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COSTA RICA AND KENYA AS ECOTOURISM DESTINATIONS

Country Strategies vs. Visitor Perceptions

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World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) “is the forum for business leaders in the Travel & Tourism industry. With Chief Executives of some one hundred of the world's leading Travel & Tourism companies as its Members, WTTC has a unique mandate and overview on all matters related to Travel & Tourism.” (WTTC)

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) “is a specialized agency of the United Nations and the leading international organization in the field of tourism. It serves as a global forum for tourism policy issues and a practical source of tourism know-how.” (UNWTO)

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) “is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting ecotourism. Founded in 1990, TIES has been in the forefront of the development of ecotourism, providing guidelines and standards, training, technical assistance, research and publications. TIES' global network of ecotourism professionals and travelers is leading the efforts to make tourism a viable tool for conservation, protection of bio-cultural diversity, and sustainable community development.” (TIES)

Earth Council Alliance (ECA) “seeks to help foster cooperation among the organizations around the world which share its commitment to the achievement of a sustainable development pathway to the human future with a particular focus on the community in grassroots leve. [They] actively mobilize support for the work of autonomous Earth Council members and other partners and organizations; NGOs, business, governments, academic and indigenous cultures.” (ECA)

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) “is the United Nations system’s designated entity for addressing environmental issues at the global and regional level. Its mandate is to coordinate the development of environmental policy consensus by keeping the global environment under review and bringing emerging issues to the attention of governments and the international community for action.” (UNEP Organization Profile 3)

Environmentalism not only wants to conserve the natural environment, but also improve and protect the quality of it through changes to environmentally harmful human activities. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

Sustainable tourism has three principles that refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development. It should try to establish a balance between these three dimensions in order to guarantee its long term sustainability. (UNEP) ”Thus, sustainable tourism should: (UNWTO)

- Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.
- Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
- Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.”

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Tourism industry

For ages people have been interested in exploring the world. They have migrated around the globe in search of unexploited natural resources, new habitats, and shorter routes between destinations, or just for the sake of discovering places where no one else has ever been before. This human curiosity later came to be one of the world's largest industries, tourism industry. Today, tourism is one of the largest industry sectors in the world, and consequently one of the most socio-economically and environmentally influential trades (Buckley 1994, 661). Tourism industry is an extremely wide concept, and defining what it means and what kind of travel is included depends heavily on the scope and context where the discussion takes place. The basic idea of tourism lies in the movement of people, and this mobility has increased considerably in the past decades creating one of world's the largest industries. There are various reasons why people choose to travel, such as business, pleasure, or education, but leisure and recreation, or pleasure is the most popular one. (Mathur 2007.)

Tourism is a field of study in several different disciplines (geography, economics, business and marketing, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history), which further increases the ambiguity of the term and complicates the definition of tourism. A single definition of tourism is hardly suitable for different disciplines; therefore, a certain foundation for the definition is a useful starting point for research. Williams (1998) states that the three core elements of tourism include the notions that tourism involves temporary travel from one's home to another location, the motivations for tourism originate from a variety of sources that can include business, pleasure, education, health, and religion, and that "the activity of tourism requires an accessible supporting infrastructure of transport, accommodation, marketing systems, entertainment and attractions that together form the basis for travelling." (Williams 1998, 3.)

In the recent years, a wider scale of different types of tourism has become more accessible for travelers. Sustainable tourism has significantly increased its profile and importance in tourists' minds, and consequently tour operators, accommodation providers, and transportation providers increasingly take sustainability into account and attempt to redesign their operations. Mathur (2007) identifies certain characteristics of sustainable tourism; it is informative for the tourist, supports integrity of place (tourists patronize businesses that emphasize and support the local area), benefits local residents, conserves resources, respects local culture and tradition, does not abuse its product and thus participates in sustaining natural habitats, heritage sites etcetera, strives for quality, not quantity, and lastly, sustainable tourism means great trips that leave the tourists feeling satisfied, excited and invigorated. Ecotourism employs the same principles as sustainable tourism, but as a concept it is narrower with stricter guidelines (see Appendix 1). However, its popularity has been steadily increasing, and it has become a branding method for countries and companies in the attempt to preserve the nature and attract the conscious tourist.

1.2 Focus of the research

In the past three decades, a massive amount of research has been conducted in the field of tourism, and further sustainable tourism and ecotourism (e.g. Buckley 1994, 2004; Honey 2003, 2008; Weaver 1999). The Central American nation Costa Rica has been a prime example of ecotourism, a relatively restrictive concept of environmentally conscious tourism, since the early days of ecotourism mainly due to its phenomenal biodiversity within such a small geographical area, and the conservation and education efforts the country has invested in (Honey 2008). Because of this special ‘status’, Costa Rica has been the subject of numerous studies about ecotourism and all its aspects; its impacts on nature, wildlife, and economic environment, its contribution to conservation efforts, and the downsides of ecotourism, most importantly whether it truly is as worthy and beneficial a concept as argued. Costa Rica has been the early playground for researchers, a country where theories and practices could be tested, measured, and evaluated. A major portion of the early ecotourism research is based on experiences from Costa Rica. For the reasons mentioned above, Costa Rica was chosen as the first case country for this research.

In the recent years, multiple other countries have profiled themselves as ecotourism destinations as well, including countries with incredible biodiversity and often unique natural wonders. One of these countries is Kenya, a nation located on the equator in eastern Africa. The wildlife found in Kenya is exceptionally diverse, and safari tours around the country’s national parks attract thousands of visitors every year. Kenya has realized the potential of the local nature, and has thus implemented measures to conserve the habitat which is home to numerous different species of animals. Therefore, Kenya was chosen as the second case country. While both Costa Rica and Kenya are known as ecotourism destinations, and both emphasize ecotourism in their national tourism promotion, it is currently unclear how visitors to these countries perceive the destinations in reality, and how the countries are portrayed in the travelers’ recaps of their journeys. This research paper aims to uncover how visitors see these countries, and whether ecotourism was an important factor when making the decision to travel to a particular destination.

The focus of this research is on identifying the characteristics of ecotourism and separating it from other types of tourism, and subsequently looking for these features in visitor perceptions. The aim is to analyze a sample of authentic depictions of vacations the visitors to Costa Rica or Kenya post on different discussion forums, and discovering the underlying motivations for traveling to these destinations. The results are then compared with the tourism strategies of Costa Rica and Kenya in order to see whether there is a correlation between the efforts to promote ecotourism and visitors' motivations, experiences, and satisfaction. This study intends to start building a bridge between country level strategizing and individuals traveling to the country.

1.3 Objective and structure of the study

The objective of this study is to examine Costa Rica and Kenya as tourist destinations, and more specifically as ecotourism destinations. The focus is on the tourists who travel to Costa Rica or Kenya, and how they perceive and talk about the destination. Both Costa Rica and Kenya has invested a considerable amount of effort into branding the country as an ecotourism destination and encouraging tour operators and lodging providers to adapt to the principles of ecotourism. An interpretation is then made whether the ecotourism strategies of these countries align with the visitors' perceptions of the destinations. Hence, the main research problem is as follows:

How do visitors perceive Costa Rica and Kenya as ecotourism destinations?

This research problem is then further divided into the following sub-objectives:

1. *How have Costa Rica and Kenya branded themselves as ecotourism destinations?*
2. *How visitors to Costa Rica and Kenya perceive the destinations?*
3. *How do visitor perceptions align with the countries' desired image as ecotourism destinations?*

This introductory section provides the first insights into the research problem and preliminary reasoning why this research focuses on ecotourism. Also, an overview of the tourism industry is given in order to set a solid foundation for the study. The second section continues with an overview of ecotourism, its history and unique characteristics, and it attempts to reach a conclusion about the definition and guidelines of ecotourism. Ecotourism as a concept is very restrictive, and therefore it is important to distinguish ecotourism from other types of tourism, such as wildlife tourism, adventure tourism, and nature tourism. These ecotourism guidelines will help differentiate between conventional tourism, nature tourism and ecotourism. Additionally, it is noteworthy to distinguish the ecotourists from the other types of tourists. According to different literature, a prospective ecotourist can be demographically identified and separated from the regular sun and beach tourist. However, it is unlikely that the literature can exhaustively define who ecotourists are, but rather a vague generalization can be made. Regardless, this profile for an ecotourist can be reflected with the profiles of the actual tourists in order to see if there are any similarities and differences. Towards the end of the second section, a theoretical framework is created for this research. The framework identifies the process a visitor goes through to form individual perceptions of the destinations, and how these perceptions affect experiences and satisfaction. Destination satisfaction is one of the most important factors when ensuring the continued success of the destination, and also ecotourism.

Furthermore, a detailed narrative is provided regarding the research design of this study, including the measures taken when determining the appropriate approach to this research. The data collection process is then described step by step from choosing the type of data and the primary source for the data to the final conclusions. The data analysis section explains how exactly this sample data was analyzed and interpreted. Chapters four and five begin with a brief overview of the countries on a general level, as well as a summary of the countries' ecotourism strategies, because being familiar with the country is essential for the purposes of this study, since without knowledge of the country it would be challenging to analyze the travel reports, and properly understand the issues of regarding the research. The chapters present the findings of the data analysis by country, and these findings are then compared to the respective countries' ecotourism strategy in order to determine how the visitor perceptions align with the strategy.

Ultimately this research attempts to analyze the visitor perceptions and determine whether the visitors value the ecotourism industries of Costa Rica and Kenya. The final chapter of this study examines the research questions in terms of the results for both countries, discusses the findings of the research, as well as offers suggestions for future research.

