

Eco-Education Project “Nature Interpreters in Ecotourism”

E.S. Shestackova

Siberian Federal University, Krasnoyarsk, 8-905-087-15-76, shestackov@yandex.ru

This paper explains a special role of interpretive tour guide training in the context of ecotourism development in Krasnoyarsk region. It examines three multi-level training programs aimed at students, park rangers and local people. A series of guide-training programs was undertaken as a part of the author’s on-going research on ecotour guide training in Krasnoyarsk region.

Modern urbanized industrial lifestyle makes people dream of escaping from hectic stressful city life and enjoying pristine wilderness. That makes nature based tourism a worldwide growing industry which if skillfully managed provides immeasurable economic, social and other benefits to travelers and the communities they visit.

Krasnoyarsk region due to its geographical position is called “the centre of Russia, the crossroads of civilizations” [1], “the heart of Siberia and Urasian continent”. [2] It fascinates its visitors by wonderful and still largely pristine nature and exquisite indigenous cultures. There are a number of natural zones and picturesque landscapes and a great variety of animal species. For a long time all the natural amenities of the region: impressive snow-capped peaks of the mountains and deep canyons, the boundless and thick taiga and mighty rivers - were closed to tourists and its beauties were kept secret.

Now the administration of Krasnoyarsk region claims to develop nature-based ecological tourism. [3] The reason for growing interest in ecotourism is its ecological, cultural and social aspects along with an economic imperative. But though the region is blessed with nature beauty there is a risk that despite many benefits of ecotourism it could also affect the environmental and social qualities of destination areas adversely. Many tourism organizations and operators could just cash in on the marketing advantages of ecotourism, with little recognition of its key ideals and principles.

We reviewed a wide body of literature to identify and define what ecotourism is and what its key principles are. D. Morgan states that the term "ecotourism" originated in the early 1990’s in response to the growing interest among travelers in enriching their travel experiences through direct contact with the natural environment, living history, and local cultures. [4] It is Hector Ceballos-Lascurain who is credited with coining the term ‘ecotourism’ in 1983 when describing a new form of nature travel. The founder of the trend defines ecotourism as “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low impact, and provides for beneficially active socioeconomic involvement of local populations”. [5] Since that time numerous definitions have been offered to describe ecotourism. As it is seen from Table 1 the wording could differ but the main elements are practically immutable.

Table 1.

Ecotourism is a “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.”	The International Ecotourism Society [6]
“Ecotourism is tourism which combines the elements of education, recreation and adventure with the aim of observing and experiencing nature”	J. Laarman & P. Durst [7]
‘Tourism to natural areas that fosters environmental understanding, appreciation and conservation and sustains the culture and well being of communities’	M. Young [8]
‘Ecologically sustainable tourism that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation’	Ecotourism Association of Australia [9]
Eco-tourism is "Tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the objective of admiring, studying and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any cultural features that may be found there.'	H. Ceballos-Lascurain [10]
‘Ecotourism is nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable’	National Ecotourism Strategy [11]
‘Ecotourism is a special form of nature-based tourism – special in at least two ways. First, it endeavours not only to provide an enjoyable experience for visitors’, second, it does ‘ so in a way that is both ecologically and culturally responsible’	B. Weiler & S.H. Ham [12]
Ecotourism is ‘nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable’	Commonwealth of Australia [13]

As we see most experts (J. Laarman, P. Durst, M. Young, H. Ceballos-Lascurian, S.H. Ham, etc.) as well as leading ecotourism organizations agree that ecoeducation with a high degree of nature interpretation aimed at

improving visitors' awareness, sensitizing them to environmental issues, and caring about the places they visit is an integral part of sustainable ecotourism. [14] S.H. Ham and B. Weiler state that the guide has a pivotal role to play in the ecotourism experience [12]

In the view of ecotourism practitioners ecoguides or nature interpreters are an obvious and direct medium to communicate visitors' awareness. These specialists provide relevant information concerning flora and fauna of the site, its history, legend, etc. in an enjoyable for visitors way. According to American interpreter trainers P. Weiler & S.H. Ham, tour guides facilitate meaningful and memorable experiences for all visitors and regulate tourists. They emphasize that "interpretive guiding helps engender an intellectual, emotional and even spiritual connection between people and places as much as a physical experience with land and water". [12] J. Sweeting asserts that "accurate and emotional interpretation of sites and features, skillful monitoring and modeling of appropriate environmental and cultural behaviour, can maximize the positive impacts of tourism and minimize the negative ones, both in the short and long term". This idea is echoed by Australian educationalists E. Beckmann [16] and A. Jelinek [18]. Their studies show that in most countries interpretation methods employed for leading ecotour groups and managing the visitor's experience give the visitors the sense of emotional involvement and help mitigate negative environmental impacts. [18]

