

Balancing Conservation and Commerce: The Role of Eco-Tourism in Promoting Animal Welfare and Sustainable Economic Growth

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Abstract

Tourism is a major driver of global economic growth. Yet, conventional practices often impose significant costs on wildlife and ecosystems, including animal exploitation, habitat degradation, and short-term profit-driven decision-making. These consequences represent classic negative externalities, where the environmental and social costs are not reflected in market prices. This paper examines the potential of eco-tourism to reconcile economic objectives with the ethical treatment of animals and environmental sustainability. It explores regulatory approaches, such as banning harmful attractions, imposing environmental taxes, and supporting conservation-focused enterprises, alongside international frameworks like CITES and UNESCO. Local-level strategies, including eco-certification, tourist education, and community involvement, are also evaluated for their effectiveness in promoting responsible tourism. Real-world examples, including Thailand's elephant sanctuaries, Costa Rica's biodiversity-based tourism, and Kenya's conservation safaris, illustrate that eco-tourism can simultaneously generate economic benefits and protect wildlife. While challenges such as weak enforcement and greenwashing persist, coordinated efforts among stakeholders demonstrate that sustainable tourism is achievable.

Keywords: eco-tourism, animal welfare, sustainable tourism, conservation, economic growth

Introduction

Can eco-tourism really deliver the best of both worlds: thriving economies and thriving wildlife?

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors for economic growth, serving as a critical pillar for developing nations by reinforcing GDP, creating employment opportunities, and spurring local investment (OECD, 2024). In 2024, the global travel and tourism division contributed USD 10.9 trillion to the US economy, accounting for approximately 10% of global GDP and supporting around 357 million jobs (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2024). In nations such as Thailand, Indonesia, and India, tourism contributes significantly to national income. In parts of Africa, wildlife-based tourism is part of an economic strategy, generating billions in revenue while creating employment opportunities for locals (Herre & Samborska, 2023). These statistics highlight the hand-in-hand roles of tourism in economic growth, social interaction, and infrastructure growth.

Yet, beneath these headlines of success lies a darker reality: in pursuit of tourist attraction and satisfaction, exploitative wildlife attractions. Some examples, such as elephant rides, tiger petting, and dolphin shows, remain popular and universal. At present, approximately 550,000 wild animals are exploited to entertain

tourists worldwide (World Animal Protection, 2019). While these grab the attention of visitors and generate income, these activities reflect animal suffering, increased biodiversity loss, and ruin countries' reputations - all costs that are seldom reflected in the market price of tourism. In response, ecotourism has emerged as a promising sustainable alternative, seeking to balance economic growth with environmental stewardship. It highlights low-impact, conservation-focused travel that protects wildlife while providing financial benefits to local communities. This paper, therefore, aims to answer the following question: **“To what extent can ecotourism provide a sustainable balance between tourism-driven economic growth and animal welfare?”**

The paper argues that although exploitative wildlife tourism exists, driven by economic incentives and market failures, eco-tourism offers a reliable path moving forward. However,

getting that balance right critically depends on adequate institutional support, strict policies, and community engagement.

Background and Problem Statement

Tourism has become one of the most important drivers of economic growth globally. In many developing countries, the stakes are even higher. For example, tourism is one of the most significant sources of foreign exchange and jobs in Namibia; Thailand's ecotourism market in Asia was valued at approximately USD 1,380.54 million in 2024 and by 2033, it is expected to be worth about USD 3,668.35 million, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of about 11.47% (IMARC, 2024); wildlife-based tourism accounts for about 10.5% of Kenya's GDP, a significant share of the country's economy.

However, many of these economic benefits of tourism are enabled by exploitative practices that are life-threatening for animals. Some of the most common ones are:

Elephant rides and shows: Elephants that tourists ride often go through early training as babies, called "the crush." This training may include physical beatings, deprivation, and isolation to break their spirit and make them obedient. After this, they have to carry heavy howdahs (seats), work for long periods, and be chained even when resting. This causes them to get pressure sores, damage their spines, and many times they become dehydrated, tired, and malnourished (National Geographic, 2016).

Marine mammal parks and captivity: Dolphins and orcas are often kept in tanks that are very small compared to their natural habitats. These conditions lead to serious health and behavioural issues, such as higher stress, aggression, and immune system problems, which significantly shorten their lives. As per data, 52.26% of bottlenose dolphins born in captivity do not survive past one year (Williamson, 2018).

