ECOTOURISM IN SCANDINAVIA
Lessons in Theory and Practice
Ecotourism Book Series

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Ecotourism, or nature-based tourism that is managed to be learning-oriented as well as environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable, has emerged in the past 20 years as one of the most important sectors within the global tourism industry. The purpose of this series is to provide diverse stakeholders (e.g. academics, graduate and senior undergraduate students, practitioners, protected area managers, government and non-governmental organizations) with state-of-the-art and scientifically sound strategic knowledge about all facets of ecotourism, including external environments that influence its development. Contributions adopt a holistic, critical and interdisciplinary approach that combines relevant theory and practice while placing case studies from specific destinations into an international context. The series supports the development and diffusion of financially viable ecotourism that fulfils the objective of environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability at both the local and global scale.

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ECOTOURISM IN SCANDINAVIA
Lessons in Theory and Practice

Edited by
S. Gössling and J. Hultman

Lund University, Helsingborg, Sweden
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CABI Head Office
Nosworthy Way
Wallingford
Oxon OX10 8DE
UK
Tel: +44 (0)1491 832111
Fax: +44 (0)1491 833508
E-mail: cabi@cabi.org
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CABI North American Office
875 Massachusetts Avenue
7th Floor
Cambridge, MA 02139
USA
Tel: +1 617 395 4056
Fax: +1 617 354 6875
E-mail: cabi-nao@cabi.org

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Contributors

Areti Alkimou, James-Franck-Ring 59, 37077 Goettingen, Germany. e-mail: aalkimon@hotmail

Erika Andersson Cederholm, Department of Service Management, Lund University Box 882, 25108 Helsingborg, Sweden. e-mail: erika.andersson_cederholm@msm.lu.se

Thor Flognfeldt, Department of Tourism, University College, Lillehammer, Norway. e-mail: Thor.Flognfeldt@hil.no

Johan Folke, Department of Service Management, Lund University, Box 882, 25108 Helsingborg, Sweden. e-mail: johan.folke.491@student.lu.se

Peter Fredman, European Tourism Research Institute (ETOUR), Mid-Sweden University, Östersund, Sweden. e-mail: peter.fredman@etour.se

Stefan Gössling, Department of Service Management, Lund University, Box 882, 25108 Helsingborg, Sweden. e-mail: stefan.gossling@msm.lu.se

Yvonne Gunnarsdotter, Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, PO Box 7012, 750 07 Uppsala, Sweden. e-mail: Yvonne.Gunnarsdotter@lpul.slu.se

C. Michael Hall, Department of Tourism, School of Business, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin, New Zealand. e-mail: cmhall@business.otago.ac.nz

Johan Hultman, Department of Service Management, Lund University, Box 882, 25108 Helsingborg, Sweden. e-mail: johan.hultman@msm.hbg.lu.se

Berit C. Kaæe, Danish Forest and Landscape Research Institute, Hørsholm Kongevej 11, 2970 Hørsholm, Denmark. e-mail: bck@kvl.dk

Kreg Lindberg, Oregon State University, 2600 NW College Way Bend, Oregon 97701, USA. e-mail: kreg.lindberg@osucascades.edu

Nils-Otto Nilsson, EKOSCANDICA, Box 21, Vittsjö, Sweden. e-mail: nilsotto.nilsson@ekoscandica.se

Josefine Hammer Østrup, Department of Service Management, Lund University, Box 882, 25108 Helsingborg, Sweden. e-mail: josefne.ostrup.125@student.lu.se
Contributors

Robert Pettersson, European Tourism Research Institute (ETOUR), Mid-Sweden University, Östersund, Sweden. e-mail: robert.pettersson@etour.se

Klas Sandell, Research Unit for Tourism and Leisure, Department of Geography and Tourism, Karlstad University, Sweden. e-mail: klas.sandell@kau.se

Arvid Viken, Finnmark University College, 9509 Alta, Norway. e-mail: arvid.viken@hifm.no

Silvia Wurzinger, Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna, Liebigasse 5, 1010 Vienna, Austria. e-mail: silvia.wurzinger@gmx.at
Foreword

