35). They categorically assert, without qualification, that “pseudo-ecotourism was observed in all of Canada’s natural regions”, confident enough about the “established tenets” to demarcate “pseudo-ecotourism” from “genuine ecotourism” (p. 37). By the end of the paper, they boldly claim of their evaluative framework that “Its applicability as an evaluative tool for gauging provider congruency with ecotourism tenets and goals is demonstrated” (p. 38), a conclusion that should surely be moderated by qualifying “ecotourism tenets” to indicate that the mentioned tenets are of course the ones that they have derived from their empirical analysis of academic definitions, representing at best the recurrence of common themes across fifty to eighty per cent of them.

Indeed, Donohoe and Needham (2008) are confident enough about the normative legitimacy of these tenets that they believe they should be adopted for policy purposes: “there is an escalating need for ecotourism standards, for which ecotourism tenets and the ecotourism continuum should serve as a strong and explicit reference” (p. 37). They propose that “Progress in this direction should be considered the next logical step for ecotourism” (p. 37). This would complete the movement begun in the 2006 paper from definition to standard setting, as these tenets would morph into policy standards, or at least serve as a “strong and explicit reference” for developing such. The authors intend an obvious sequence here, but there is nothing logical about this “next step” given that it depends on accepting as “established” tenets that, to say the least, are dubious and do not enjoy the legitimacy of having been worked through in a proper policy development process. In a subsequent paper with another colleague (Donohoe and Lu, 2009), Donohoe inches these tenets further toward normative legitimacy, barely hesitating at the threshold of claiming for them the status of being “universal tenets”. They claim that their research and that of others “implies that we have achieved near consensus; that is, a universal understanding of ecotourism and its core tenets” (p. 358).

Based on a content analysis of a sample of Chinese definitions, they find congruency with the tenets they derived from their initial sample and with general ecotourism discourse sufficient to make the modest claim that “it is possible to infer that ecotourism in China is defined in much the same way as it is in other nations and contexts” (p. 367). Less cautiously, they go on to add: “Consequently, the findings of this study support Fennell’s (2001), Weaver’s (2005) and Donohoe and Needham’s (2006) claim that we are moving towards definitional consensus or a universal understanding of ecotourism” (p. 367). By the end of the paper, this ‘movement’ seems to have advanced to the point of having arrived as the authors assert that “universal tenets serve as a strong reference standard for the operationalization of ecotourism and the delivery of sustainable outcomes” (p. 370). In addition to finding congruence between the Chinese definitional sample and their own, they also find considerable incongruence. However, whereas in Donohoe and Needham’s 2006 study such incongruence was taken as some kind of deficiency in the non-academic sample, (which was assumed as normative),

<sup>9</sup> They also use the same theory/practice frame they used in their 2006 paper: “The approach used here to evaluate ecotourism serves to illustrate incongruity between ecotourism theory and practice” (p. 37). The use of this distinction here is no less dubious.

in this case they are respectful of the difference, supposing it to be a function of different cultural norms.<sup>10</sup> In view of this, they pose the question “Can western-derived tenets serve as a strong explicit framework for ecotourism in China? Should they?” (p. 369). There are of course important cultural issues to be addressed and factored in developing ecotourism policy, and respect for cultural difference must surely be an important principle in any policy process. However, the problem with using the key tenets they propose for developing ecotourism policy is not so much that they are “western”. Being derived as they are from a limited academic sample, they cannot be said to represent “western-thinking” in any meaningful way. The problem, rather, is that they lack political legitimacy, in the West as well as in the East, assigned by the authors an important political role but not having been developed and ratified in a proper political process.

Donohoe and Lu (2009) also find considerable lack of agreement among the Chinese definitions they review. In “the absence of a common ecotourism definition in China”, they write, “it becomes imperative that ecotourism planners and policy-makers proceed with caution, seeking guidance from the evolving expertise in this domain” (p. 362). Indeed, ecotourism planners and policy-makers, in China or elsewhere, should proceed with caution; we would caution them to take such policy “guidance” as might be offered “from the evolving expertise in this domain” with a grain of salt, recognizing that the definitional issue is essentially a political issue, and that whatever expertise experts may have in research methods and such they do not have any special authority concerning policy, including the policy decision of deciding how ecotourism should be defined for policy purposes!

## **5. Conclusion**

Having reviewed the line of analysis provided in Donohoe and Needham (2006) and traced its development, let us be clear about what we think the problem is. It is not that we take issue with the content as such of the themes or key tenets that have been proposed (although as a matter of fact we would not endorse them). The concern rather is with how a set of themes identified from a limited sample of academic definitions morph into normative tenets and are spoken of as if having some normative legitimacy or authority for the purpose of guiding ecotourism policy that is unwarranted. When academics express their ethical views about what ecotourism should be, in definitions or otherwise, they are not functioning as experts but in effect as partisans in what should be a policy debate.