Moreover, in the ecotourism context interpretation and education can serve two distinct roles, that of satisfying visitor information needs and of visitor management. The values and attitudes of tourists are beginning to change, and tourists are now demanding more environmentally responsible services and products as well as information. Tourists want to learn about the environments they visit as well as understand their connections with a broader environment.

Sri Lankan experts point out that "ecotourism activities often involve active participation, which allows for the visitors to appreciate the importance of natural and cultural conservation." [17] Providing education and interpretation as a part of ecotourism experience is most likely to make people aware of environmental issues following their experience and be actively involved in. Thus, education and interpretation creates the potential to provide ecotourists with environmental consciousness and facilitate long-term attitudinal and behavioral changes.

So, ecoguides and nature interpreters are considered a positive force for conservation and sustainable tourism and are often associated with the management of protected areas. In accordance with international practice professional naturalist interpretive training programs are available through national park departments and conservation organizations in different regions to provide prospective trainees with knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment and skills necessary to bridge natural attractions to visitors. Trainees should get skills how to create patterns of responsible behaviour of individual visitors in an enjoyable way.

Therefore, ecotourism education in whole and naturalist interpretive training in particular should be considered as the most important field as far as future development of ecotourism is concerned. [18] Thus, education of ecoguides and nature interpreters should be an essential component of sustainable and ecotourism development in Krasnoyarsk region. However, this aspect is still underestimated and this actual problem is overlooked. In Russia there are few educational centres where ecoguides could get professional training and practically no programs for nature interpreters. [19] To make things worse, in Krasnoyarsk region there are no educational establishments, where interpretive training programs are available. We have made an attempt to bridge this gap.

A series of three guide-training programs was undertaken as a part of the author's on-going research on ecotour guide training in Krasnoyarsk krai. The content areas of the interpretive guiding curriculum developed for the two courses aimed at nature park Ergaki rangers and representatives of local community were identical. The curriculum included eight following modules:

- Introduction to ecotourism tourism on protected areas
- Ecotourism principles
- The role of the guide including minimising negative impact
- Visitor profiles and expectations
- The interpretive approach to communication
- Flora, fauna, geographical description of the park
- History of the park
- Tourist attraction and legends

The modules can be logically subdivided into theoretical and competence-building ones.

The first program (80 hours) was organized specially for rangers of Nature Park Ergaki. Twenty participants attended the course. The course included a great deal of discussions, bright presentations, simulations and role plays. The panel discussion on the topic "Guided Tour - the Role for Wildlife Conservation" produced a lively discussion among the participants.

The objective of this course was to augment park rangers' the stock of knowledge in issues connected with Russian and foreign practices in park visitors' management. The key target of the program was not only to familiarize the rangers with the principles of ecotourism and inform them about the amenities of the park, but to make an attempt to change existing stereotype that their main function in the park is to control and punish tourists. The major emphasis was made on explaining that the best results in keeping ecological balance in the park can be achieved by managing, informing, involving and inspiring visitors. However, the key goal for ecotourism is to enhance people's attitudes and actions towards their environment. In many instances this could be the major

contribution of ecotourism, by exposing a wider cross-section of the community to the need to value and protect their natural and cultural areas, resources and heritage. The rationale underpinning this approach is that by providing accurate and compelling interpretation of sites and features, and monitoring and modeling appropriate environmental and cultural behaviour, the positive impacts of tourism will be maximized and the negative impacts minimized, both in the short and long term. [12]

Apart from this, the trainees were taken for a day trip to the Nature Reserve “Stolby” to gain first-hand experience of the protected area tourist management challenges and practices of interaction with visitors. The visit also provided an opportunity to the participants to learn about the sights, habitats, flora and fauna of the site.