2 ECOTOURISM

2.1 From tourism to ecotourism

It is challenging to define tourism unambiguously as there is no generally accepted clarification on what constitutes the tourism industry. For example, the extent to which restaurant services are included in the definition is open to interpretation. (see Fennell 2003, 1.) The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) provides a general definition of tourism as "an industry providing services to travelers, from transportation to accommodation to entertainment and ancillary services, such as currency exchange" (see Lominé & Edmunds 2007, 185). Tourist, as defined by the United Nations' World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), is a "person travelling for pleasure for a period of at least one night, but no more than one year ... with the main purpose of the visit being other than to engage in activities for remuneration in the place(s) visited (see Fennell 2003, 2). Today, travel and tourism employs approximately 284 million people worldwide and accounts for 9.8 percent of the world's GDP (Economic Impact Analysis 2016).

In the past decades, mass tourism to sunny beach locations has been the extremely successful. As Honey (2008, 10) mentions, it has almost become synonymous with the 'four Ss' of tourism; sea, sun, sand and sex. In recent years, the market for mass tourism and the four Ss, or as more commonly quoted, the three S tourism (excluding the sex) (Hampton & Christensen 2007, 1000), has matured as the 2001 UNWTO analysis on sun-and-sea resort tourism shows (see Honey 2008, 7). Tourists are now moving towards different kinds of vacations, because laying on a seaside beach sunbathing is not enough anymore. In addition, people tend to be more aware of environmental issues and socio-cultural problems in the countries they travel in and consequently a new market for alternative tourism has opened. Alternative tourism covers the forms of tourism that promote opposite approach to mass tourism. (Fennell 2003, 4.) Usually these alternative forms somehow integrate nature as a vital part. This can be seen in the different forms of alternative tourism; nature, wildlife, and adventure tourism, as well as ecotourism (Honey 2008, 7). As ecotourism is the main object of this study, it is important to distinguish ecotourism from the other forms of alternative tourism and find a feasible definition for it among the numerous definitions available.

2.2 Brief timeline of ecotourism

The first time a resemblance to ecotourism was mentioned during a discussion of the tourism industry was in 1965 when Hetzer defined responsible travel as travel that has “minimum environmental impact; minimum impact on – and maximum respect for – host cultures; maximum economic benefits to the host country’s grassroots; and maximum ‘recreational’ satisfaction to participating tourists.” (Fennell 2003, 18) However, it was not until 1983 when Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin devised and defined the term ecotourism, short for ecological tourism. In 2008 he said that “ecotourism means going to natural areas to enjoy the natural elements from there; landscape, the flora and fauna, but in such a way that we’re minimizing negative impacts and we’re providing sustainable livelihoods for the local people” (Ceballos-Lascuráin, interview 2008). Today, Ceballos-Lascurain is still frequently referred to in ecotourism-related academic and professional literature. Thus, it is justifiable to say that his contribution to the study of ecotourism has been incredibly significant.

In 1991, the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) set up an Environmental Committee, which accumulated the *Ten Commandments on Eco-Tourism* (see Appendix 2) and two annual environmental awards. These awards turned out to be short-lived on ASTA’s side; but they were an important evidence of the direction the tourism industry was heading. (Honey 2008, 27.) Over the years several environmental, ecotourism and sustainable tourism and development awards have been created but also ceased to exist. Additionally, ecotourism guidelines and principles have evolved from the times of Ten Commandments on Ecotourism. The United Nations organized an event called the Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. The main results of this conference, informally called the Earth Summit, were the *Agenda 21* and *The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* (United Nations 1992). The Rio Declaration states 27 principles according to which states should continue to seek sustainable economic development.

The United Nations defines Agenda 21 as a “comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by organizations of the United Nations System, Governments, and Major Groups in every area in which human impacts on the environment.” Regardless of travel and tourism industry being one of the largest industries in the world, it is not directly addressed, but rather just briefly mentioned in a few sections of the agenda. (Wight 2007, 215.) For example, chapter 11 in the Agenda 21 points out ecotourism as a possibility “to increase the value of forests through non-damaging uses” (Agenda 21 1992). As a response, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the Earth Council based in Costa Rica created the *Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry,* and published it in 1995. It is in accordance with the original Agenda 21, but with specific guidelines for the travel and tourism industry. (Honey 2008, 27.)

Ten years after the Rio Earth Summit ecotourism took another leap forward towards global significance. The United Nations declared 2002 as International Year of Ecotourism (IYE). UNWTO and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) had the leading roles in carrying out the activities of the year. These two organizations determined the following objectives for the IYE: (UNWTO & UNEP 2004)

a) Generate greater awareness - - regarding ecotourism's capacity to contribute to the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage in natural and rural areas, and the improvement of standards of living in those areas.
b) Disseminate methods and techniques for the planning, management, regulation and monitoring of ecotourism to guarantee its long-term sustainability.
c) Promote exchanges of successful experiences in the field of ecotourism.
d) Increase opportunities for the efficient marketing and promotion of ecotourism destinations and products on international markets.

However, the main event of the year was The World Ecotourism Summit, which was held in Québec, Canada on May 19-22, 2002. The final report of the Québec Summit states: (WTO 2002)

> *The purpose of the Summit was to bring together governments, international agencies, NGOs, tourism enterprises, representatives of local and indigenous communities, academic institutions and individuals with an interest in ecotourism, and enable them to learn from each other and identify some agreed principles and priorities for the future development and management of ecotourism.*

The main outcome of the Québec Summit was the *Québec Declaration on Ecotourism*. In its website the UNEP (2006) states that the primary purpose of the Québec Declaration "is to set UN-level recommendations for the development of ecotourism activities in the context of sustainable development" (UNEP 2006). Since tourism is one of the leading industries in the world, it should recognize the possibilities held within the industry to "contribute to poverty alleviation and environmental protection in endangered ecosystems" (WTO 2002, 5). The Québec Declaration is a way to promote this idea further and as a result it outlines recommendations to national, regional and local governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, community-based associations, academic and research institutions, inter-governmental organizations, international financial institutions and development assistance agencies, local and indigenous communities, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). (WTO 2002, 67-72.) The WSSD was held in Johannesburg, South Africa in August 2002 as a follow-up summit ten years after the Rio Summit.

Today, ecotourism continues to spread around the globe and awareness of ecotourism is increasing constantly. People are starting to have better knowledge and understanding about different options to traditional mass tourism and therefore the demand for alternative travel is escalating. To assist tourists in choosing the right tour operator, hotel, destination etcetera, there are numerous awards and certification systems at place around the world. Honey (2008, 66) identifies a few awards that are granted every year; for example, Condé Nast Traveler's World Savers Award and the Responsible Tourism Award by Responsible Travel. The latter is nowadays better known as the World Responsible Tourism Award. One of the most exceptional examples of a green certification program is the Costa Rican Certification for Sustainable Tourism. "[It] was designed to differentiate companies among the tourism sector businesses based on the degree to which they comply with a sustainable model of natural, cultural and social resource management" (Instituto Costarricense De Turismo 2014). As the awareness increases, more attention will be paid to the various implications ecotourism.

2.3 Ecotourism explained

Difficulties in measuring the size of the ecotourism industry are mainly derived from the fact that it is easily mixed up with other types of nature-related tourisms. Honey (2008, 7) defines nature, wildlife, and adventure tourism as follows: (Honey 2008, 7)

> *Nature tourism involves travel to unspoiled places to experience and enjoy nature. It usually involves moderate and safe forms of exercise such as hiking, biking, sailing and camping. Wildlife tourism involves travel to observe animals, birds, and fish in their natural habitats. Adventure tourism is nature tourism with a kick: it requires physical skill and endurance and involves a degree of risk taking, often in little-charted terrain.*

Figure 1 illustrates the several dimensions of tourism and the interrelatedness between them. It clearly shows that ecotourism accounts for a small portion in the larger concept of tourism, and the definition is very restrictive.

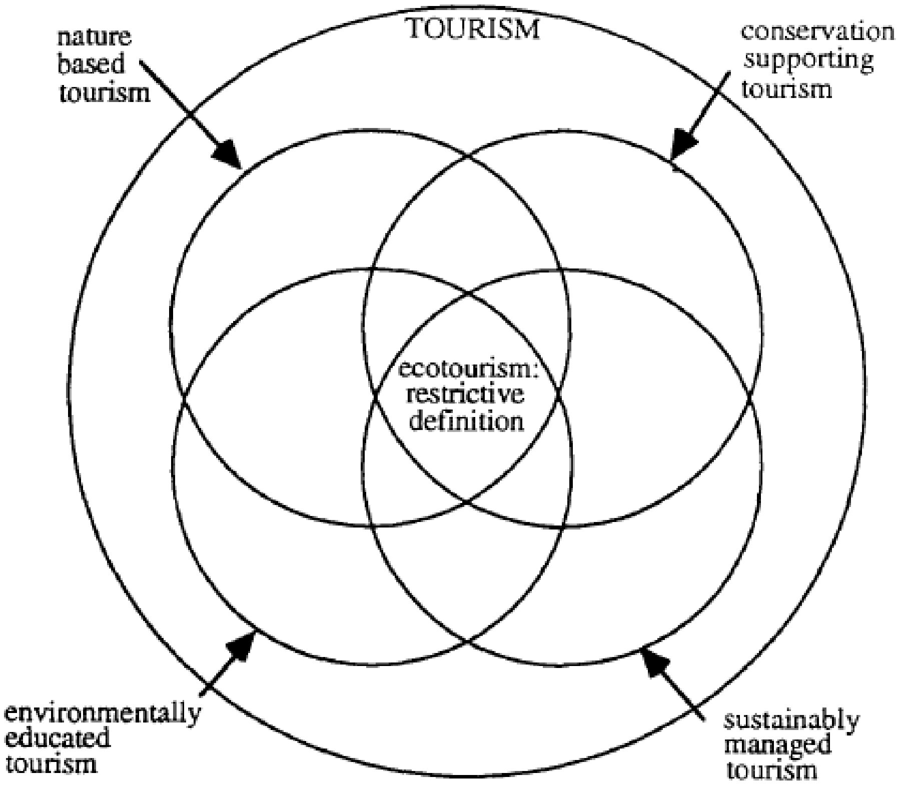

TOURISM
nature based tourism
conservation supporting tourism
ecotourism: restrictive definition
environmentally educated tourism
sustainably managed tourism

Figure 1. An Ecotourism Framework

Figure 1 A framework for ecotourism (Buckley 1994, 664)

As a contrast, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES 2010) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people". The other types of alternative tourism do not take environmental or socio-cultural impacts of tourism into account as properly as ecotourism. However, it is possible that these tourism segments engage in sustainable tourism even though they are not categorized as ecotourism per se. Again, there are several slightly differing definitions of sustainable tourism, but the main idea remains the same; respecting "the destination's social, cultural, and natural environments." (Lominé & Edmunds 2007, 179.)

