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Universal Tenets or Diametrical Differences? An Analysis of Ecotourism Definitions from China and Abroad

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been increasing attention afforded ecotourism development in China. However, a national ecotourism framework has yet to emerge. This has forced planners, managers, policy-makers and researchers to look abroad for guidance. And, this raises sensitivity concerns related to Chinese cultural values, perspectives, and expectations regarding nature-based tourism experiences. This study analyzes contemporary Chinese ecotourism definitions with the objective to identify a set of common definitional themes. These themes are then compared to a set of ecotourism tenets established through antecedent analysis of definitions from abroad. A discussion of universal tenets, cultural values, diametrical differences, and the achievement of sustainable ecotourism ensues. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Received 9 May 2008; Revised 29 August 2008; Accepted 18 September 2008

Keywords: China; content analysis; ecotourism; key tenets.

BACKGROUND

Since its popular inception, ecotourism has become a global phenomenon (Hawkins and Lamoureux, 2001; Fennell, 2003). This tourism activity has been envisaged as an

exemplar of sustainable development; a means for facilitating and enabling environmental, socio-cultural and economic integrity (Blamey, 2001; Vivanco, 2002). Ecotourism popularity is, therefore, due in part to its operational goal to bridge the conservation — development nexus and deliver a range of benefits (Wight, 1993; Lindberg *et al.*, 1997; Weaver, 2005). Benefits commonly associated with ecotourism are summarised by Stone and Wall (2004, 2005) and include such outcomes as high-quality tourism experiences, generation of funds for natural area conservation, improved quality of life, promotion of cultural preservation, enhanced environmental awareness, infrastructure improvements and economic development. As a result of these laudable benefits, international support for ecotourism is growing. It manifests in tangible ways such as policy developments, formal endorsements, research agendas and consumer interest. The legitimisation of ecotourism by the United Nations (UN) through the designation of the International Year of Ecotourism (2002), the creation of an International Ecotourism Society, the development of an International ecotourism certification standard (Green Globe 21), the publication of the *Journal of Ecotourism*, and the explicit establishment of ecotourism on the agendas of international organisations such as the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2008) and the World Travel and Tourism Council are testament to the internationalisation of ecotourism.

With growing global interest in ecotourism, a plethora of ecotourism definitions and operational ideologies have emerged. Recent examinations of the definitional discourse reveal a set of ecotourism tenets that capture the ethics and principles for which ecotourism is commonly understood (Björk, 2000; Blamey, 2001;

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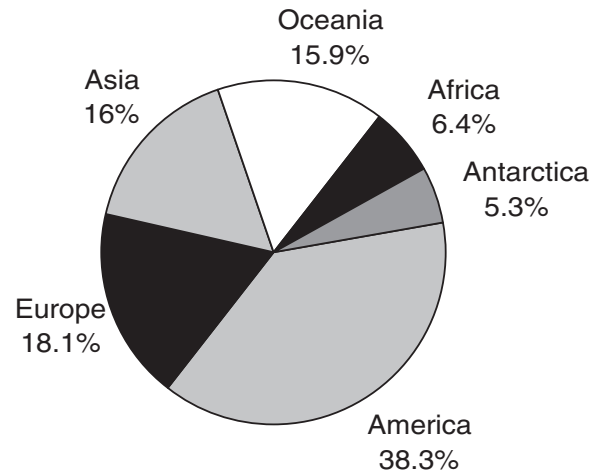
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Fennell, 2001; Weaver, 2005; Donohoe and Needham, 2006). This research implies that we have achieved near consensus; that is, a universal understanding of ecotourism and its core tenets (Weaver and Lawton, 2007).

Conversely, researchers contend that the dissemination of tourism knowledge is influenced by social and political forces; that it is generally one-way — from developed countries of dominant language to others (Kobasic, 1996; Hall and Page, 2002; Humberstone, 2004; Tribe, 2004; Nyiri and Breidenbach, 2005). They suggest that prevailing tourism discourses show evidence of 'seeing' only through the 'lenses' shaped by the characteristics of neo-colonialism and imperialistic knowledge production systems. In the case of ecotourism, the literature contends that ecotourism is rooted in and is greatly influenced by western ideology and values (Fennell, 2003; Cater, 2006). Lending credence to this contention is Backman and Morais's (2001) study of the geographical distribution of ecotourism research foci and researcher location. Their study finds that much of the current ecotourism research is focused on and originates in 'western' locations such as the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK (Figures 1 and 2). Despite the now global reach of ecotourism, Backman and Morais concede that much of the knowledge regarding ecotourism originates in more developed countries. And, in less developed countries such as Brazil, China, Indonesia and Kenya where ecotourism activities are accelerating, a noteworthy knowledge void is evident. Weaver and Lawton (2007, p. 1175) describe a 'deep North-South divide' as a contemporary ecotourism research 'macro-theme'. To proactively address this state of imbalance, it is recommended that an interdisciplinary approach be assumed, that the integration and continuity of research in neglected thematic and geographic areas be supported, and that the involvement of both academic and non-academic communities in the mobilisation and translation of ecotourism knowledge be encouraged.