Ecotourism as process

I find it interesting to read this book on Scandinavian ecotourism. As a practitioner, I have worked with the implementation of ecotourism in Sweden since 2000. Based on my experiences, I find many conclusions in this book that I would like to underscore – and others that call for a debate. For example, is there a need to promote ecotourism through certifications or labelling – or is Scandinavia a ‘natural’ ecotourism destination? And is it possible to talk about ‘ecotourism’ when ecotourists travel by air? The very concept of ‘ecotourism’ can be difficult to accept when most travel is, arguably, not sustainable. This book includes many thoughts on these and other topics. I am sure a debate on sustainable development of tourism practices must be taken further, and this is consequently something all stakeholders involved in ecotourism should look towards.

Over the last year, international interest in Nature’s Best, the Swedish ecotourism quality labelling, has increased dramatically. I would thus like to present some information on how the Swedish Ecotourism Association is currently working. From the very beginning we have strived for ‘more and better ecotourism’. This motto grew from the recognition that ecotourism had become a broad concept that held no obligations and that ecotourism work was mainly working in marketing. The implementation of ecotourism in a credible and functional way is hard work and often based on compromise. It took us 2 years of expert- and reference-group meetings to form Nature’s Best’s criteria, involving more than 100 experts and stakeholders. We have learned that good marketing is an essential factor for the success of a label. Our approach has been to help tourists find the best nature tours from both quality and sustainability points of view. This includes helping service providers committed to sustainability to reach the market. We felt that care for natural and cultural heritage, local economy and local
social relations had to be combined with first-class experiences, if labelled ecotourism was to work commercially in a high-cost country like Sweden. The promotion of Swedish ecotourism has thus been based on communicating quality, excitement, fun and knowledge rather than ecology, green destinations or green tourism – we want the ecotourism aspect to come across as something positive, natural and profound when visiting the labelled companies.

The parts of Sweden where ecotourism is needed most are remote areas with vast natural resources, high unemployment and conflicts surrounding the use of natural resources. In such areas, economic restructuring has often meant decreasing job numbers in traditional industries such as forestry, while the protection of species such as wolf, bear, lynx or eagle has been seen to be of limited value. Ecotourism can contribute to sustainable income in these communities and help to preserve threatened natural and cultural resources. However, such socio-economic change takes time, and ecotourism is thus a process towards sustainability.

Much remains to be analysed and discussed in the field of ecotourism, and this book is an important contribution taking discussions a step forward. Perhaps it will also help to make all tourism more sustainable, and we in the Swedish Ecotourism Association would certainly welcome it if the whole tourist industry could learn from the conclusions put forward by the authors of this book.

Dan Jonasson  
*President of the Swedish Ecotourism Association*
The idea for this book was born in late 2004, out of the observation that there is – possibly – no region in the world that is more dynamic than Sweden in terms of its organized ecotourism development. In 2004–2005, new companies offering ecotourism journeys were certified almost on a daily basis, with arrangements including virtually any thinkable nature-based arrangement, ranging from organized mushroom picking to wolf and beaver safaris. Tourist numbers, it seemed, would grow with the number of ecotourism entrepreneurs, and success stories of Swedish ecotourism were frequently presented in the media. The Swedish ecotourism label, Nature’s Best, was of such attractiveness that even other countries thought about its implementation. Clearly, ecotourism had entered a boom and bust cycle of development.

Scientifically, this raised a number of questions: was this really genuine ecotourism, based on tough certification criteria, or just a green-washed branch of the rapidly growing experience industry? Why would ecotourism grow this rapidly in Scandinavia, which, after all, couldn’t offer the exotic experiences one had come to associate with ecotourism in countries such as Australia or Costa Rica? Could ecotourism journeys be implemented anywhere, and under which circumstances? And, last but not least, what was so unique about certified ecotourism in a region where most nature-based tourism could be considered as ecotourism anyway? These, and many other questions, led us to edit this book, with a widened perspective on Scandinavia as a whole.