Although there are almost as many definitions for ecotourism as there are researchers, the purpose of this study is not to list all of them. The definition provided by TIES will be sufficient enough. The backbone of ecotourism, however, is in the principles according to which ecotourism operators and ecotourists should operate. TIES (2010) identifies these six principles that should be complied with: (TIES 2010)

- *Minimize impact.*
- *Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.*

- *Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.*
- *Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.*
- *Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.*
- *Raise sensitivity to host countries' political and social climate.*

In addition to these principles, Honey (2008, 29-31) expands this concept with a couple more characteristics; "involves travel to natural destinations, respects local culture and supports human rights and democratic movements." Together these principles and characteristics constitute 'real ecotourism'.

Due to the complexity of defining ecotourism and the numerous different names under which ecotourism is marketed, two conflicting orientations have emerged; genuine ecotourism and ecotourism 'lite'. Genuine ecotourism sincerely puts the various principles into practice while ecotourism lite just adopts the façade but does not fully comply with the principles. (Honey 2008, 28.) A major problem connected to this is the 'green washing' of operations. Essentially green washing means that the consumer is intentionally misled to believe that the product or service is environmentally friendly, or that the company's operations are greener than they are in reality (Greenpeace 2014). However, the definition of ecotourism has evolved significantly through time, and odds are that it will evolve even further in the future.

2.4 Ecotourists

The profile of ecotourists is rather fundamental for ecotourism planning and marketing. However, the ecotourists have been slightly overlooked in previous ecotourism research, and thus there is somewhat limited information available about the nature of the ecotourists. Nevertheless, there have been a number of studies made about the ecotourists (eg. Chan & Baum 2007; Wight 2001); who they are, where they come from, and what kind of backgrounds they have. Previous studies have discussed mainly North American ecotourists. As majority of the tourists visiting Costa Rica are American (Institutional Press Kit 2014), this is an appropriate approach to the issue. Visitors to Kenya are more diverse, but majority of the visitors come from Europe, North America, or Australia. Furthermore, in addition to limited information, reduced definitional understanding and the heterogeneity of the ecotourism markets aggravate the process of defining who the ecotourists are (Encyclopedia of Ecotourism 2001, 37). Nevertheless, there are certain characteristics that fundamentally define ecotourists and differentiate them from the average tourist.

In her interview with Martha Honey, Caroline Wild profiles the American ecotourist as a male or female who is 35 to 54 years old, well-educated professional or business-person with a genuine interest in learning about nature and cultures. Moreover, there is a considerable number of “mature” (over 54) ecotourists. (Honey 2008, 77.) Honey also has interviewed a tour operator Kurt Kutay who divides ecotourists roughly in two categories; DINCs (dual income, no children), and empty nesters (couples with grown up children). Many of them are “socially minded and interested in the culture, history and people in the developing countries”, and they may belong to an environmental organization, or profess an interest in conservation. However, in the past decade, Kutay has noted an emergence of two new categories; single professionals, most of whom are female, and families, often three generations traveling together. Another point he makes is that “a big part of ecotourism for [all the categories] is a real connection to the local people in the countries they are visiting, even more than the environmental contribution.” (Honey 2008, 77.)

Pamela Wight (Encyclopedia of Ecotourism 2001, 37-62) has conducted several studies that provide more detailed review of a North American ecotourist. She has analyzed ecotourists from three viewpoints; market characteristics, preference, and purpose, satisfaction and motivation. First of all, an overview of some market characteristics is in order (however, please note that these characteristics are rather ambiguous and hence some rough generalizations have been made).

- Income: Ecotourists generally have a slightly higher income than average travelers.
- Occupation: Approximately 35% of the American ecotourists are either professionals or in a managerial position.
- Education: In the US, 75% of the general ecotourists and 96% of the experienced ecotourists have a college degree. However, interest in ecotourism can be found at all levels of education. (Encyclopedia of Ecotourism 2001, 40.)
- Age: In several instances ecotourists have been said to be middle aged or older, but Wight indicates that almost three quarters are in fact between 35 to 54 years old.
- Gender: Previously males have been dominant in nature based activities, but recently this trend has shifted towards more equal gender distribution. (Encyclopedia of Ecotourism 2001, 43.)
- Trip duration: Ecotourists tend to stay in their destination somewhat longer than average travelers. However, the extent varies with the location quite significantly and consequently the farther away the destination is from the travelers’ home the longer they tend to stay. (Encyclopedia of Ecotourism 2001, 44.)

Wight carries on the study by identifying the preferences of the ecotourists. According to her analysis, the most popular activities on an eco-vacation are visiting national parks, hiking, water-based activities, admiring nature, camping, touring and cultural and aboriginal experiences. Additionally, the ecotourists prefer to stay in “more rustic, intimate, adventure-type accommodation” than conventional hotels, motels or camping. The desired accommodations include bed and breakfasts, lodges, cabins and inns. (Encyclopedia of Ecotourism 2001, 48.)

The final part of Wight’s research discussed the purpose, satisfaction and motivation of the ecotourists. She recognized that the travelers’ primary reason for ecotourism is experiencing various elements of nature and scenery. Other reasons include attaining new experiences, learning and exposure to local culture. The motivation, however, differs between age groups. Roughly generalized, the younger ecotourists (18-24 years) “tend to look for the thrill” whereas the middle aged ecotourists (45-54) “tend to want to get away from it all.” The older ecotourists (55-64) are the only ones who are genuinely interested in the environment. (Encyclopedia of Ecotourism 2001, 53) Furthermore, Wight identified some motivations that differentiate ecotourists from more conventional tourist; (Encyclopedia of Ecotourism 2001, 53)

- *uncrowded locations*
- *remote, wilderness areas*
- *learning about wildlife and nature*
- *learning about natives and cultures*
- *community benefits*
- *viewing plants and animals*
- *physical challenge*

However, in general the demographics of ecotourists fluctuate significantly according to the country of origin, destination, and other related factors. Ecotourism industry is rapidly expanding, and the definition of ecotourist expands along with it. The profile of potential ecotourists is far broader than any definition of actual ecotourists. In addition, the studies conducted about the ecotourists are mainly concentrated on those ecotourists who rely on tour operators for their travel arrangements. The independent ecotourists who arrange their own journeys are often left out of the studies and hence a clear distinction between these two groups should be made when discussing the identity of an ecotourist. (Higgins 1996, 14.)

2.5 Implications to social, natural and economic environments

Ecotourism has significant implications to different aspects of a country. Naturally, it has major impacts on the nature, but the importance of the impacts on the social and economic environments should not be neglected in the discussions on ecotourism. The need to conserve the nature is in the very core of ecotourism and therefore the ideas of conservationism and environmentalism are very important.

However, the truth is that human population is consuming and contaminating the planet’s natural resources at an alarming rate every year. Humans cannot survive in the long run without drinkable water, breathable air, and usable biodiversity. As natural ecosystems are the “world’s primary reservoirs” for each of these required attributes, humans need to stop modifying and destroying them (Buckley 2004, 5). Promoting sustainability and conservation of natural areas are essential in order for the humanity to survive. Regrettably, many governments have failed to recognize that ecotourism and tourism would in many occasions be significantly more profitable than, say, logging or whaling. (Buckley 2004, 9.) For example, a study in Iceland showed that the monetary value of whale watching worldwide is significantly more than any financial gain that would come from hunting, should Iceland resume commercial whaling (Honey 2008, 23).

The main benefit of ecotourism is the conservation of natural areas. Usually these natural areas contain something unique that makes conserving them worth the while. The area can be a habitat of an endangered animal, bird or insect, or the flora in the area cannot be found anywhere else. Ecotourism and the funds brought in by ecotourism and tourism allows these areas to be protected and thus preserved for the future generations as well. In Rwanda, for example, tourism has helped protect the mountain gorilla and its habitat (Goodstein 2006). Similar cases can be found almost from every corner of the world; the Galapagos Islands, Costa Rica and Tanzania, just to name a few.

The social impacts of ecotourism and tourism in general are very significant. As Doxey identified in 1975, people tend to go through four stages of feelings towards the tourism industry; Euphoria, Apathy, Annoyance and Antagonism (see Fennell 2003, 61). At first, people are happy that tourists are arriving to their area but later they get used to having tourists around and the relationship becomes more formal and commercialized. As an increasing amount of tourists are travelling in the area, local people start to get annoyed because planning and development are made mainly with the tourists in mind. In the last stage the local people show open irritation towards tourists and the reputation of the destination declines. (Fennell 2003, 61.) To conclude, tourism has a significant impact on the lives of local people. As the destination becomes more and more popular and the number of tourists increases, the authentic and original environment of the destination deteriorates, and in the worst-case scenario, disappears completely. For example, the Canary Islands (Islas Canarias) used to be a group of beautiful islands with indigenous inhabitants and colorful history, but now the islands are cramped with hotels, resorts, golf courses and so on, and the history is almost forgotten. The original lifestyle of the Canarias is difficult to find these days. The Islands are very popular destination among Finnish senior citizens for example, because most essential services can be found in Finnish and no additional language skills are required.

Naturally, as tourism spreads and increases in volume, the local people receive better income. However, at some point the local people start to suffer from the expansion of tourism more than the extra income compensates. The economic impact of tourism to the host country's economy is significant, but it is important to determine whether the social costs are actually higher than the economic benefits. Through following ecotourism principles, these costs can be managed more effectively than when only regular tourism, such as sand, sun and sea tourism, is present. Marketing and promoting is one of the most important sectors of ecotourism, and therefore the next section discusses the marketing of ecotourism in more detail.