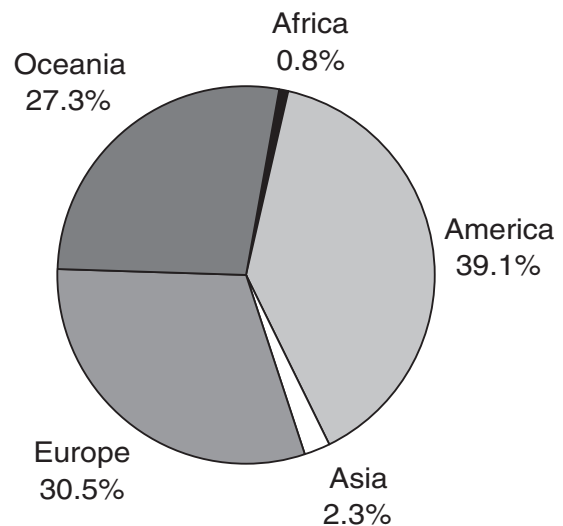
The work of Backman and Morais (2001) as well as the work of Carrier and Macleod (2005), Cater (2006) de la Barre (2005), Edwards *et al.* (1999), Fennell (2003), Sofield (2007) and others suggests that ecotourism may be understood in a socio-cultural 'bubble' that represents

predominantly English-speaking 'western' influences. This bubble may also be understood in the broader contemporary context of globalisation and the internationalisation of human development (Holt-Jensen, 1999; Hall and Page, 2002; Nyiri and Breidenbach, 2005). This phenomenon is taken to refer to the social, political and economic processes that transcend borders, thereby connecting nations, peoples and processes in



Source: Backman and Morais (2001)

Figure 1. Ecotourism research sites: percentage by continent.



Source: Backman and Morais (2001)

Figure 2. Ecotourism research origin: percentage of authors publishing.

Table 1. Ecotourism tenets and associated elements

Key normative tenets of ecotourism	Associated elements of ecotourism
Nature-based	A. Activity occurs primarily in nature B. Healthy ecosystems C. Undeveloped/pristine areas (minimal human interference) D. Provides opportunity for visits to natural areas
Preservation/conservation	E. Maintenance and enhancement of ecosystems F. Awareness of ecosystem requirements G. Collaborative efforts between providers and community (protected area managers, locals, etc.) H. Incorporation and implementation of preservation/conservation into management plan
Environmental education	I. Provision of biocultural education for all stakeholders (staff, guests, community, etc.) J. Encourage interaction with nature (to provide an experiential/educational benefit) K. Increases awareness and understanding of an area's natural heritage L. Empowers visitors and other stakeholders to become involved in issues affecting heritage (both natural and cultural)
Sustainability	M. Achievement of equity and social justice N. Maintenance of ecological integrity O. Satisfaction of human needs P. Social self-determination and cultural diversity Q. Integration of conservation and development
Distribution of benefits	R. Equitable local access to resources, costs and benefits S. Benefits compliment rather than replace traditional local practices and activities (fishing, crafts, etc.) T. Maximises short and long-term benefits for visitors, providers, locals, etc. U. Improves the quality of life of local people V. Complements existing tourism infrastructure
Ethics/responsibility	W. Ethics based on environmentally, socially, and culturally responsible approach X. Ecological principles to guide decision-making Y. Consideration of the impacts and consequences of travel in natural areas Z. Lead by example — increase awareness of the value of ethics-based business and action

Source: Donohoe and Needham (2006).

new and complex ways (Beeson, 2007). Although a contested concept, it has been characterised by the introduction and acceptance of global norms and standards representative of dominant social and political structures (removal of variation and distinctive features — assimilation) (Hveem, 2006). Therefore, it follows that tenets such as those listed in Table 1 and those applied by global institutions such as the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2008) and the World Travel and Tourism Council represent a hegemonic structure that endorses western-centric definitions of sustainable development, sustain-

able tourism, and hence, ecotourism. Cater (2006, p. 36) contends that 'if we uncritically accept Western-constructed ecotourism as the be-all-to-end-all, we do so at our, and others' peril'. Concomitantly, Vivanco (2002) argues that insecurity, resentment, conflict and ecological degradation are potential outcomes resulting from the widespread application of one 'ecotourism mould'. Given that there is no universal understanding of development or the environment, Vivanco (2002), Humberstone (2004) and Cater (2006) argue that for ecotourism to truly exemplify sustainable development and other core ecotourism tenets, it

must be sensitive to cultural values and structural inequalities. Therefore, there is a need for recognition of multiple ecotourism realities, the identification of realities that may be ignored or overlooked by hegemonic ecotourism frameworks, and the understanding of influences, potential conflicts and outcomes of such phenomena.

In recent years, the growing international interest in and geographic reach of ecotourism has directed a significant amount of interest to China's ecotourism resources and experiences (Zhang *et al.*, 1995; Li, 2004; Shen, 2004). Since ecotourism or '*shengtai luyou*' (生态旅) was officially recognised in China in the late 1980s, the opportunities and potential benefits of this activity have earned it a place on China's sustainable development agenda (Stone and Wall, 2004, 2005). As a result, ecotourism is increasingly available for international and domestic visitors interested in the natural and cultural heritage of China. Opportunities include such activities as wildlife and landscape viewing, trekking, cycling and eco-lodge experiences (Doole, 2005). Although ecotourism is an emergent concept in China, research suggests that activities and ideologies that closely match those of so-called 'universal ecotourism' have been operational in China for much of the country's long history. A conservation ethic and a mature understanding of nature and environmental processes are observed in the earliest of Chinese culture (Holt-Jensen, 1999). These values are reinforced through spiritual ideologies common to Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism and are deeply embedded in the Chinese culture (Qu and Li, 1994). They are, however, starkly different from the ideal western view. For example, the Chinese concept of nature or '*da-ziran*' is understood on the basis of five elements — fire, water, metal, earth, wood — and the intimate involvement of humans in elemental processes (Sofield, 2007). Chinese definitions of 'man' are based on the earth element. Earth is based on heaven. Heaven is based on the 'way' (spiritual path). And, the way is based on *da-ziran* (nature). Philosophically, the Chinese world view exemplifies an anthropocentric perspective where humans are involved in nature at all times. This is distinct from a western perspective, which in its ideal view is biocentric; that is, it views nature as separate from humans (Sofield,