We are happy to report that responses to the idea of an anthology on ecotourism in Scandinavia were very positive, and most Scandinavian researchers working with tourism and the environment have actually contributed chapters to the anthology. We are very grateful for your time, ideas and knowledge! In particular, we would like to express our gratitude to Klas Sandell, who has been very enthusiastic about the project from the
beginning, and made a number of suggestions that greatly improved the
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Stefan Gössling and Johan Hultman
Helsingborg, November 2005
Introduction

Ecotourism has lately been conceptualized as tourism that is environmentally and socially benign, contributing both to local economies and the conservation of protected areas, while educating the traveller about local nature and culture (e.g. Fennell, 1999; Honey, 1999; Weaver, 2002; Cater, 2004). Definitions such as the one used by the International Ecotourism Society – ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people’ – are commonly found in the literature with some variation, i.e. regarding the educational element or the motivation of ecotourists (Fennell, 1999; Weaver, 2002), leading to distinctions of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ (Weaver and Lawton, 2002) or ‘minimalist’ and ‘comprehensive’ (Weaver, 2005a) ideal forms of ecotourism. Consequently, ecotourists are understood as people with a profound interest in nature-based forms of tourism (see also Wurzinger, Chapter 11, this volume), and ecotourism has been advertized as a sustainable, ‘positive’ form of tourism (i.e. UN General Assembly, 2003).

Ziffer’s (1989) observation that ecotourism is an ‘activity, a philosophy and a model of development’ fits very well in the context of Scandinavia, where ecotourism has become an important economic activity fully exposed to market forces, even though supported by governmental bodies and tourism organizations as a model of regional and economic development (Hall, Chapter 17, this volume). However, while the motives behind the development of certified forms of ecotourism in Sweden might be largely idealist, ecotourism as a theoretical concept is generally not as well understood by the public as by tour operators in Scandinavia. In Norway, for instance, ecotourism is considered to be an irrelevant concept, as most tourism activities generally take place in natural settings and are implicitly being understood as sustainable and ‘eco’ (Viken, Chapter 4, this volume).
Likewise, Icelanders (Gössling and Alkimou, Chapter 5, this volume) and Danes (Kaae, Chapter 2, this volume) have developed an understanding of tourism that corresponds to ‘ecotourism’: sustainable tourism taking place in natural environments, where environmental conservation and learning about nature are self-evident components of the overall tourism experience.

A broad majority of Scandinavians, as well as tour operators and tourism organizations, thus generally conceptualize Scandinavian tourism as ecotourism. This view corresponds to scientific findings that many forms of tourism in Scandinavia meet the requirements of ecotourism. For instance, few of the many negative consequences of tourism described elsewhere (e.g. Matthiesen and Wall, 1982; Hunter and Green, 1995; Weaver, 2005b) seem to occur in this region, and Fredman et al. (Chapter 3, this volume) thus argue that a large share of tourism in Scandinavia could be regarded as ‘non-institutionalized’, i.e. non-certified ecotourism. Examples of such tourism include, for instance, second homes (Müller and Jansson, 2004), farm tourism (Gössling and Mattsson, 2002), mountain tourism (Fredman et al., 2001; Fredman and Lindberg, Chapter 10, this volume) or indigenous tourism (Pettersson, Chapter 15, this volume). Hunting tourism, on the other hand, is largely an ecologically sustainable form of tourism in Scandinavia, but it faces great challenges in becoming culturally sustainable, as this ritualized, male-dominated activity is at the heart of complex local identities where ‘place’ and ‘belonging’ are essential elements of *gemeinschaft* – social relations between individuals based on close personal and family ties. Should these obstacles be overcome, however, Scandinavian hunting tourism could be an interesting example of a consumptive form of ecotourism (Gunnarsdotter, Chapter 16, this volume).