2.6 Marketing of ecotourism

Marketing of services differs from the marketing of products significantly. Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1985, 33) identify four major divergences that separate services from products; intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability of production and consumption, and perishability. In other words, services cannot be touched, packed, or shipped to another location; they must be consumed at the point of production. Also, services cannot be stored in a warehouse or saved somewhere else for future consumption.

Mahoney (in Fennell 2003, 90) developed this idea little further and suggested that there are three main differences in tourism marketing compared to the marketing of other types of products. First issue is similar to the one of Zeithaml et al. (1998, 33); intangibility. In addition to the intangibility, evaluation of experiences and the quality control of services are trickier to put into practice. Secondly, in the tourism industry the customers are required to travel to the service in order to use and enjoy it. Lastly, the tourists tend to participate in and visit more than one activity and facility while traveling. (see Fennell 2003, 90.) Therefore, the marketing activities of a travel company should be designed in cooperation with the other service providers in the specific destination. After all, marketing is one of the most important components of the tourism industry. With effective marketing, the destination "can literally be created in the traveler's mind." (Honey 2008,61.) The travelers quite often base their initial traveling decisions on the images they have constructed from different media, since they may have never traveled to that particular country or area before.

Tourism marketing is largely depended on segmenting the market and creating a targeted marketing plan. The travel operators should take into account the limits they face in the markets; it is impossible for them to account for the whole travel market but instead they should concentrate on specific segments that they are strong in (Fennell

2003, 90). Fennell (2003) also identifies the four principle ways that target marketing can occur; “(1) geographically, on the basis of geographical space; (2) demographically, based on age, gender, religion, race, etc.; (3) psychographically, based on individuals’ lifestyles, attitudes, values, and personalities; and (4) benefits, which include an analysis of the benefits sought by tourists and the costs they avoid”. Businesses should build their marketing activities around these groups in order to achieve effective results.

In the marketing of ecotourism, the division of the markets into segments is especially important as not all travelers are interested in ecotourism. The ecotourists have a slightly different profile than the conventional tourists and therefore the so-called normal approach to marketing may not be sufficient for ecotourism. The ecotourists were discussed in more detail in chapter 2.3, but principally ecotourists in this context have a basic knowledge about ecotourism and thus represent a prospective demand for ecological travel, or they are unfamiliar with the concept but through effective marketing they could be potential future ecotourists (Fennell 2003, 92). According to Ryel and Grasse (in Fennell 2003, 92), effective marketing of ecotourism products can be achieved through “(1) the identification of the characteristics of a desired group, (2) appropriate advertising, (3) careful crafting of the advertising message, and (4) the development of a mailing list” (see Fennell 2003, 92). This supports the idea of segmenting the market based on demographic, psychographic and geographic variables.

The ecotourism marketing material often uses so-called ‘green’ language and catchy phrases such as “taking only photos, leaving only footprints” in order to attract the tourists. Some companies also use this kind of jargon in order to sound more ecologically friendly than they in fact are. This is definitely unfortunate, but to a certain extent it also implies that the green qualities are desired by the tourists. Honey (2008, 62) singles out some of the buzzwords companies and marketing agencies use in their advertisements and brochures, such as “*quiet, rain forest, clean air, pure, lush, unspoiled, nature, breathtaking, bio-, eco- and green*”. She also notes that the tourism industry has had no difficulties in adopting this green language, but the actual changes in their operations easily remain only superficial.

Especially in today’s world, online marketing is crucial for travel companies. It is very effective, yet relatively inexpensive as well as more environmentally friendly than traditional paper advertisements and brochures. The main focus of this study is in the content of online discussion forums and therefore it is justified to account the discussion forums as one possible medium for marketing. Not only are discussion forums effective and free, they are also easily accessed, difficultly manipulated, and in most cases, very truthful. However, as Honey (2008, 64) remarks, some marketing and public relations companies use these discussion forums to post “flattering comments about their client companies”. These comments may not always be completely truthful and hence some discretion is advisable when reading online discussion forums. In addition to discussion forums, blogging has become very popular as well and it is an effective and efficient way to build personal and corporate credibility that could potentially attract new customers in the future. Blogging is a less time-consuming and less expensive way to reach current and potential customers than public speaking or magazine advertisements for example. (Ord 2004.) Future ecotourists could also be reached through different forms of social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

2.7 Visitors' satisfaction, expectations, and experiences

The satisfaction of the visitors is one of the most important factors when determining the long term success of tourism and ecotourism. Visitors who are satisfied with their experience at the destination are more likely to return and revisit the same place, than those who were less satisfied with their trip. (Wu 2016.) Oliver (1997) defines satisfaction as "a judgment that a product or service feature provides a pleasurable level of consumption" (see Wu 2016), and even the smallest details can affect the visitors' perceptions of the destination and consequently their satisfaction. It is possible that while the trip could be otherwise perfectly executed and satisfying, if the visitor encounters one scam, one dirty hotel room, one bad customer service experience, or some other negative experience however small, it could taint the overall experience for the visitor, especially in the short term. In the long term negative experiences tend to fade from people's memories, and the good experiences are the ones people are likely to remember years later. However, for a destination even these short term negative feelings can be harmful. The visitors might be in the habit of vacationing abroad once a year, but having a negative experience in one place will easily guide them towards another destination the next time they are traveling.

Satisfaction "is strongly related to meeting visitor expectations, which are largely built on destination image" (Encyclopedia of Ecotourism 2001, 53). The experience elements, the setting, and the landscape of a destination are relatively more important to an ecotourist than a regular tourist. Walking and wildlife viewing, and visiting parks and protected areas are clear priorities for ecotourist, and therefore the visitor satisfaction is dependent upon those experiences, as well as the services provided in the destination, such as guides, interpretative education programs, and those related to learning and cultures. (Encyclopedia of Ecotourism 2001, 53.)

Destination image is a complex perceptual phenomenon that encompasses a system of "thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualizations, and intentions toward a destination" (Wu 2016). Image has an emotional factor to it that steers the aforementioned system. Destination image and destination loyalty are interconnected; a positive image of a destination can have a beneficial effect on destination loyalty and visitor satisfaction. Similarly, high destination satisfaction boosts loyalty. (Wu 2016.) As mentioned earlier, the destination image is crucial when future visitors form their expectations. Occasionally expectations can work against the destination when the image conveyed is more elaborate than the reality. This is a rather common occurrence in destination marketing, and in order to reach high level of satisfaction and induce destination loyalty, the tourists' expectations should be carefully managed. Building an image of the destination and then delivering on those promises is essential.

As Dann (1977) stated decades ago, tourism is fundamentally an experience economy (see Wu 2016). The definition of an experience is rather simple; it is "the subjective mental state felt by the participants during a service encounter" (Otto & Richie 1996, quoted in Chan & Baum 2007). The main function of tourism is to provide experiences to the visitors, and these experiences essentially determine how the visitor perceives the destination. The tourism experience is a personal account of the surrounding environment, it is unique for every single tourist, and often it is charged with emotions. The tourism experience has a high value to the tourist, and it is crucial for companies to keep this in mind. The experiences the companies provide should bring added value to the visitor's life, the experience should be "unforgettable, satisfactory, and extraordinary". (Wu 2016.) Ecotourism experiences are very similar to regular tourism experiences, as the core of ecotourism and tourism alike is providing extra value to the experience of life. Chan and Baum (2007, 577) conclude that "visitor experiences have elements of core needs fulfillment, and emotional or hedonic content". Thus, it can be observed that experiences and expectations both play an important role in the overall satisfaction.

2.8 Theoretical framework

As it was concluded in the previous chapter, expectations, experiences, and satisfaction are interconnected. Expectations affect experiences, and experiences result in different levels of satisfaction. Perception, on the other hand, significantly affects both experiences and satisfaction, and vice versa. The Oxford English Dictionary defines perception as "a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental impression", or "intuitive understanding and insight". The way the visitors feel and think about the destination is essential when determining destination satisfaction, and through that the success of destination strategy and marketing. Figure 2 illustrates the source of the visitor perceptions in a very simple manner. Essentially, visitors travel to Costa Rica or Kenya on a vacation, and each and every one of the visitors perceive the vacation differently. Most likely they generally see the same, but the way the visitors perceive what they see varies between individuals. The visitors' perceptions are influenced by their initial expectations and their experiences while on vacation. Naturally there are various controllable and uncontrollable factors that can potentially impact the visitor’s perception about the vacation significantly. The expectations shape the initial destination image in the visitor’s mind. The experiences in the destination can either reinforce these expectations, or thrash them altogether, hence creating a completely new destination image for the individual.