2007). The western concept of nature is understood on the basis of pristine (untouched by human activities) landscapes and ecological features. Therefore, Chinese ontologies regarding nature, ecological processes, and the relationships between nature and humans have evolved in a different cultural landscape than those associated with the 'west'.

ECOTOURISM IN CHINA: A CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Since the establishment of modern tourism in China in the 1950s, tourism has grown to become a strategic industry for the development of China's economy (Zhang *et al.*, 1995). In the course of an economic development policy shift (known as 'reform and opening') that saw the relaxation of China's borders to tourists in 1978, China has sustained exponential growth in inbound tourism (Guangrui, 1995; Lew and Yu, 1995; Song, 2005). In 2004, international arrivals reached 100 million and international tourism receipts totaled US \$25 billion, an increase of 47.8% over 1978 (China National Tourist Office, 2005). Domestic tourism has also been experiencing exponential growth, with domestic tourist trips reaching over 1 billion (China National Tourist Office, 2005). Despite the many constraints associated with domestic leisure experiences, some of which include family obligations, time (work/life balance), income, traditional lifestyle/culture, and policy (immature markets), leisure and tourism opportunities — such as domestic travel — in China, have become a mass phenomenon (Ling, 2005; Nyiri, 2006). This emerging 'leisure culture' or '*xiuxian wenhua*' was formalised in government doctrine when the National Tourism Administration declared 1996 the 'Year of Leisure and Vacation', and in 1997 and 1998 the Central Government of the Chinese Communist Party made policy development and tourism promotion a priority for the first time (Wang, 2001). Leisure and tourism has since become a known catalyst for economic development, income increases and quality of life improvements in China (Zhang *et al.*, 1995; Ma, 2005). Rapid expansion is expected to continue in both the domestic and international tourism markets and as a consequence, China has shown the fastest growth

among the world's leading tourism destinations in recent years (UNWTO, 2008). There is little doubt that China is a significant entity in the global travel and tourism exchange (Lew and Yu, 1995; Kenyon, 2005). And, rapid growth has forced increasing tourist demands and tremendous pressure for the rapid development of tourism resources in China (Zhang *et al.*, 1995).

The development of ecotourism in China has resulted from the convergence of four important factors. First, changing domestic tourism policies opened previously restricted rural areas to tourism, therefore facilitating greater access to natural areas (Cheng and Wang, 1996). Second, specialised tourism — such as ecotourism — has been growing steadily in China in response to growing demands for diversified tourist experiences (Zhang *et al.*, 1995). Although landscapes and the natural environment have long comprised a main attraction for domestic tourism, interest in nature-based tourism has evolved beyond scenic experiences in order to attract and satisfy changing domestic and international tourist demands (Petersen, 1995; Nyiri, 2006). Third, the ecological diversity and cultural richness contained within China's borders has been recognised as one of the world's most highly valuable ecotourism resources (Smil, 1984; Zhang, 1995; Lindberg *et al.*, 1997). Such recognition has attracted increased attention from international tourists and ecotour companies. And fourth, the development of Zhangjiajie National Forest Park (1982) and other nature reserves established, for the first time in China, the importance of integrating tourism development and the protection of the natural environment (Li, C., 2004; Li, W., 2004). These goals have long been identified as central to successful ecotourism development. The convergence of these four factors has stimulated the evolution and ongoing growth of ecotourism in China. As a result, ecotourism and nature-based tourism are developing more rapidly than other tourism types (Weaver, 1998; Li, W., 2004; Stone and Wall, 2005).

Concrete evidence of the growing domestic interest in ecotourism manifested when the first forum on Chinese ecotourism was held in Xishuang Banna in Yunnan Province (1999). The event attracted over 100 Chinese scholars

and resulted in the establishment of the Chinese Ecotourism Association and the *Declaration on Chinese Ecotourism*. Further evidence of the importance of ecotourism in China was made clear with the official announcement that 1999 was the Year of Chinese Ecotourism. Given the opportunities associated with ecotourism, the abundance of ecotourism resources, and the growing number of protected areas, ecotourism has become and remains an established priority on tourism and sustainable development agendas in China (Xu, 1994; Lindberg *et al.*, 1997; Li, W., 2004; Stone and Wall, 2005; Xu, 2005). Despite such engagement, a national definition and quality standards for ecotourism operations in China have not yet been established. Although various Chinese ecotourism definitions have emerged over the last few decades, there has been limited analysis of the definitions and their value for ecotourism planning and management. With the exception of a volume entitled: *Ecotourism: Theoretical Analysis & Case Studies* (Zhang, 2004), another prepared by Zhang (2003) that includes some Chinese ecotourism definitions in a broader study of tourism in China, and an analysis of ecotourism interpretations by site managers in Hainan (Stone and Wall, 2004, 2005), the literature in this regard is lean (Lindberg *et al.*, 1997). Fennell (2001), Honey (2002), and Wallace and Pierce (1996) agree 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. Therefore, definition should act as the fundamental framework for ecotourism development and operation. Given the absence of a common ecotourism definition in China, it becomes imperative that ecotourism planners and policy-makers proceed with caution, seeking guidance from the evolving expertise in this domain. The relative embryonic state of ecotourism research and policy in China complicates the process as Chinese policy-makers are forced to look abroad for guidance (Fennell *et al.*, 2001). Further complicating matters is that Chinese values are 'diametrically different from those associated with the western paradigm of ecotourism' (Sofield and Li, 2003, p. 145). The planning and management of ecotourism in China, therefore, should be sensitive to these