Tiger petting and interactions with wild cats: A study analyzing 49 lion-cub petting videos found that 61% of the cubs were under 3 months old (Chorney et al., 2022). This indicates that many of these animals are separated from their mothers almost immediately after birth and are subjected to interactions with numerous humans daily. Such forced contact often results in significant stress, with avoidance and aggression being two of the most

commonly observed behaviors. Similarly, white tigers are frequently inbred for exhibition purposes, which leads to a range of genetic and health problems, including skeletal deformities such as scoliosis, compromised immune function, and elevated neonatal mortality.

From an economic perspective, the exploitation of animals for tourism represents a classic case of negative externalities, i.e., costs that are not reflected in the price of the service, whether in production or consumption. Tourists pay for rides, shows, or direct interactions with animals for personal enjoyment, often without accounting for the substantial costs imposed on the animals, biodiversity, ecosystems, or the risk of species extinction. On the production side, operators of elephant camps, tiger selfie zones, or dolphin aquariums frequently rely on abusive training practices, confine animals to inadequate spaces, and capture wild animals in ways that harm both the creatures and their environments. These impacts, ranging from ecological degradation to declining animal health, are external to the operators' costs and are rarely accounted for in their pricing. Moreover, overexploitation can damage habitats, spread diseases, and threaten species survival, which, in turn, undermines the very natural assets that attract tourists, jeopardizing the sustainability of wildlife tourism itself.

Even though people are becoming more aware of how cruel it is to use animals in tourism, attractions that exploit animals, such as elephant rides, tiger petting, and dolphin shows, are still thriving. The main reason for this is that the money comes in quickly and in large amounts – tourists are willing to pay a lot to get up close and personal with wild animals, which helps local economies. Governments also raise revenue through taxes and permit fees, so wildlife tourism is a major source of income for them, especially in developing countries such as Thailand, India, Indonesia, and Kenya. Even in places where laws against such practices are imposed, the punishments are minor and rarely enforced.

Eco-Tourism as a Sustainable Approach

Eco tourism is a type of responsible travel that focuses on visiting natural areas while also protecting the environment and helping local communities. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (2015) says that eco-tourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that protects the environment, supports the health of local people, and includes learning and interpretation." This definition emphasises three important objectives: preservation, community advantage, and instruction. Eco-tourism seeks to balance enjoying nature's beauty with protecting it for future generations, in contrast to exploitative tourism, which harms animals and ecosystems for quick profit.

People think that eco-tourism can help with the problems that traditional wildlife tourism causes, such as animal abuse, habitat destruction, and short-term thinking about money. These are the costs that aren't obvious but still hurt the environment and society. Eco-tourism seeks to incorporate these costs into its business model through ethical practices. People who care about animals and the environment are often willing to pay more for experiences that don't hurt or bother animals and are respectful of nature. This makes it possible for conservation to make money.

Thailand is an excellent example of how eco-tourism can replace bad habits. For a long time, elephant tourism in Thailand used cruel training methods and forced performances. But places like the Sappraiwat Elephant Sanctuary in Phitsanulok have come up with a more moral way to do things. This sanctuary saves elephants from abuse and gives them a place to live in the wild. Visitors can see the elephants from a distance and learn

about how they behave in the wild, but they can't ride or bathe them (Thunn, 2023). This shows that the sanctuary cares more about teaching people about animals and respecting their space than just entertaining them. This model has become more popular, but it still has some problems. Some places say they are ethical when they really let harmful things happen. This is called "greenwashing," and it can trick tourists who want to make smart choices.

Costa Rica is another country that has made eco-tourism the primary focus of its tourism industry. Costa Rica receives millions of visitors every year because it has a wide range of plants and animals and protected areas. People come to see rainforests, volcanoes, and animals like sloths, toucans, and monkeys. Researchers from Utah State University and the University of Georgia say that Costa Rica's ecotourism functions as a social-ecological system (Gallaher, 2017). The locals guide tours and work to protect the environment, helping them earn money while doing good. This has made Costa Rica one of the most eco-friendly countries in the world. But there are still worries here. As eco-tourism grows, some places become too crowded, and demand for natural resources increases. Also, not everyone follows the strict rules for eco-tourism, which can lead to the term being misused.