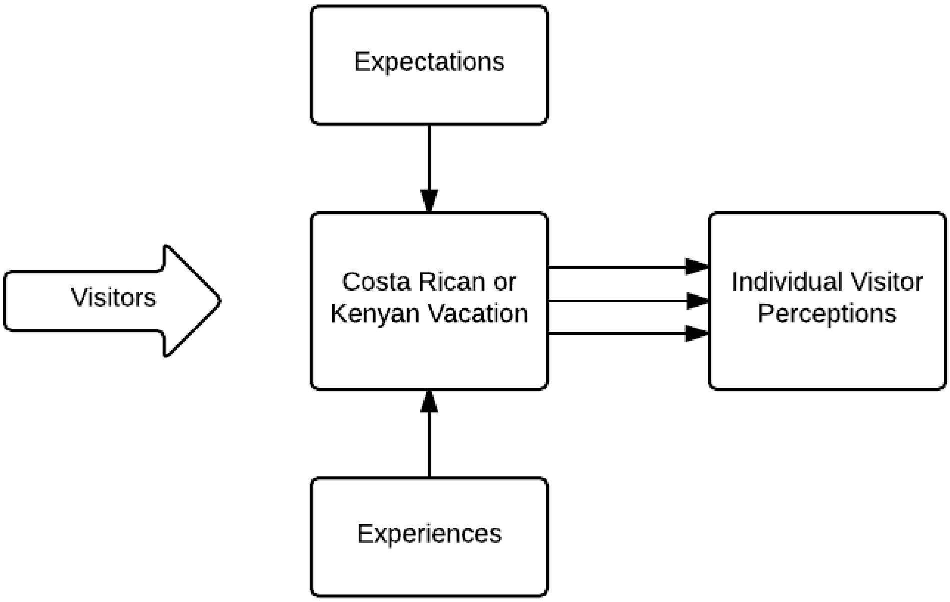

Expectations
Visitors
Costa Rican or Kenyan Vacation
Individual Visitor Perceptions
Experiences

Figure 2 Simplified model of the visitor perception creation process

To elaborate on the simplified model of how visitor perceptions are created, more detailed picture can be created where the factors that can affect the outcome are visible. An illustration of this figure can be seen below. The starting point of the model is the expectations of the tourist. Next the visitors arrive to their destination, and begin their vacation. During the vacation the visitors then perceive and experience the environment around them each in their own way. The last point is satisfaction, more specifically how the visitors translate their perceived environment and experiences into satisfaction. Figure 3 below further illustrates the flow of the perception and satisfaction process.

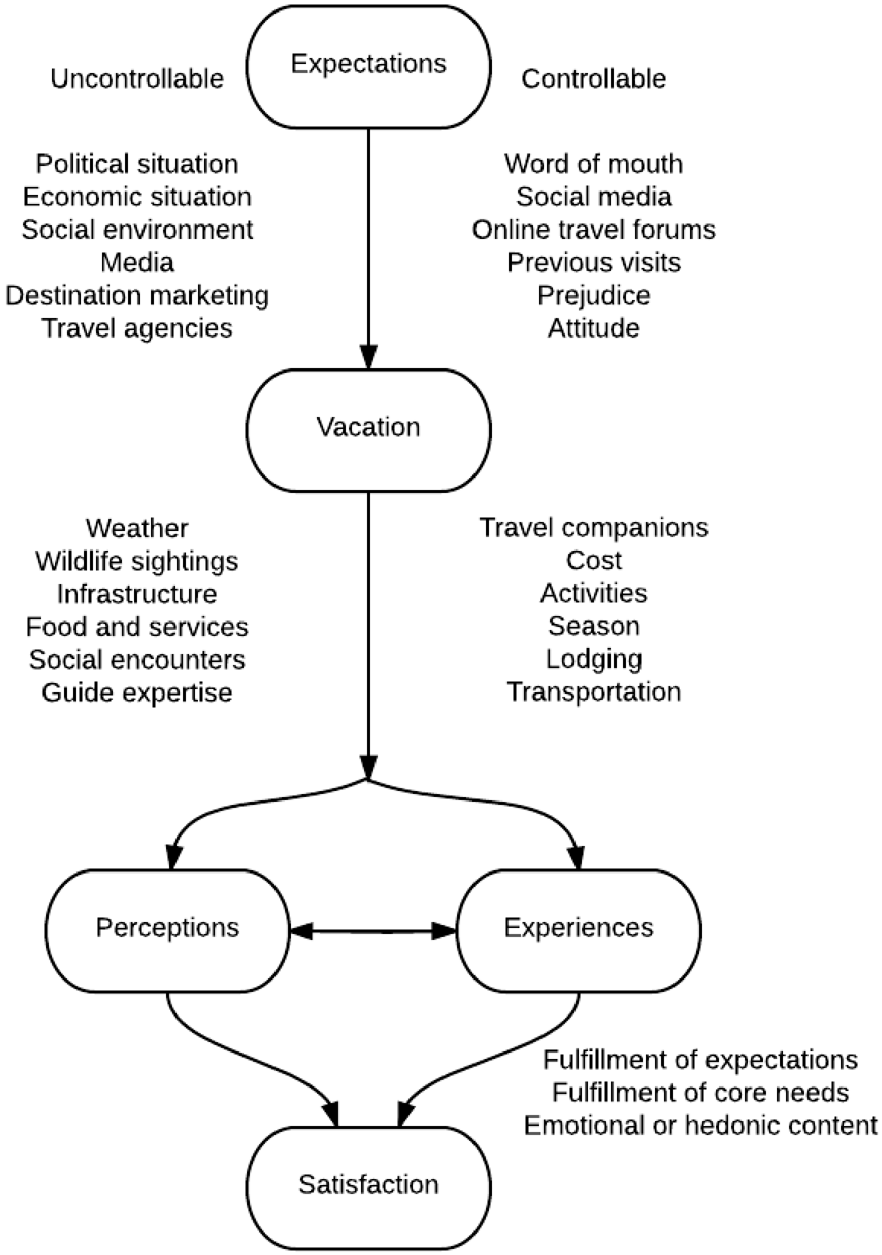


Figure 3 Factors influencing the visitor perceptions and satisfaction

When a tourist makes the decision to travel, they start to look for different destination options. Once the tourist has settled on a destination, they begin forming expectations of the destination based on multiple factors. Some of the factors are within the control of the traveler, and some he or she cannot control. Drawing the line between the controllable and uncontrollable variables is not all black and white, but essentially the traveler can control their own interpretation of the information gathered from social media, online travel forums, or word-of-mouth. Additionally, other controllable factors such as prejudice, attitude, and previous experiences will have a significant effect on expectations but can be managed should the traveler so choose. Examples of the uncontrollable factors that influence expectations are the political and economic situation of the destination country, social environment at the destination, media, destination marketing, and travel agencies. Information received through media, marketing, and travel agencies is unfortunately sometimes embellished, and therefore it may be difficult for the traveler to form realistic expectations. With online sources such as social media and discussion forums, there is always the opportunity to interact with other people and potentially verify certain information. However, with sources like media and destination marketing, the consumer has a very little chance for two-way communication, and hence they have to accept the information as it is.

The next step on the model is the vacation itself. Equipped with the expectations formed prior to the trip, the visitors arrive to their destination and shape their initial perceptions. The vacation offers numerous elements that influence the visitor’s experiences and perceptions. These elements can be controllable and uncontrollable, similar to the expectation forming process. Weather is an example of an uncontrollable element, it can have a considerable impact on both perception and experience. However, season could be considered as a controllable factor, since the visitor can choose when to travel to the destination. Traveling in the rainy season or on the peak of the summer can deter and depreciate the expected experiences, and thus also impact perception and satisfaction.

Other examples of uncontrollable factors that affect the vacation are wildlife sightings, infrastructure, guide expertise, social encounters, food and other services. Surely with enough research some of these factors could be controlled, but since guides, services, and food for example all involve a human element, there is always a possibility of a bad day or other negative effects. Examples of elements that are easier to control are travel companions, costs, activities to partake in, lodging, and mode of transportation. Whether the visitor travels alone, with family, or with friends, the visitor’s experiences and perceptions could be quite different. Traveling with a loved one is more intimate and the couple may perceive the environment with kinder approach than for example a family traveling with small children. Then again, traveling alone can open the visitor to experiences and encounters that may not be otherwise likely, but at the same time the act of sharing the experience with another person is missing, hence altering the perception of the experience and the destination.

The last point of the model is satisfaction. Both perception and experiences shape the overall visitor satisfaction. The way the visitors perceive and experience the destination is crucial for the success of the destination, be it a country, a town, a resort, a hotel, a national park, or any other place where the visitor is physically present while on the vacation. In order for the perceptions and experiences to turn into positive satisfaction, the vacation should satisfy the visitor’s expectations and core needs, and offer certain emotional or hedonic content, as Chan and Baum (2007) suggested. Destination satisfaction is a sum of every piece in the puzzle, starting from the traveler’s decision to travel to the point of returning home. Satisfied tourists are more likely to return to the destination, and return consumption of a service could be regarded as one of the more important factors of the success of the destination. Therefore, it is important for all levels of operators at a destination to pay attention to the visitor satisfaction, from country level strategizing to individual tour operators.

As the emphasis of this research is studying the extent to which visitors regard Costa Rica and Kenya as ecotourism destinations, it is important to note that ecotourism is just a small section of the whole tourism industry. The visitors’ knowledge and experience about ecotourism affect the way they see it around them. If the person is completely unaware of the whole concept of ecotourism, it may be impossible for that person to perceive any ecotourism practices around them. Additionally, it is entirely possible that the visitors participate in ecotourism activities and stay in eco-certified lodging without being aware of it. Acts of ecotourism can, after all, last an hour, a day, a week, or even months. For the traveler to be eco-conscious, they do not need to do everything according to the strictest ecotourism rules. That could often be nearly impossible, for example, with potential air travel, or a small variety of hotels in a remote location.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research approach

The ecotourism businesses in Costa Rica and Kenya are among the largest in the world. This research was conducted to find out how visitors perceive Costa Rica and Kenya as ecotourism destinations, and how the visitors' perceptions align with the countries' ecotourism strategies. Hence, the core of this empirical research is formed around the trip reports written by tourists who have traveled to Costa Rica or Kenya. These reports have been collected from different online discussion forums, and they provide a primary source of information for this research. There are several interesting issues which these reports can provide some insight to, for example, how important ecotourism is for the visitors and whether it is a significant factor when planning their vacations. Another issue is the use of eco-certified accommodation and the nature of the visitors' activities during their stay in Costa Rica or Kenya, as well as the overall feeling they were left with after the trip. However, one significant matter this research attempts to address is the extent to which the tourists convey Costa Rica and Kenya's eco-branding efforts in their reports, and how they perceive these countries as travel destinations. The intention is to answer the main research questions on how Costa Rica and Kenya brand themselves as ecotourism destinations, how the visitors perceive the destinations, and how well the countries' ecotourism strategies align with visitor perceptions.

As Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) say, the typical "how" questions focus on causes and consequences, and hence aiming for qualitative answers. The research question for this study, "how do visitors perceive Costa Rica and Kenya as ecotourism destinations", aims to uncover the causality between visitor perceptions and the country level tourism strategies. To reach the desired level of understanding on the topic, this research combines a variety of research methods in order to achieve the best outcome. The methods adapted and used have multidisciplinary purposes, which here have been tied to the analysis of the ecotourism phenomenon and visitor perceptions in relation to the destination country's marketing efforts.

Qualitative research normally aims to uncover deep and detailed information about the research problem (Patton 2015). Additionally, Dabbs (1982) defines qualitative research as "concentrating on the meanings, concepts' definitions, metaphors, symbols, characteristics and description of things" (see Haavisto 2014). Essentially the critical questions in a qualitative research are what, how, when, and where. This research attempts to understand the motivations, feelings, and perceptions of the visitors traveling to Costa Rica and Kenya, and how these countries have utilized the ecotourism sector in their respective tourism strategies. Therefore, qualitative research method is the appropriate and relevant approach to the research problems.

The first concept applied in this research is the netnographic research process. Kozinets (2010) has significantly contributed in the development of netnographic research by deriving concepts and methods from basic ethnographic research and adapting them to be applicable to online content. The foundation of ethnographic research is an anthropological approach to the research and personal involvement in the subject of the research. The popularity of this approach has increased among multiple fields in the social sciences, including sociology, cultural studies, and marketing and consumer research. In netnographic research, the researcher is not immersed in the culture of the subjects, but is more objective and less personally involved. Netnographic research does not necessarily require interaction with individual people, but the research can focus on discussion forum content already posted online by anonymous individuals, and this is the approach utilized in the data analysis of this study. (Kozinets 2010.)

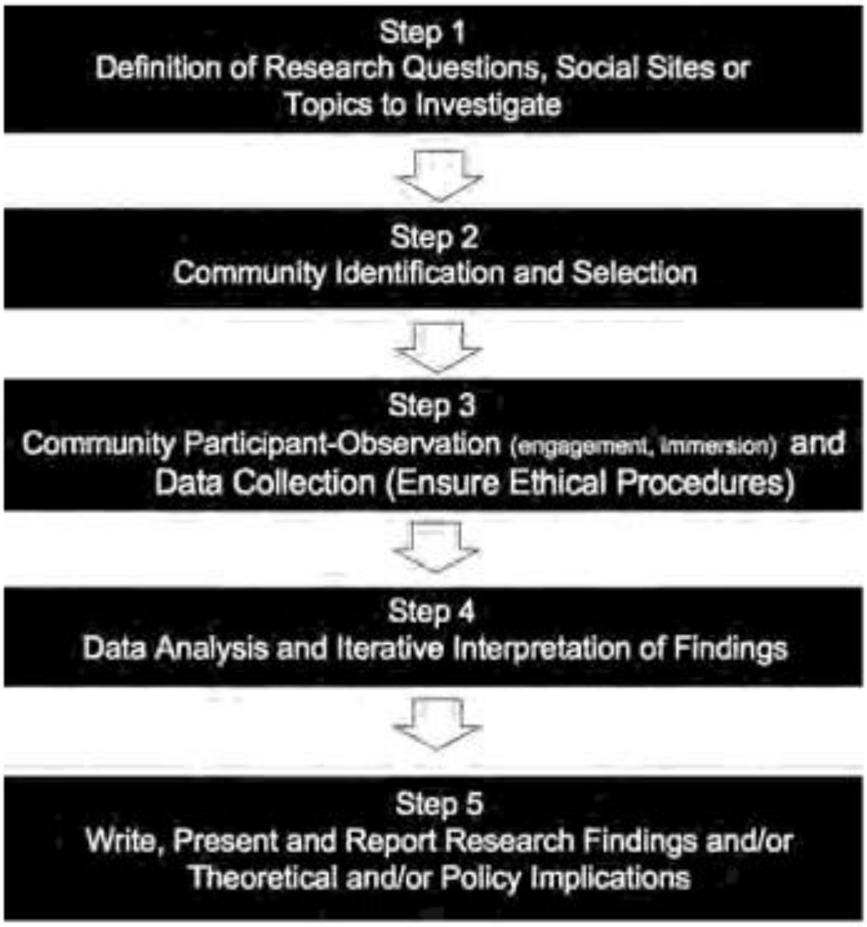

Step 1
Definition of Research Questions, Social Sites or Topics to Investigate
Step 2
Community Identification and Selection
Step 3
Community Participant-Observation (engagement, immersion) and Data Collection (Ensure Ethical Procedures)
Step 4
Data Analysis and Iterative Interpretation of Findings
Step 5
Write, Present and Report Research Findings and/or Theoretical and/or Policy Implications

Figure 4 Simplified flow of a netnographic research project (Kozinets 2010)

The principles of Kozinets' netnographic research can be applied especially in the data source selection and sampling. Figure 4 explains the netnographic research process in a simplified manner. This approach was applied when conducting the data analysis for this study. In the beginning, the research question and the sub-objectives were defined, and the general source of data was identified. When the objective of the research was clear, a more in-depth identification and selection of the discussion forums were made. For the purposes of this study, the data source is formed by the three most popular online travel discussion forums, and specifically the trip report threads in each discussion forum. The steps 2 through 4 are discussed in more detail in the next chapters.

3.2 Data collection

The main components of this research, the travel reports, were gathered from online discussion forums. The discussion forum decisions were based on Kozinets' (2010) guidelines for site selection for netnographic research. The online communities chosen for the research should therefore be relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous and data-rich. The data collection for this research was done in two separate occasion. The first batch of trip reports from Costa Rican vacations were collected in February 2011, and the reported vacation took place between 2003 and 2011. The second data collection occurred in April 2014, when trip reports were gathered from Costa Rican and Kenyan vacations that took place between 2012 and 2014.

Having combed through several travel related discussion forums, I decided to collect the reports from the three largest travel-related websites with active discussion forums; TripAdvisor, Fodor's, and Lonely Planet. These were chosen based on the size of the forum, number and variety of readers and contributors, and number of relevant posts. Clear trip reports were mainly found in these three, whereas in several other forums the discussion revolved around single issues and questions travelers had regarding their future vacation or planned vacation. I chose only original trip reports that were written by individuals on their own personal experience in order to limit the extent of this research to an appropriate depth. The purpose of this study is to research the visitor perceptions in general, instead of opinions on individual issues. Additionally, for the first data collection, trip reports were also gathered from tripreport.com, but currently large sections of this discussion forum seems to be abandoned and the servers no longer operational, hence the reports are currently no longer accessible. Table 1 lists the travel forums analyzed for this study, as well as the times of observation.

Table 1 General travel discussion forums analyzed in this study

Forum	**First discussion analyzed**	**Observation date**	**Number of analyzed discussions**
www.tripadvisor.com	February 2013	April 2014	57
www.fodors.com	January 2012	April 2014	23
www.lonelyplanet.com	June 2012	April 2014	10
www.tripreport.com	September 2003	February 2011	17
www.tripadvisor.com (2)	November 2006	February 2011	33
www.fodors.com (2)	April 2008	February 2011	23
www.lonelyplanet.com (2)	June 2003	February 2011	20

The travel reports were chosen systematically from the most recent reports in the forums. The aim for two separate data collection points is to see whether the issues remain the same over the years, or whether there are some thematic changes in the stories. In the analyzed reports the vacation in Costa Rica has taken place between 2003 and 2014. However, only the trip reports of the vacations in Kenya that took place between 2012 and 2014 were analyzed, because the data on Costa Rica showed no changes in themes or frequencies in which key words or phrases appeared, and therefore I chose not to analyze older reports from Kenya.

Table 2 Specific discussion forums analyzed in this study

Forum	**Sub-forum**	**Number of analyzed posts**
TripAdvisor	Costa Rica Travel Forum	63
	Kenya Travel Forum	27
Fodor's	Mexico and Central America Forums	33
	Africa and the Middle East Forums	13
Lonely Planet	Thorn Tree: Costa Rica / Central America	25
	Thorn Tree: Kenya / Africa	5
Trip Report	Costa Rica	17

A total of 138 travel reports were collected and analyzed from Costa Rica, and 45 reports from Kenya. As seen in Table 2, of the Kenyan reports 27 were collected from TripAdvisor’s, 13 from Fodor’s and 5 from Lonely Planet’s discussion forums, whereas of the Costa Rican reports 63 were from TripAdvisor, 33 from Fodor’s, 25 from Lonely Planet, and 17 from tripreport.com. These reports only represent the initial posts by users who had visited Costa Rica or Kenya; no additional posts or replies in the same thread were included in the analysis in order to limit the extent of this study. All initial trip reports from the chosen time periods were collected and analyzed.

3.3 Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed by utilizing content analysis methods. Creswell's (2009) data analysis framework was used as the backbone of the analysis. Figure 5 explains the logical flow of data analysis from raw data to interpreting the meaning of themes (Creswell 2009, 185). Krippendorff (2013, 10) states that "content analysis entails a systematic reading of a body of texts, images, and symbolic matter, not necessarily from an author's or user's perspective." He further defines content analysis as a "research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorf 2013, 24). The objective is to interpret and scrutinize the texts written by the visitors to Costa Rica or Kenya, and detecting possible patterns that can be applied to variety of other purposes, such as determining the success of the country's tourism strategy. However, it could be beneficial to keep in mind that the data, or the trip reports are not necessarily well thought out truths in the visitors' minds, but rather ambiguous thoughts and perceptions, and the visitors can sometimes have two or more opinions on the same topic. They might write about different issues today than they would tomorrow, and it is impossible to deduce the ultimate truth and the final opinion of the visitor.