cultural differences (and not shaped solely on the basis of guidance from abroad). In the ideal case, sensitivity should begin at the normative level (definitions), and it should be continued at strategic (policy, standards and regulations) and operational levels (planning and management) as well.

PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

These diametrical differences collided when the researchers met at the *Canadian Association of Geographers Annual Meeting* in London, Ontario (2005). Following a special session on tourism geography, the researchers discussed mutual interests related to ecotourism, environmental ethics and tourism management. Curiosity was sparked related to the tourism 'realities' and environmental 'values' associated with the researchers' different cultural backgrounds. Of particular interest were differences related to the ways in which nature is valued and the ways in which the relationship between humans and the natural environment are understood in China and abroad. On the basis of this informal discussion and a follow-up discussion at the 9th World Leisure Congress in Hangzhou, China (2006), as well as a flurry of ensuing email communications, a decision was made to embark on a collaborative research journey to discover and interpret ontological differences and similarities and their influence on the ways in which ecotourism is defined in China.

Given the current state of ecotourism, the absence of common definition and policy directives, and the mounting challenges associated with managing ecotourism activities in China (Li, W., 2004), the remainder of this paper seeks to test the validity of Sofield and Li's (2003) claim. We know that leisure, tourism and recreation definitions change according to their purpose and context (Hall and Page, 2002). We know that China has a world view that is distinct from the dominant western world view and as a result, China has become one of the primary loci for exploring globalisation and the universality (versus reality) of so-called universal values (Nyiri and Breidenbach, 2005). Thus, in embarking on this research journey, our guiding hypothesis was that *diametrical*

differences between Chinese and western ecotourism definitions are to be expected. Based on this hypothesis, a research purpose was defined with a goal to test this hypothesis and identify the differences. Two research tasks and associated objectives were defined to guide the analysis. First, the Chinese ecotourism literature must be analysed with the objective to identify thematic trends in the discourse. Second, a comparative analysis must be completed with the objective to assess the congruency between the Chinese thematic trends and those from abroad (Table 1). In meeting these objectives, the ambition of this paper is to contribute to the evolving understanding of ecotourism definitions, values and perspectives in China, and the ontological gaps between ecotourism discourse in China and abroad. This contribution is meant to facilitate understandings of hegemonic ecotourism structures and their potential influence in developing countries. These concerns are worthy of further consideration because they provide insight into the cultural foundations and institutional context of ecotourism (Carrier and Macleod, 2005). Furthermore, such considerations shed light on the potential for populations to clash over meanings — particularly where differences in ontological understanding may exist. As ecotourism develops rapidly in China, these ontological differences must be identified, and ecotourism policy and planning must be sensitive to these differences so as not to risk compromising the socio-cultural and sustainable ideals and outcomes of ecotourism (Humberstone, 2004). It is the ambition of this study to stimulate tourism researchers to explore the complexity of cultural processes and values, particularly those related to ecotourism in developing countries where cross-cultural discourse has been limited.

METHODOLOGY

A thematic content analysis model is applied to select Chinese ecotourism definitions. Content analysis is a method for making replicable inferences based in the systematic analysis of communications (Krippendorff, 1980; Babbie, 1992; Schwandt, 2001). It relies on a count of the manifest content or visible surface content

of communications. In this case, the units of observation are select ecotourism definitions from the Chinese academic literature. Content analysis has been judged to be a best fit for the research purpose and objectives on the basis of the following rationale. First, it facilitates the quantitative analysis — identification and frequency analysis of thematic trends — in the definition sample. Second, the results can be easily replicated as content can be easily discerned, recorded and analysed by another researcher ([Krippendorff, 1980](#); [Babbie, 1992](#)). This ensures that the analysis is transparent and reliable. Third, the method corresponds to the methodological approach applied in antecedent analysis of 'abroad' definitions ([Donohoe and Needham, 2006](#)). This methodological approach was used to identify the key ecotourism tenets (Table 1), and it has been selected over other similar research efforts because it is congruent with antecedent and established content analysis approaches (consistency across studies) and its procedural steps are easily replicated and/or adapted. It is applied here for the analysis of Chinese definitions as it facilitates comparability between studies. Accordingly, the analytical steps from Donohoe and Needham's study are replicated here. It is important to note that like the Donohoe and Needham study, the analysis is limited to definitions accrued from the academic literature. Therefore, this study does not presume to address how managers and tourists define, practice and experience ecotourism in China.