Kenya is another excellent example of eco-tourism, especially for its wildlife safaris. Tourists can see elephants, lions, giraffes, and many other animals in their natural habitats in the country's national parks and game reserves. Kenya has changed its focus from hunting and exploitation to conservation-based tourism over the last few years. This country has seen long-term economic benefits from protecting animals and their homes; their safaris generate revenue, create jobs, and encourage investment in conservation. According to research from Kenyatta University, wildlife viewing has become a major source of income for Kenya. Protecting species like lions and elephants has also helped the country remain one of the best places to go on safari (Akama et al., 2011). That being said, some places still face poaching, land disputes, and unfair sharing of tourism revenue.

All of these examples show that eco-tourism can be successful if done right. It helps the environment, helps the people who live there, and gives tourists an experience they will never forget. But it's still not perfect; greenwashing, too many people, and unfair practices could ruin these benefits and cause more problems. For eco-tourism to work, there needs to be clear rules, honest businesses, and tourists who want to make choices that are good for the environment.

Eco-tourism is not just a trend; it is a responsible way to travel. It shows that we can protect nature and help people at the same time, and learn more about the animals and habitats around us. If more countries do this, eco-tourism could become a strong way to make money while helping the planet.

Policy and Strategic Interventions for Sustainable Animal-Based Tourism

Many businesses prioritize profit over animal welfare and ecological protection, resulting in practices that harm both animals and their habitats. Such outcomes represent a form of market failure in which the true social and environmental costs of tourism are not reflected in the market. In these cases, government intervention through regulatory policies and incentives is necessary to integrate ecotourism principles and offer opportunities for tourists to engage with wildlife in ways that are both ethical and environmentally sustainable.

Governments can take several measures to address these challenges. Prohibiting activities such as elephant rides and animal shows, which may appear entertaining to tourists but often involve cruelty, is one approach. Additionally, imposing taxes on environmentally harmful businesses and reallocating these funds as subsidies to conservation-friendly initiatives, such as wildlife sanctuaries, can encourage responsible practices and support sustainable tourism enterprises.

International frameworks also play an important role in protecting animals and ecosystems. For instance, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) regulates the trade of endangered wildlife (CITES, 2025), while UNESCO's designation of World Heritage Sites draws attention and funding toward the preservation of ecologically and culturally significant locations (UNESCO, 2023).

At the local level, certification programs can help identify environmentally responsible tour operators and educate tourists on making informed, ethical choices, mitigating the risk of "greenwashing." Public awareness campaigns and informational initiatives further empower tourists to consider the social and ecological impacts of their decisions, fostering greater support for sustainable tourism practices.

Engaging local communities in ecotourism provides additional benefits. Offering employment opportunities as guides, lodge operators, or wildlife educators incentivizes local populations to protect and preserve natural resources, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between communities and conservation efforts.

However, the effectiveness of these policies is not guaranteed. In some regions, weak enforcement or corruption allows exploitative practices to persist. Moreover, the continued demand among some tourists for close interactions with wild animals perpetuates harmful businesses. When supported by strong governance, international cooperation, and responsible consumer behavior, however, ecotourism has the potential to advance both conservation goals and sustainable economic development.

Conclusion

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries globally, contributing to economic growth, job creation, and investment opportunities. However, conventional tourism practices can have severe negative consequences for wildlife and ecosystems, including animal abuse, habitat destruction, and the prioritization of short-term profit over long-term sustainability. These impacts represent classic negative externalities, where the social and environmental costs of tourism are not reflected in market prices.

The findings of this study suggest that eco-tourism can provide a sustainable balance between economic growth and animal welfare when guided by appropriate policies and practices. Regulatory interventions, such as banning cruel animal attractions, taxing environmentally harmful businesses, and supporting conservation-focused enterprises, are critical. International frameworks like CITES and UNESCO, along with local initiatives such as eco-certification, tourist education, and community engagement, further reinforce ethical practices. Involving local communities in eco-tourism, through employment as guides, lodge operators, or educators, creates incentives to protect wildlife while generating economic benefits.

Despite challenges such as corruption, weak enforcement, tourist demand for exploitative attractions, and greenwashing, real-world examples demonstrate the potential of eco-tourism. Thailand's elephant sanctuaries,

Costa Rica's biodiversity-focused tourism, and Kenya's conservation safaris illustrate that ethical tourism can be both profitable and sustainable.

In conclusion, while eco-tourism is not without limitations, it represents a viable strategy for achieving a balance between tourism-driven economic growth and the protection of animal welfare. Its success depends on coordinated efforts among governments, communities, and tourists, as well as the continued development of policies and practices that prioritize sustainability. With responsible management, eco-tourism can ensure that both natural ecosystems and economic benefits are preserved for future generations.

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