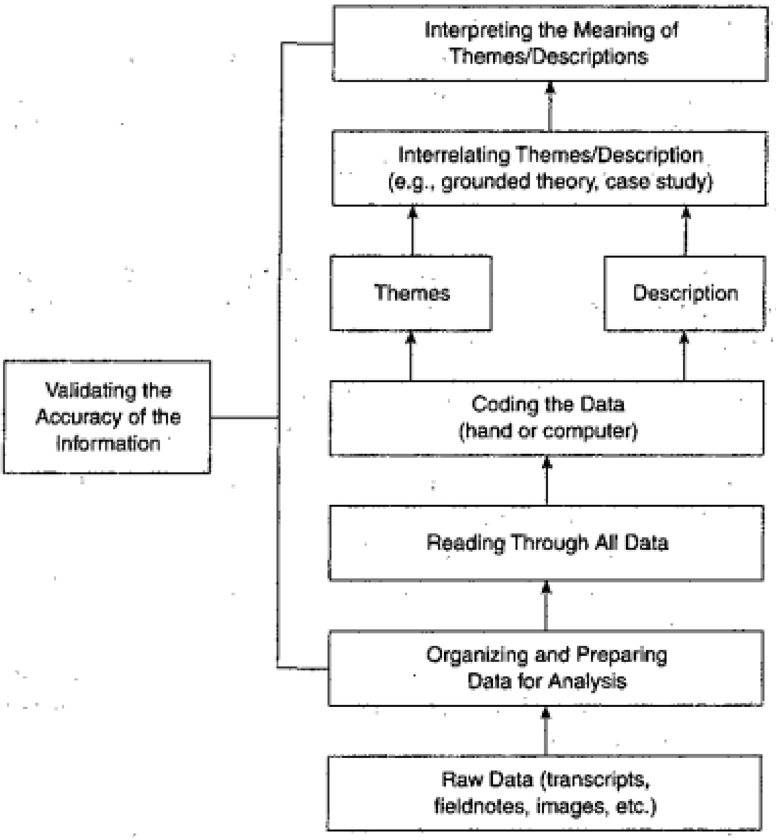

Interpreting the Meaning of Themes/Descriptions
Interrelating Themes/Description (e.g., grounded theory, case study)
Themes
Description
Validating the Accuracy of the Information
Coding the Data (hand or computer)
Reading Through All Data
Organizing and Preparing Data for Analysis
Raw Data (transcripts, fieldnotes, images, etc.)

Figure 5 Data analysis in qualitative research (Creswell 2009, 185)

The discussion forum entries analyzed for the purposes of this research were written by ordinary tourists who have visited either Costa Rica or Kenya. The primary intention of these entries is to share experiences and knowledge with other travelers interested in the same area. Additionally, writing a trip report for others to read and comment on can be a way for the traveler to build on the experience, and further process the experience in order to better understand it. Furthermore, the content of these entries cannot be controlled by anyone other than the writer and the moderator of the forum and therefore these discussion forums provide a reliable source of information about an individual's experiences of different destinations, tour operators, hotels, car rentals, activities, and so on. Often proper advance research on the different destinations and options within the destination can be crucial for the success of the vacation. For example, researching the destinations helps diminish the possibility of staying at a hotel with a bed bug problem, and it can help avoid tours and activities that participate in the abuse of animals and natural resources.

The trip reports were all written in English. The writers represent a variety of different nationalities, such as Swedish, Belgian, Australian, and British. However, the majority of the reports were written by Americans. The trip reports were of varying lengths, there were multipage reports as well as reports only consisting a few sentences. Often the reports emphasized and elaborated on the experience side of the trip, for example by giving a lengthy narrative about a hike in a national park and all the different species of animals observed during the hike. The shorter reports concentrated on giving facts about their travels, the dates, hotels, tour companies, and such, as well as a brief indication whether the vacation was pleasant or not. The total amount of data analyzed was 37 pages of text with font size 1,5 for Costa Rica, and 17 pages for Kenya. The total word count of the data is over 165,000 words.

The first issue to tackle in this research is the distinction between regular tourism, authentic ecotourism and other kinds of alternative tourism, such as nature, adventure and wildlife tourism. I divided the travel reports into categories based on the features of each type of tourism. Further, the data was analyzed through identifying any significant area that was visited, accommodation type, or activities engaged in during the vacation. The frequency of these occurrences can be seen in table 3. Additionally, I interpreted the simple positive indicators versus negative indicators, such as praising a hotel or a tour guide, versus verbally expressing dissatisfaction. Here the frequencies can be taken into account when determining the overall visitor satisfaction. Similar comparisons can be made on several criteria that include, but are not limited to:

- Travel in Costa Rica or Kenya mainly because of the booming ecotourism vs. other reasons
- Reason for travel was nature vs. other reasons

- Visiting Costa Rica or Kenya for the first time vs. being a returning visitor

Table 3 Frequency analysis of the trip reports

Factor	**Costa Rica prior to 2012**	**Costa Rica 2012-2014**	**Kenya 2012-2014**
Total number of trip reports	89	45	45
Nature /wildlife /adventure tourism	58	19	44
Regular tourism	30	23	1
Ecotourism	1	0	0
A mix of different types	0	2	0
Medical tourism	0	1	0
Mentions of ecotourism	2	0	0
Mentions of conservation	0	0	2
Stayed at eco-certified accommodation	11	26	17
Satisfied with the trip	68	44	40
Neutral feelings	11	1	5
Dissatisfied with the trip	8	0	0

When taking this research even further, certain other conclusions can be reached. There are several well-known destinations, such as the Maasai Mara National Reserve, Tsavo National Parks and Amboseli National Park Forest in Kenya, and Monteverde Cloud Forest, and Manuel Antonio National Park in Costa Rica, which have numerous eco-certified camps, lodges, hotels, and tour operators that the tourists may use without acknowledging the ecological aspect of their choices. From the gathered data and previous knowledge of the local conservation actions and the green certification programs in Kenya and Costa Rica, a cross-interpretation of unintended or accidental ecotourism can be made. The tourist may abide by all or some of the ecotourism rules without knowingly doing so.

The data analysis was conducted based on the methods and ideas presented by Creswell (2009). First, the data was gathered in a single document, and read for the first time. Then, the data was coded according to the guidelines explained below. Lastly, the coded data was analyzed and interpreted. The coding method used in this research is deductive. The codes were identified from the theoretical framework, research questions, and other relevant empirical work. (Forman & Damschroder 2008, 48.) I created a simplified and suitable a priori coding for this research. I chose four categories and indicated a different color to mark each category. Then, according to these color codes, I coded the contents of the discussion forum posts. The main categories I decided to emphasize in this research were the type of tourism represented, mentions of ecotourism or eco-activities, mentions of nature and wildlife, and the overall satisfaction. These categories were chosen based on the desired outcome of this research; reaching a conclusion on the research questions. Therefore, it is essential to study the different types of tourism, as well as how visitors talk about ecotourism related issues. Satisfaction, on the other hand, is an integral part of visitor perceptions and hence it was chosen to be studied.

In addition to the above-mentioned categories, as a more inductive method, I separately marked places, tour operators and hotels, mention of beach or anything ‘eco’. The occurrence of the word ecotourism was given a special mark in order to isolate it from the rest of the text. This way it was easier to separate relevant information from the irrelevant in regards of this research, and refine the codes and categories mentioned earlier (Forman & Damschroder 2008, 48). For example, when analyzing the trip report of a vacation in Kenya posted by TripAdvisor user ‘Taryn_J77’, the first sentence states that they had just returned from a safari in Kenya. Therefore, it is clear that the type of tourism is not regular as the main reason for traveling was the safari. This trip report later talks about wildlife some more, but does not mention ecotourism, hence the type of tourism is wildlife tourism. More inductively, it can be noted that the visitors stayed at an eco-certified lodge for a part of their stay, based on the name of the hotel. The report did not explicitly mention that the accommodation was eco-certified. Therefore, it received a note on the analysis, but was not openly categorized as ecotourism. Figure 6 below illustrates the simplified data analysis framework.

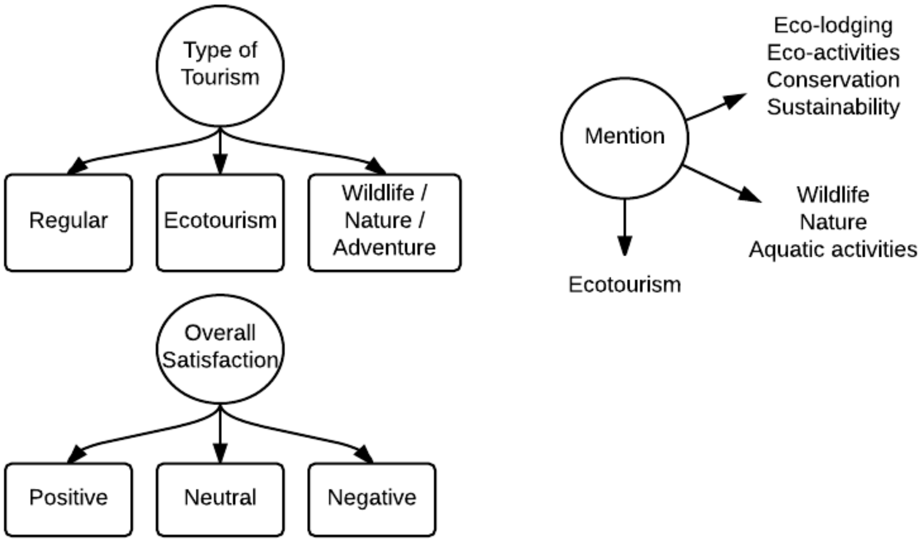


Figure 6 Simplified data analysis framework

After color-coding the data, I divided the travel reports in six groups, each report being in two groups at the same time. First, I set out to determine the type of travel; regular tourism, ecotourism, or adventure / wildlife / nature tourism. As the division was already rather challenging as it was, it would have been impossible to distinguish between adventure, wildlife, and nature tourism and therefore these types are bundled up in one group. Additionally, if sufficient enough information was unavailable, I assumed the type to be regular. The second set of groups measure the overall feeling or mood conveyed through the travel report. In this case, there are three different options; positive, negative, or neutral. For example, the TripAdvisor user 'SouthBay' describes their trip to Kenya as "our best holiday ever." (TripAdvisor 2014) Therefore, it is reasonable to presume that the overall feeling and satisfaction was positive. Table 4 gathers the frequencies of different nodes together. These measures attempt to find an answer to the main objective of the research; "how do visitors perceive Costa Rica and Kenya as ecotourism destinations?" Furthermore, the data sheds light to the second sub-objective, determining how visitors to Costa Rica and Kenya perceive the destinations.