Step 1: collection of definition sample

The study sample includes 16 contemporary Chinese ecotourism definitions, all of which were published after 1993. Definitions were identified through an appraisal of Chinese research published since 1990. Although the definitions included in this study are representative of a broad range of Chinese definitions, by no means may the sample be considered an exhaustive list. Instead, these definitions represent a sample of recent scholarly attempts to define ecotourism in China.

Step 2: development of a content analysis template

To initiate the analysis, a set of tentative themes were determined through a preliminary analysis of the definition sample and a critical review of relevant literature in China ([Cheng and Wang, 1996](#); [Guo, 1997](#); [Chen and Pen, 2001](#); [Yang and Lu, 2004](#); [Xu, 2005](#)). From this scan, a set of 16 common and reoccurring themes were identified. These themes comprise the content analysis template (Table 2). [Donohoe and Needham \(2006\)](#) apply the same approach for developing the content analysis template used in their study. Instead of simply taking their template and applying it to the analysis of Chinese definitions (which would produce a set of predetermined themes based on western research), the preliminary analysis allows themes to emerge from the Chinese sample. As the study seeks to observe the presence of differences and similarities between the samples, this was judged as the best-fit approach.

Step 3: coding of definitions

The definitions were translated from Chinese to English in order to facilitate coding of the sample by both researchers. As expected, translation challenges presented, particularly where a 'literal' translation was not possible. There are many concepts and words in Chinese and English that simply do not translate well. To mitigate these challenges, the content analysis template was developed on the basis of a thematic analysis completed in Chinese. It was thought that this approach would allow the Chinese themes to emerge free of English language impositions and translation interference (English constructs, words, etc.). The template was then translated into English and was used as the basis for evaluation. Although efforts were made to mitigate translation and interpretation difficulties (and the potential outcomes it can influence), this methodological challenge is common to cross-cultural research and it is acknowledged by the researchers in this study.

An initial set of definitions (five) was coded in order to test the content analysis template. Initial testing is commonly used to refine the

Table 2. Content analysis template

Criteria for analysis	Select references and their definitions ($n = 16$) Observation (✓)
Adventure/exploration	
Culture	
Democratisation	
Distribution of benefits (to community and others)	
Education/awareness	
Enjoyment/experience	
Ethics/responsibility	
Health benefits/quality of life	
Management	
Minimising impacts	
Nature-based	
Preservation/conservation	
Professionalism/service quality	
Reliance on parks and protected areas	
Small scale (groups and enterprises)	
Sustainability	

coding rules and analysis template where necessary. In this case, no interpretation or functional difficulties were encountered (although expected as a result of translation), thus the remainder of the sample was coded. Where reference to each of the 16 criteria was observed in the definitional sample, the observation was recorded.

Step 4: assessing reliability and accuracy

In order to test the method and its reliability, the researchers coded the definition sample independently. Intercoder reliability was calculated by hand as a percentage agreement (Lombard *et al.*, 2004). These calculations produced a reliability rate of 93.7%. Where agreement was not achieved (6.3%), translation and interpretation were likely the source of these observational differences. Although there is some disagreement in the literature about intercoder reliability standards, a rate of 80% or higher is considered acceptable for the percentage method (Krippendorff, 1980; Ryan and Bernard, 2000).

Step 5: tabulating results

On the basis of the analysis, a frequency tabulation was completed. That is, total observations

for each criterion were calculated and the top ranked criteria were then identified (Table 3).

The comparative analysis is based on a simple comparison of the top-ranked themes from the Chinese (Table 3) and abroad analysis (Table 1). Although a simplistic approach, it facilitates a measure of 'diametrical differences' and an understanding of thematic trends and similarities between the samples.

RESULTS: CHINESE DEFINITIONAL THEMES

Three important observations can be made (Table 3). First, the variability in criterion observations suggests that there is great variation in contemporary Chinese ecotourism definitions. This variability is consistent with antecedent observations of thematic variability in ecotourism definitions (Fennell, 2001; Donohoe and Needham, 2006).

Second, a thematic pattern can also be identified. Consequently, it is possible to surmise a set of priority themes common to the Chinese ecotourism discourse. These themes are reflective of the seven thematic criteria that appear most often in the study sample. These criteria include, in ranked order from most frequently observed: (i) nature-based; (ii) preservation/

Table 3. Content analysis of Chinese ecotourism definitions

Criteria for analysis (themes)	Select references and their definitions																Total observations	Ranked order**
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16		
Preservation/conservation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	14 (88%)	1
Nature-based	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	11 (69%)	2
Distribution of benefits	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	9 (56%)	3
Education/awareness	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	7 (44%)	4
Enjoyment/experience	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	7 (44%)	4
Ethics/responsibility/awareness	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	7 (44%)	4
Sustainability	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	7 (44%)	4
Professionalism/quality					•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	6 (38%)	5
Culture					•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	5 (31%)	6
Adventure/exploration					•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	3 (19%)	7
Health benefits/quality of life					•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	2 (13%)	8
Reliance on parks and protected areas	•															•	2 (13%)	8
Democratisation																•	1 (6%)	9
Management																•	1 (6%)	9
Minimising impacts																•	0	10
Small scale (groups and enterprises)																•	0	10

• Criteria observed in definition.

** Rank based on the number of observed appearances of the identified criteria — ranked most observances to least.

Top ranked themes appear in bold.