Certified forms of tourism have emerged in all Scandinavian countries (cf. Gössling, Chapter 6, this volume). However, Sweden remains so far the only country that has developed a label for ecotourism: *Naturens Bästa* (Nature’s Best). The label was launched during the UN International Year of Ecotourism in 2002 and developed by the Swedish Ecotourism Association in cooperation with the Swedish Travel and Tourism Association and the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SEA, 2005a). The products labelled with Nature’s Best should, in coherence with the Swedish Ecotourism Association’s goals, contribute to nature conservation and preservation of the cultural heritage of the destination. Nature’s Best is a certification for arrangements, not tour operators per se. Within 3 years (2002–2005), some 220 certified ecotourism arrangements offered by 70 operators have emerged in Sweden (for a more detailed discussion of *Naturens Bästa* see Gössling, Chapter 6, this volume and Fredman et al., Chapter 3, this volume).

No study has as yet explored the mechanisms of ecotourism marketing and promotion in Scandinvia. There is evidence, however, that some arrangements certified with *Naturens Bästa* have attracted large tourist numbers even in the most remote areas (see, for instance, Folke et al., Chapter 14, this volume). The success of the label might largely be ascribed to two factors: first, the Swedish Ecotourism Association focused on
marketing as a key element of its planning and organization, and developed a network with national and international organizations with a strong focus on national media. This is evident from the website of the Swedish Ecotourism Association, which provides a ‘pressroom’, with continuously updated information and photographs available for use by journalists. The website is professionally managed, and won the Swedish Publishing Prize in 2004. Secondly, as has been argued by Gössling (Chapter 8, this volume) and Hultman and Andersson Cederholm (Chapter 7, this volume), ecotourism in Sweden is marketed as an extraordinary experience rather than a benign, environmentally and socially beneficial form of tourism. There is thus a semantic shift from marketing the environmentally and socially benign character of ecotourism arrangements to presenting the experience-character of the journey, i.e. in focusing on individual benefits in booking an experience-product. This semantic shift might have been equally important in explaining the success of ecotourism in Sweden because it overcomes a problem common to all ‘green’ products: their higher costs are borne by the individual, while their benefits are enjoyed by society. In terms of the strategic expansion of certified ecotourism, this might be one important lesson to be learned from ecotourism development in Scandinavia.

Economically, ecotourism in Scandinavia is of great importance, and may account for a large share of the overall turnover from tourism in Scandinavia. Certified forms of ecotourism and the income derived from these are minor in comparison, however. It needs to be considered, though, that this revenue will often be made in peripheral areas with substantial structural problems. Particularly in rural areas, where lower incomes are the rule, it can make major contribution to livelihoods. In such areas, there are usually few alternative income opportunities, and tourism thus gains additional importance in diversifying these economies. Often, ecotourism entrepreneurs might also be able to capture additional income from value-added products sold directly to customers. For instance, farm products might be sold at higher prices in farm boutiques than in supermarkets, and a larger share of the gains will accrue directly to the farms. Thus, ecotourism and similar small-scale, entrepreneurial tourism businesses visualize possibilities for combining rural value-capture (Marsden and Smith, 2005) with economic, social and ecological sustainability.

**Scandinavian Images**

Scandinavia is largely understood as a region with vast natural resources, including glaciers, volcanoes and geysers in Iceland, fjords in Norway, extensive forest and lake areas in Sweden and a great number of beaches in Denmark. These images of Scandinavia can be found in a wide variety of guidebooks and even in the scientific literature. One example is Boniface and Cooper's *World Tourism* (2005, p. 152): ‘Scandinavia’s tourism resources are the uncrowded, unpolluted countryside, the spectacular scenery of the mountains and many coastal regions, the islands and holiday beaches, and
Many Scandinavian countries have themselves created and maintained similar stereotypes, reinforcing the notion of Scandinavia as a region with great nature-based tourism potential. For instance, Visit Sweden (2005) distributed the following text in their 2005 brochure:

Because Sweden stretches so far north-to-south, there are dramatic differences between the various regions of the country. In the north is mythical Lapland, often called Europe’s last wilderness; with its endless mountain expanses and exhilarating nature; with exotic, world-famous natural phenomena like the midnight sun, the northern lights and the arctic darkness and cold; with the Sami people – Scandinavia's aboriginal population and their fascinating culture, historical as well as contemporary, and not least with the world-famous IceHotel, built afresh each year from thousands of tons of snow and ice from the Torne river.