From the beginning, Donohoe and Needham clearly appreciate, in a certain sense at least, the link between definition and policy development. In their 2006 paper, they write: “The research motivation is based on a broader agenda that seeks to examine the links between definition and quality standards for ecotourism (policy development)” (p. 195). However, this “motivation” and “broader agenda” goes considerably beyond merely ‘examining the links’ as they seek to have the value laden definition they propose – based at best on the ethical views of a sample (or even sub-set of a sample) of academics about what ecotourism should be -- serve as the basis for policy development. “With definitional maturity established”, they go on to add “researchers can then explore the processes and procedures for standards and quality assurance programs finely tuned to the needs of ecotourism”. It is not clear what they mean here by “definitional maturity” but it needs to be pointed out that settling upon or establishing a definition of ecotourism for the purpose of setting ecotourism policy is not a job for researchers or experts. This would be to give researchers a role in the policy process that goes far beyond their expertise. For policy purposes, a definition of ecotourism indeed needs to be settled upon, but this is a normative decision that by right and as a matter of justice belongs to the stakeholders.

Donohoe and Needham express their agenda quite clearly in their 2006 paper in listing a series of stages for the development of ecotourism policy. Stage 1 is “to establish a strong working definition for ecotourism and its fundamental tenets”; stage 2 is to “establish an ecotourism policy statement that links these fundamental tenets to other normative, strategic and operational policies” (p. 196). The staging sequence seems right, but Needham and Donohoe fail to recognize and appreciate that, given the political importance of stage 1 for stage 2 it cannot legitimately be undertaken as if it were a politically neutral stage that could be completed by plugging in the results of an empirical content analysis expressing at best the ethical views of academics/experts. The definition expressed in stage 1 is bound to reflect ethical views about what ecotourism should be, and likewise of what the policy standards in stage 2 should be. Such ethical views as this or that set of academics may hold about these matters are not views that they hold in virtue of their expertise in this or that knowledge domain but rather as citizens or human beings in general,

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<sup>10</sup> For example, “enjoyment/experience” was a top ranking theme (p.367) in the Chinese sample but not in the 2006 academic sample. Consequently, it did not acquire the status of becoming designated as a “key ecotourism tenet”. It was, however, a top-ranking theme in the 2006 supply side sample, but in that case its incongruence was taken as a deficiency, judged against the “key tenets” taken and applied normatively.

and in the matter of policy their views have no greater weight or authority than that of others citizens or human beings, and considerably less than stakeholders who will be directly impacted by policy decisions.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in the inflationary process of morphing the recurrent themes they identified from a limited academic sample of dubious normative validity into “normative ecotourism tenets” approaching the status of universal tenets, and but a blessing away from becoming policy standards, Donohoe, Needham and Lu generalize such authority as they properly have as academics beyond the bounds of legitimacy and in effect depoliticize a decision that is properly the subject of political debate among stakeholders.

In their 2006 study, Donohoe and Needham mention Wallace and Pierce’s (1996) proposed principles for ecotourism, which include “democratization” glossed as “participation of all stakeholders in decision-making” (p. 194). Whether democratization should be considered an essential component of ecotourism is open to debate. However, its essentiality for policy development is much less contentious. Given the centrality of choosing an ecotourism definition for the purposes of making policy and setting standards for ecotourism, deciding on a definition is an ethical and political decision. As such it is not one that falls legitimately within the expertise and role of academics. For academics to assume the role of providing such a definition ready-made for policy purposes as if their preferred definition were somehow non-partisan and legitimated by their specific expertise is not just to overstep and overstate their proper but limited academic role as it relates to matters of policy debate but to abuse the rightful authority and prestige they have as academics. Moreover, it is to depoliticize the policy issue and in effect disenfranchise stakeholders with respect to a crucial ecotourism policy decision. By clarifying the nature of the question ‘what is ecotourism?’ as it relates to ecotourism policy, and by delimiting the role of academics and experts in answering this question, we hope that we have freed and opened this question up for a more fair and just policy debate.

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<sup>11</sup> Donohoe and Needham (2006) write: “Study findings should provide much needed guidance for government, industry and / or researchers who may be developing tourism management plans, research projects, codes of ethics, definitions, standards or other ecotourism related advancements” (p. 196). The problem is that an empirical study such as the one they have undertaken can not possibly provide “guidance” with respect to what ultimately is a political and not a research question.