Sources: (1) Wang (1993); (2) Xu (1994); (3) Cheng and Wang (1996); (4) Lu (1997); (5) Guo (1997); (6) Zhang and Dong (1997); (7) Wang (1998); (8) Liu (1998); (9) Wang (1999); (10) Li and Zhang (1999); (11) Chen and Pen (2001); (12) Guo (2002); (13) Luo (2003); (14) Liu et al. (2004); (15) Yang and Lu (2004); (16) Zhao and Zhao (2004).

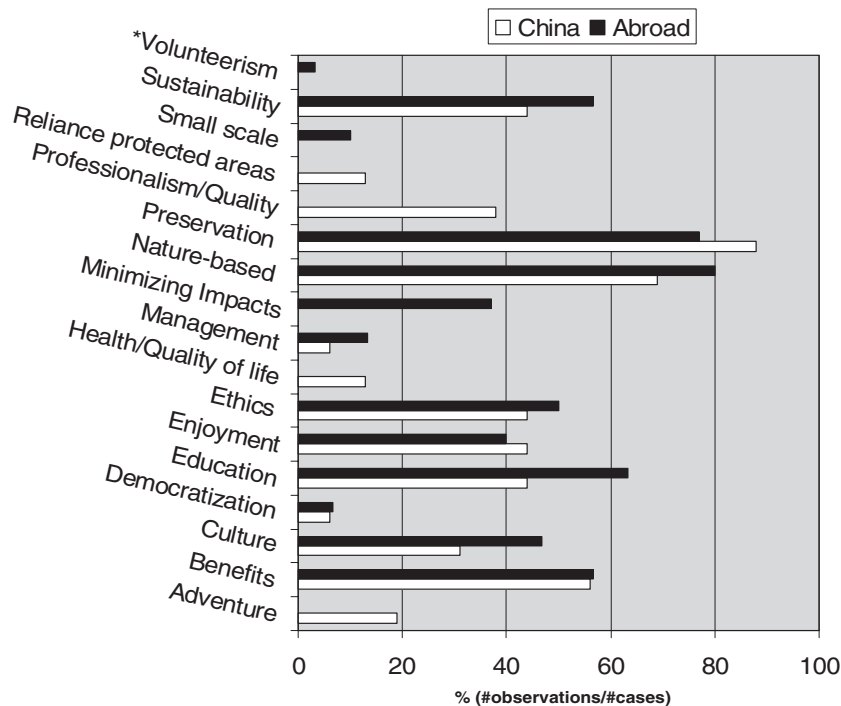
conservation; (iii) distribution of benefits; (iv) education/awareness; (v) sustainability; (vi) ethics/responsibility; and (vii) enjoyment/experience.

Direct reference to the top ranked themes is observed in more than 40% of the definitions (Table 3). In particular, 88% of definitions refer to 'preservation/conservation' and 69% to the 'nature-based' criterion for ecotourism. These two criteria are the highest ranking criteria and are the most common themes present in Chinese ecotourism definitions. These criteria are followed by 'distribution of benefits' for which reference was made by 56% of the study sample. 'Sustainability', 'education', 'ethics/responsibility' and 'enjoyment/experience' follow, completing the list with 44% respectively. The remaining nine criteria were referenced by fewer than 40% of the definitional sample and as such were not considered priority themes. With the exception of 'culture' (40%), the remaining seven criteria were referenced by fewer than 20% of the sample. In the case of 'minimising impacts' and 'small scale', these criteria were observed in less than 5% of the sample definitions.

The third important observation is the proportion of definitions that make reference to the final two criteria: 'health benefits/quality of life' and 'professionalism/quality'. A perfunctory review of ecotourism definitions beyond China's cultural and physical borders finds limited reference to these themes. These themes were included in the analysis framework because reference to their importance appeared frequently in the Chinese literature. The emphasis on 'professionalism/quality' (38%) and 'health benefits/quality of life' (13%) in the Chinese literature suggests a differing set of priority values. Although they are important components of the ecotourism experience, they are not identified as priority definitional themes abroad.

RESULTS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Four important observations can be made when comparing the results of the Chinese definitional analysis with the key tenets of ecotourism (Figure 3). First, congruency is apparent between the content analysis criteria. As reminder, these criteria were identified



*Criterion appears in Donohoe and Needham (2006) analysis but not in Chinese analysis.

Figure 3. Comparative analysis of ecotourism definitions from China and abroad.

through a preliminary review of the definitional samples (independent samples). This may be partly due to the methodological similarity with which the lists were deduced. Primarily, it is thought to be a reflection of the thematic trends present in the ecotourism definitional literature in both China and abroad. There are, however, some important differences between the analysis criteria lists and this implies a set of different priorities and values. Where 'monitoring' and 'volunteerism' appear in the Donohoe and Needham (2006) analysis, they are replaced with 'health/quality of life' and 'professionalism/quality' in this study. There were no references to 'monitoring' and 'volunteerism' in the Chinese sample. Consequently they were not included in the analysis of Chinese definitions. 'Health/quality of life' and 'professionalism/quality' were included as they were observed in the preliminary assessment of Chinese definitions. These criteria were not observed with great frequency in the Donohoe and Needham sample as they were not identified in their pilot study, their content analysis template or their discussion of key tenets. Therefore, thematic frequency for these criteria in the Chinese sample is an important observational difference.