(Visit Sweden, 2005)

The text goes on to describe central Sweden with its ‘[…] blue-tinted mountains and deep forests cut through by roaring rivers’, as well as the South with its ‘vast fertile plains, its castles and manor houses, rolling hills, whispering deciduous forests and mile-long beaches’ (Visit Sweden, 2005).

Similar representations of nature in advertising materials can be found in all Scandinavian countries, even though these might vary between images of untamed wilderness (Iceland), majestic landscapes (Norway) and beach-focused family holidays (Denmark). In short, the image of tourism in Scandinavia is largely built on natural assets and nature-based recreational activities (cf. Bostedt and Mattsson, 1995; Gössling, 1997; Vail and Hultkrantz, 2000; Dupuis, 2004). These discursive, pre-travel constructions of Scandinavia as a multitude of places of nature can be assumed to structure tourist experiences and even tourist ways of seeing, thus continuously recreating this ‘natural’ image of Scandinavia (cf. Braun, 2002). This, in turn, might well generate enlarged markets for ecotourism ventures, a visualization of good examples and a greater understanding of ecotourism theory.

A Regional Approach to Ecotourism

In recent years, public, scientific and governmental interest in ecotourism in Scandinavia has grown substantially. Extended forests, rivers and lakes allow for a great variety of nature-based activities, such as hiking, picking berries, collecting mushrooms, rock climbing, fishing, kayaking, sailing, snow scooter driving, bird watching, dog sledding and hunting, making Scandinavia a unique region from a nature-based tourism perspective. Furthermore, a considerable percentage of Scandinavian countries are now designated national parks and other protected areas, which, along with 22 World Heritage Sites (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2005; UNESCO, 2005), form important tourist attractions. Certified tourism has also
experienced rapid growth in recent years, and the Swedish certification Naturens Bästa includes a wide variety of specialized offers. Scandinavian societies take a great interest in nature and outdoor activities, with the Right of Public Access – a unique common law granting access to virtually all areas – (Sandell, Chapter 9, this volume), being a cultural manifestation of this. In many contexts, aspects of Scandinavian tourism – including the systematic creation of new markets and products in peripheral areas (Nilsson, Chapter 12, this volume), as well as the strategic and innovation-based development of certified ecotourism products – are thus of considerable academic, public and cooperate interest. However, little has been written about ecotourism in Scandinavia, and Ecotourism in Scandinavia: Lessons in Theory and Practice is the first attempt to comprehensively describe, analyse and evaluate aspects of Scandinavian ecotourism, including overviews of the state of ecotourism development in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland, with a focus on aspects of sustainability, scale, marketing, certification, participation, education and organization.

Besides Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland, Finland is the fifth country belonging to the Nordic countries. However, because of their common history, culture and language, this book focuses on Scandinavia. As Finland has seen strong growth in nature-based tourism as well, and particularly since some Finnish policy issues are of importance even in the context of this book, links between Finland and the Scandinavian countries are emphasized where appropriate. Likewise, Greenland is an autonomous region politically associated with Denmark, which has seen a strong growth in tourist arrivals in recent years, even though absolute arrival numbers are still low. Some information on tourism in this large island is provided in Gössling and Alkimou (Chapter 5, this volume).

Global Environmental Change and Ecotourism

In the future, global environmental change, including temperature increases, sea level rise, land alterations, changes in precipitation patterns and extreme climate and weather events might have a wide range of consequences for tourism, and for nature-based tourism in particular (Gössling and Hall, 2005a). Global warming, for instance, has been predicted to be in the range of 1.4–5.8°C by 2100 (IPCC, 2001), with a likely scenario of a 3°C warming by the year 2100 (Kerr, 2004, p. 932). Recent research indicates, however, that the range might very well be larger, with up to 11.5°C warming by 2100 (Stainforth et al., 2005). Global warming will affect northern regions in particular, which will have serious implications for northern ecosystems (ACIA, 2004). Some of these changes can already be felt. For instance, ticks have become more frequent in central Swedish forests (Lindgren and Gustafson, 2001), which might influence tourism based on forest resources. Models also predict substantial changes in Scandinavian precipitation patterns within a scenario of climate change (Xu, 2000; SWECLIM, 2002). Increases in precipitation, most of which are projected to
occur in winter, will contribute to increased lake inflows, lake levels and run-off, the latter leading to greater frequency of riparian flooding (cf. Palmer and Räisänen, 2002). During summer, drier conditions, exacerbated by greater evaporation, will reduce lake inflows and lake levels. Higher temperatures and decreasing water levels in summer may also affect thermal stratification, evaporation and species composition of lakes (Hulme et al., 2003). This might in consequence influence different forms of ecotourism related to, for example, bird watching or fishing.