The second program was aimed at training local people to be interpretive guides. It was organized in collaboration with the administration of Nature Park “Ergaki” which realizes that, on the one hand, involving representatives of local community in providing services for ecotourism helps achieve both ecological and economic sustainability and, on the other hand, ecotourism enables communities to thrive economically while preserving and restoring the resources on which the travel and tourism industry and local communities depend. [21] Based on the request from the administration of Nature Park “Ergaki” the panel of four trainers conducted the training course in the village of Ermakovstoye (April, 23-29, 2007). Thirty two trainees joined the course of which 24 participants were from Ermakovskoye and the rest from the adjacent villages (Tanzibey, Grigoryevka and Nizhniy Suetuk).

Besides the mentioned above curriculum the training course included a broadened introduction to Nature Park amenities, opportunities and threats alongside with its conservation values and the need for long-term conservation and management.

In addition to a theoretical block the trainees were taken to a six-day trip to the most visited areas of the Nature Park “Ergaki” from May, 25 to June, 3, 2007 as a part of the training curriculum. The trainees were exposed to the general habits and habitats of plants and wild animals. They conducted field surveys and exercises to collect first-hand information on the itineraries, resources and existing visitor management practices.

Through working in groups, collation of information and group discussion were arranged and presentations were delivered. The overall knowledge gained as well as the practical skills of trainees is reflected in the projects of individual trips prepared by them. Assessment was based on written examination and viva voce. Most trainees successfully completed the course. Twenty trainees received certificates. The post-program monitoring shows that 15 participants of the program work as guides and apply gained skills and knowledge to practice and get additional sustainable income.

The third program was organized for training nature interpreters to accompany individual foreign tourists and groups. As statistics show event tourism and ecotourism in Siberia is getting popular among foreigners [22] as the region attracts tourists by its natural beauty [23]. The most attractive destinations are reported to be the famous Rocky Pillars, the Nature Park “Ergaki” in the Sayan Mountain, the Yenisei River and faraway and wild parts of the Krasnoyarsk North [22].

The two-year program has a number of peculiarities as its objective is not only to train ecoguides with the definite set of knowledge and skills, but to educate ecotour guides who “are expected to act as role models for environmentally and culturally sensitive behaviour, assist in natural resource management, provide education and interpretation, but what is the most important in this respect, act as a cultural mediator between clients and the local community” [24].

Therefore, in addition to a standard curriculum, the trainees received intensive course “English for ecoguides and nature interpreters”. The training focuses on studying the relevant lexical units in authentic texts for further enhancing their ability to communicate with international tourists. The program puts an emphasis on communication formulas, cross-cultural aspects of communication, the culture and history of the visitors’ countries. After completing a course the trainees have the necessary language competence and skills, which allow them to interact with foreign tourists on different topics, concerning accommodation, weather, tourist itineraries, tourist outfits, nature destinations, flora and fauna. The trainees can interpret natural and cultural heritage of a destination to say nothing of ability to make small talk.

The trainees had regular one-day trips to a Nature Reserve “Stolby” where they made several researches and photo-sessions. Moreover, they conducted guided tours in English for a group of students of SFU and for British missionaries.

Every summer (2006, 2007, 2008) the participants had a one-week practice in a camp site in Nature Park “Ergaki”. In 2006 they had a “plunge into ecotourism English”. They examined habitats, itineraries, flora and fauna. The studies resulted in designing virtual excursion to some itineraries in Nature Park “Ergaki”. In 2007 the trainees practiced conducting guided tours and in 2008 participated in a volunteer project.

As the program took a rather long period and the requirements were very demanding only 6 of 15 trainees have completed their training successfully and received certificate.

This is the first-ever eco-guide training in Krasnoyarsk region, the project team is compiling an eco-guide training manual in English.

The results of the literature review, pilot study of ecotour guide training show that ecoguides are the personal ‘face’ of any organization, whether it is a natural resource management agency, tour operator or local conservation group, who have a duty of care to host communities and the environment. To perform the numerous roles required of them by their employers and clients, guides must possess a range of knowledge and skills, most of which can be delivered or enhanced through effective training programs. It is also proved that public and private sectors involved

in ecotourism could greatly benefit from training programs dealing with interpreting natural history and ecology in the context of protected areas. The results of pilot eco-education project “Nature Interpreters in Ecotourism”, consisting of three program indicate that there is a steady interest for this field from the Nature Park administration as having qualified nature interpreters in staff is a perfect opportunity to raise protected areas image, local people who can get additional sustainable income from providing guided ecotours and students who see the prospects of serving foreigners. Therefore there is a scope for further research in this area to provide a more definitive picture of ecotour guide training and training needs.

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