Second, congruity can also be observed when the criterion frequencies for the samples are compared (with the exception of the aforementioned criteria). Variability in thematic frequency common to both samples is represented in Figure 3. It is interesting to note that 'preservation/conservation', 'adventure', and 'reliance on protected spaces' were better represented in the Chinese sample, and 'education', 'sustainability' and 'culture' were referenced with less frequency. 'Nature-based' was also emphasised with greater frequency in the 'abroad' sample.

The third and arguably the most important measure of congruity is evidenced when the top ranking criteria for each study sample are compared (Tables 1 and 3). With the exception of 'enjoyment/experience' in the Chinese sample list, the top ranking criteria from both lists are *identical*. Although these criteria appear in differing orders and were observed in the samples in slightly different frequencies, it remains that there is congruity between the key tenets of ecotourism and those criteria

most frequently observed in Chinese definitions. As such, these criteria may be considered priority ecotourism themes in China and abroad. Differences in the rank order of the thematic criteria may be due to differences in sample size, but it may also be reflective of different contextual priorities.

And fourth, where differences are clear is the manifestation of the 'enjoyment/experience' criteria in the list of top ranking themes in the Chinese sample. This theme was not identified as a priority theme/key ecotourism tenet by Donohoe and Needham (2006). In fact, this theme ranked eighth behind 'culture' in the 'abroad' sample.

DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis identified four noteworthy findings. First, congruity exists between ecotourism definitions from China and abroad. In the case of China, definitions capture thematic priorities that are common to the broader ecotourism discourse. Therefore, it is possible to infer that ecotourism in China is defined in much the same way as it is in other nations and contexts. 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.

Second, although congruity between samples is clear, subtle differences in the ways in which ecotourism is conceptualised in China and abroad can also be observed. For example, the abroad sample had a greater emphasis on nature-based activities. In China, it is argued that ecotourism is conceptualised as both a cultural and environmental experience (Niu, 1999; Zhang, 2003). China has a rich cultural history and cultural representation continues to be an important component of the Chinese leisure experience (Lew and Yu, 1995; Petersen, 1995; Lindberg *et al.* 1997; Ma, 2005). In fact, early examples of ecotourism development focused upon cultural heritage sites whereas the promotion of natural sites has been more incremental (Weaver, 1998; Nyiri, 2006). Although culture is not well represented in the definitional sample (we expected it would

be), it is nonetheless an important component of the experiential ecotourism environment in China. And, it may help us to understand why Chinese definitions do not place as much emphasis on the natural environment as definitions from abroad. Another possible explanation is related to the ways in which nature experiences are perceived in China. In a keynote address at the Cultural Diversity and Leisure Development Forum in Hangzhou, China, Lan (2005) argued that Chinese people perceive nature and nature-based tourism differently than visitors. Although all share an appreciation for the natural environment, she argued that domestic expressions of nature-based tourism reflect the 'Chinese way' and a different set of experiential priorities. To illustrate, she highlighted the popularity of scenic attractions in the domestic tourism market. Conversely, direct interactions with nature are much more popular among inbound tourists. This phenomenon is also identified by Petersen (1995), Lindberg *et al.* (1997) and Sofield and Li (2003), and it is handled at length in Nyiri's (2006) volume on scenic spots. It is further evidenced in the leisure and tourism literature through case-study analysis. For example, in a study of visitors to Dinghushan Biosphere Reserve in the province of Guangdong (Lindberg *et al.*, 1997), and a study of ecotourism in China's national parks (Nianyong and Zhuge, 2001), the authors conclude that Chinese visitors are motivated by the opportunity to view scenery and that this experience is paramount to the nature-based activity. Nyiri (2006) supports this finding, arguing that scenic spots are synonymous with Chinese cultural heritage and not natural heritage as is common in the 'west'. He explains that the cultural value of the natural sites, historically, has been promoted by the Central government as a means for creating a common sense of Chinese culture. For example, the naturally beautiful 'Xi Hu' or 'West Lake' in Hangzhou, China is widely promoted on the basis of its cultural heritage. Visitors are attracted by the opportunities to connect with the famous Chinese poets Bai Juyi and Su Dongpo, and the Italian explorer Marco Polo, who were inspired by the lake centuries ago. By extension, Chinese tourists are afforded the opportunity to benefit from the collective sense of common Chinese heritage

when visiting the site. The 'viewing' opportunity associated with the natural environment is also identified as priority for Chinese visitors in a study of national park use attitudes (Deng *et al.*, 2005). These researchers conclude that significant differences exist between the ways in which national parks and nature-based tourism activities are perceived between the Chinese and Anglo-Canadian study groups, whereby the latter perceives national parks as places to stay and engage in nature rather than view its splendor and connect with its history and cultural significance. This experiential priority reflects a diametrical difference in cultural values, perceptions and expectations associated with nature-based tourism and ecotourism activities.