Increasing temperatures will also influence suitable climatic conditions for skating and other ice-related activities, as the number of days with temperatures below 0°C is likely to decline substantially (cf. SWECLIM, 2002). Ice skating, which has a long history as an important recreational winter activity in Scandinavia, is one of the activities likely to be affected. These are but a few examples of how ecotourism might be affected by global environmental change. On the other hand, ecotourism marketing is presently emphasizing sensual experiences rather than specific places, thus making ecotourism geographically independent. This characteristic presents the possibility for emerging ecotourism discourses to handle and even ‘internalize’ global environmental change, since all kinds of being in nature can be packaged and marketed as experiences (Andersson Cederholm and Hultman, 2005). Contradictory trends manifest themselves when ecotourism theory and practice are juxtaposed, something that is at the heart of this book.

Ecotourism in Scandinavia: an Outlook

Certified ecotourism is expanding and currently entering the spheres of business tourism. For instance, conference tourism is now promoted as an incentive-based form of experience-ecotourism: ‘Have your conference on a Sami mountain farm, gather your employees for a meeting in Hälssingland’s bear-forests or for a kayak-tour in the Stockholm archipelago’ (authors’ translation; SEA, 2005b). This is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it means that ecotourism – and thus nature – is made visible in new ways. This in turn has the result that nature can be acted upon in new ways (cf. Thrift, 2000), specifically from a management perspective. Instead of being a scientific object as in the case of ‘traditional’ ecotourism practices, nature becomes a bookable product in a context of human resource management and hence an aspect of the development of strategic business advantages.

Ecology is framed as an economic resource within global circuits of capital accumulation, not as a scientific knowledge field or material/industrial resource base. This is a shift in perspective that has the potential to profoundly influence how we view nature. It might mean that ‘nature’ is more visibly incorporated in ‘culture’, both semantically and in practice, leading to a greater understanding and interest for interactions between tourists and nature. At the same time this shift in perspective highlights how tourism becomes progressively more difficult to define as a
discreet business category. There really is no such thing as ‘a tourist’, so ecotourists might perhaps more aptly be termed eco-consumers. It is consumers that are transported out into nature, and ecotourism operators are now producers of nature, mediators and part of the product. This line of reasoning is, furthermore, well in line with how Swedish tourism managers work to implement the definition of tourism in local and regional economies as ‘displaced consumption’, thus encompassing all points of business transactions in a given area between visitors and locals.

The issue of transportation leads to the second reason why a fusion between human resource management and nature opens up interesting vistas. It is well established that ecotourism can only be ecologically sustainable if air transport is not part of the trip (Gössling and Hall, 2005b; see also Flögnerfeldt, Chapter 13, this volume; Folke et al., Chapter 14, this volume). However, Nature’s Best has recently invited large hotel chains, airlines and the national railways to become active partners of the certification network, and thus part of the ecotourism product. This signals a proactive attitude to the development, internationalization and integration of ecotourism, and also a strategic initiative to further strengthen the legitimacy of nature as experience-product where sustainability might be embedded, but in ways invisible for the consumer. Hence, it seems as if ecotourism and nature are becoming part of an agenda that is far more extensive than a small and specialized segment of a wider conceptualization of nature-based tourism. At the same time, to place nature firmly within a commercial logic raises urgent issues of democracy and access to nature. This is discussed in several chapters in this book, and were we to choose one single problem in the future development of Scandinavian ecotourism it would have to be this: how can we deal with the commoditization of nature while at the same time securing access and the sustainable use of it?

References