Third, differences can also be observed with the 'distribution of benefits' criterion. This theme ranked third in the Chinese sample where it is ranked behind 'environmental education' and 'sustainability' in the abroad sample. This may reflect differing priorities whereby tourism has been conceptualised as part of a broader economic development program to reconstruct and modernise China (Zhang *et al.*, 1995; Nyiri, 2006). This program was formally adopted by the Chinese Communist Party in 1978. Within this political construct, ecotourism has been conceptualised as a means for satisfying both environmental conservation and economic development priorities (Hall, 1996; Stone and Wall, 2005). Lindberg *et al.* (1997, p. 129) argue that as a result of pressing economic needs in developing countries such as China, economic benefit for communities and natural areas tend to be a higher priority ecotourism issue than in developed (OECD) countries. The perception that ecotourism is a developmental tool is not unique to the Chinese government. In fact, it transcends political boundaries. In a survey of ecotourism participants in China, the authors conclude that ecotourism is perceived as means for generating revenue and positive benefits for local communities (Lindberg *et al.*, 1997). The same conclusion is reached in an evaluation of ecotourism and community development in Hainan (Stone and Wall, 2005). Although the operational manifestation of these perceptions requires assessment, it may be that differing developmental and social priorities offer explanation for the greater

representation of 'distribution of benefits' in the Chinese sample.

And fourth, other differential examples include 'health/quality of life' and 'professionalism/quality'. Although these criteria did not rank as priority themes, their presence in the Chinese sample and their absence in the abroad definitions implies yet another difference. The frequency with which 'professionalism/quality' appears may reflect the Chinese work ethic where professionalism is absolute. The frequency with which 'health/quality of life' appears in Chinese definitions may be a reflection of perceived ecotourism opportunities and the benefits of the human-nature relationship. In China, ecotourism is perceived as an activity with many community benefits; a means to improve quality of life through employment, educational, environmental (health) and experiential benefits (Lindberg *et al.*, 1997; Stone and Wall, 2005). It is also understood as a means to spiritual health and well-being. As a reminder, nature or '*daziran*' is perceived as the 'way' or spiritual path from earth to heaven (Sofield, 2007). Therefore, culturally determined values about the human-nature relationship may provide insight into the frequency with which 'health/quality of life' is referenced in Chinese descriptions of ecotourism.

This discussion illustrates subtle nuances between Chinese definitions and those from abroad. The analysis also suggests that these differences may be expressions of culturally determined values. Conversely, although subtle thematic nuances do exist, it remains that ecotourism priorities in both China and abroad correspond. In fact, the frequency by which the top ranking criteria appear confirms that the thematic patterns identified in antecedent research are in fact occurring in contemporary Chinese definitions. This implies that a set of universal principles or tenets are emerging from the discourse. The results of this study, therefore, support the validity of Sofield and Li's (2003, p. 145) claim that Chinese values are 'diametrically different from those associated with the western paradigm of ecotourism' but finds these cultural differences of little influence on the manifest content of Chinese ecotourism definitions. Although differences exist between the ways in which ecotourism is conceptualised in China, these differences

are subtle and do not constitute a diametrical difference. In fact, the analysis confirms that Chinese definitions are synonymous with 'abroad' definitional priorities. It is, however, important to note that this study has focused solely on definitional values (as they appear in academic definitions) and not on operational values or outcomes. Additional investigation in this regard would allow us to gauge whether diametrical differences are present when planning and managing tourism. Perhaps it is here that Sofield and Li's diametrical differences manifest?

The findings suggest that Chinese definitions are greatly influenced by the western ecotourism paradigm. Although it is known that Chinese scholars and policy-makers are looking abroad for guidance, it was thought that Chinese values would also find a place of influence in the ecotourism definition and scholarly discourse. Concomitantly, this suggests that Chinese values are being submersed by western values. If this is in fact the case, this raises concerns about the universality versus the reality of ecotourism values and definitions. Can western-derived tenets serve as a strong explicit framework for ecotourism in China? Should they? Contemporary researchers are asking similar questions and their work suggests that the ecotourism model should be sensitive to the cultural context (Cater, 2006; Jamal *et al.*, 2006; Nyiri, 2006). Braden and Prudnikova (2008) and de la Barre (2005) suggest that a context-specific and culturally sensitive ethic needs to be developed to best address the 'diametrical differences' that are present between western approaches and 'other' approaches to ecotourism. In the case of China, such an ethic should be sensitive to Chinese values (particularly those related to nature and wilderness), local stakeholders, Chinese tourism policies and expectations, and the local political climate on matters related to conservation and development. It is clear from the literature review completed in preparation for this study that such an ethic has yet to emerge in the academic discourse.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study challenge the ecotourism community to consider the import of

cultural values and their influence on ecotourism theory and practice. Although diametrical differences between definitions samples were not observed, there were subtle differences that suggest that culturally determined values should be influencing ecotourism theory and practice in China. In fact, the literature suggests that ecotourism should be sensitive to culture and that definition, guidelines and policy should be flexible so as to adapt to variations in cultural, social, economic and environmental contexts. In the case of China, it is clear that a rigid western model for ecotourism may not be best suited for domestic ecotourists. And, its application could potentially put at risk the many benefits ecotourism promises for stakeholders. In this regard, universal tenets serve as a strong reference standard for the operationalisation of ecotourism and the delivery of sustainable outcomes (Table 1). But, for ecotourism to function successfully in a variety of contexts, and particularly those contexts beyond the boundaries of western knowledge and praxis, the standard must be sensitive to cultural differences. In China, where ecotourism opportunities are multiplying, the contemporary imperative is a clear ecotourism definition and policy set that is sensitive to the Chinese context. In the absence of these critical foundations, ecotourism is unlikely to manifest as a model for sustainable development. Finally, we challenge researchers to engage in the ongoing discussion about universal ecotourism tenets, the influence and import of culturally determined ecotourism values, and the achievement of sustainable ecotourism.

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