Table 4 Nodes from the discussions

Sources	Nodes	Number of References
TripAdvisor Lonely Planet Fodor's tripreport.com	Ecotourism	3
	Eco-lodging	54
	Conservation	2
	Satisfaction Dissatisfaction Neutral feeling	152 8 17
	Regular vacation Nature/wildlife/adventure vacation Mix of different types of tourism	54 121 2

In order to address the first and third sub-objective of this study, "how have Costa Rica and Kenya branded themselves as ecotourism destinations?" and "how do visitor perceptions align with the countries' desired image as ecotourism destinations?", data on the countries' tourism strategies had to be collected and analyzed. It is crucial to determine the extent and depth of Costa Rica's and Kenya's individual official tourism plans, and more specifically, in what magnitude ecotourism is included. Both countries have a global reputation as ecotourism, nature and wildlife destinations, and it is interesting to see how this translates into the national tourism strategies. For the purposes of this research, the official tourism and ecotourism strategies and marketing information was collected from the official tourism websites Essential Costa Rica and Magical Kenya. In Kenya, additional data was collected from a private organization, Ecotourism Kenya, which is advancing ecotourism in the country as the government is unable to significantly invest in ecotourism.

3.4 Evaluation of the study

Evaluation of a qualitative study is often less straightforward than the evaluation of a quantitative study. There are various criteria from different researchers that aims to guide the evaluation of research’s trustworthiness. However, this evaluation can be heavily affected by the researchers own perception of the data and bias, research method and the results, and therefore, it is possible that two different researchers have different viewpoints on the literature, and reach different conclusions. Conducting a qualitative research gives the researcher certain flexibility, and various options regarding the presentation of the research. Ultimately, the explanation and evaluation of the research process and the results are crucial for the transparency and trustworthiness of the study. (Haavisto 2014.)

The criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) can be used to evaluate the trustworthiness of the elements in this research. These criteria are credibility or confidence in the truth of the findings, transferability or the applicability in other contexts, dependability or the consistency of the findings, and conformability or the degree of neutrality. Overall, this research complies with these criteria fairly well, however, there is also room for improvements. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), some techniques that can be used to establish credibility and confirmability include prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation. In this research, prolonged engagement and persistent observation were present in the data source decision and data collection. The data were collected over several years from the same sources, and the data represents travelers’ stories from a time period longer than a decade. Therefore, had there been major shifts in the overall visitor perceptions, it should have been somewhat visible in this data sample. However, since this data sample only includes trip reports from four different online discussion forums, triangulation could prove to provide more thorough glimpse into the visitor perceptions. Collecting data from different sources such as in-person interviews in the destination, email questionnaires, blog entries, or interactive dialog in the discussion forums would increase the credibility of this research. However, due to the budget and time limitations of this research the scope of this paper is limited to the discussion forum posts.

The transferability of a research questions how well the findings can be applied in other contexts. In this research, the same research method was applied to two different country contexts, and the findings from both locations followed along the same lines. Therefore, the same research methods could be applied to a wider variety of country contexts. Additionally, the same research method can be applied to a range of different research questions regarding visitor experiences and perceptions, and therefore the usage of this method is justified.

The third criterion by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is dependability, which means that the findings should be consistent and could be repeated in future studies. In this paper, the data could roughly be divided in three batches, trip reports from Costa Rica between 2003 and 2011, and between 2012 and 2014, and trip reports from Kenya between 2012 and 2014. The findings were very similar in all three data sets, and therefore it is fairly reasonable to assume that similar results could be achieved from different data sets from similar sources. The results can be repeated, and are consistent, hence also the third criterion is fulfilled in this research.

The fourth and last criterion by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is confirmability. This criterion scrutinizes the extent to which the findings are shaped by the authors of the trip reports and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest. Qualitative research usually involves a certain level of researcher interpretation. However, in this research the focus is the data, and what the data can reveal. The researcher has to interpret the data in terms of type of tourism and visitor satisfaction, and the intention is to find unbiased answers to the research questions. It is important for the researcher not to see meaning where it clearly is not, but rather comprehend the data as a whole. The smallest piece of information could dip the scale one way or another, but it is crucial not to take single words and phrases out of context in order to find a hidden meaning. These trip reports were written by ordinary travelers, who are unlikely to embed underlying meanings and messages to their text. Most often the trip reports are recounting the past vacation, listing visited places and hotels used for example, and therefore, it should be treated as simple text instead of multifaceted prose with different levels and depths. Additionally, this research is conducted out of curiosity towards ecotourism in different countries, and how people describe their vacations. This study is not sponsored by a company or a country, and therefore the chance of bias is relatively low. All in all, the criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are fulfilled satisfactorily in this research. This study establishes a reasonable level of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and hence the trustworthiness of the findings is acceptable.

There are certain challenges connected to a study analyzing data collected from online discussion forums. The forums can change to cater to another type of audience, or the address of the website may change so that it is no longer accessible with the information provided in a research paper. Additionally, the forum may shut down permanently and be taken offline, or it also may remain online, but no longer updated. All of these scenarios significantly reduce the transparency of the study when the data is not accessible anymore. In this study, a similar problem occurred with one of the forums. The first data set collected in 2011 was gathered from four different travel forums, but when the researcher revisited these four forums, only three of them were accessible. One of the forums was inactive, and the older data could not be re-retrieved. Since the data is not publicly available, the reader must trust the researcher to tell the truth. For other discussion forums, the reader is able to find the data used for the research should he or she wish to check the information provided.

Another challenge related to online texts is potentially having an opportunity to correct and edit the text after it was published. Therefore, there might be some additional information available now that was not available when the data was collected. Also, some pieces of data may now be removed due to the author changing their mind. Had the time frame of the study permitted, analyzing the other messages in these threads could have provided more information on the visitor's opinions and stances, and hence widened the insight into the motivation to travel and satisfaction with the vacation.

The major pros of using public online discussion forum posts as data are simple. The data represents the social reality and environment fairly well, as the data was not produced for the purposes of research, but rather at the free will of the individual readers of the discussion forums. Since there is no interaction between the researcher and the authors of the trip reports, the researcher cannot affect the content of the trip reports in any way. The authors are writing about their own experiences, and their text is not a response to a specific question, and therefore the likelihood that the author would manipulate the text to reflect more socially acceptable behavior is lower. However, this still might be a factor in the texts as the online discussion forums are often treated as communities filled with friends. The authors might be active in different discussions, and therefore take care of what they say and how they represent themselves. Still, the data analyzed in this research consists of the initial trip reports only, and therefore the significance of respondent's shyness or pursue for a socially acceptable response is not relevant.

It is also notable that the trip reports were written by people from a number of different national and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the content of the trip reports could be affected by the author's level of English. It is possible that authors whose native language is other than English may have slight difficulties expressing themselves efficiently in another language. Additionally, the authors most likely come from a variety of educational backgrounds, and all of these factors can change the verbal outcome of some people. In general, the trip reports were written clearly and they were easy to understand, but the question is whether the authors would have expressed their thoughts and ideas differently had the language been their mother tongue. However, it is unlikely that the findings of this study would have changed significantly had the language barrier not existed.

Another issue to consider is how the data is selected. The researcher's selection method of the data was systematic; all suitable forum entries for the chosen time period were collected. The question that remains is who are the authors and who are they not? What motivates travelers to talk about their experiences online? What attracts them to these particular travel forums in the first place? Could a certain type of person be more active on these forums than another type? Most likely there are as many ways of traveling as there are travelers, and therefore it is almost impossible to know what types of people are those who turn to online discussion forums for advice. They could be from any demographic group, from any national origin, the reasons for travel could be any. Some people need to plan out their vacation well in advance, while others are more spontaneous when traveling, but both of these groups could easily try to find a sense of community from a discussion forum, and deal with their feelings and experiences with other people who might understand their viewpoint. Therefore, it is important to be cautious when generalizing the findings of the research. The data most likely does not represent a comprehensive population sample, and hence the findings do not represent the universal truth on the research question.

Perhaps the most important question concerning the chosen analysis method is regarding the transparency of the research. The research method should be explained in detail so that the reader can follow the research process. This research was conducted using inductive content analysis method, and the earlier sections of this chapter thoroughly outline the methods used. However, even though this study is relatively transparent, the researcher could have given the authors of the trip reports a stronger voice. The following chapters outline the findings of this research, and a selection of screen shots is presented to support the results, but this study might have benefited from more thorough representation from the authors. A wider selection of examples from the data could have achieved this. Regardless, the research process and findings are relatively clear, and the reader can see how the results were achieved.

One issue to consider when evaluating the research method is whether there are alternative methods to conduct the research, and how these different methods may affect the outcome. However, this particular data set would have been difficult to analyze using methods other than content analysis. It may have been an option to contact the authors of the trip reports and send them a questionnaire to gather further information, but it is possible that the response rate would have been very low. The only way to contact a vast majority of the authors is through the discussion forums, and establishing direct contact would have been very challenging. Additionally, had the data set been significantly larger, content analysis software could have been utilized to assist with the analysis. The current data was small enough to be manageable without the use of any software. This content analysis method suited the research questions in this study very well, because the aim was to compare the country strategies to the way the visitors perceive the destinations and their vacations. Reaching a conclusion on these questions would have been difficult without analyzing the countries’ tourism strategies and a large number of trip reports written by individual travelers. Content analysis was the best way to dissect the data and draw conclusions.

My own position and interest towards this research stems from my personal curiosity about environmental issues, and the impact tourism has on the environment as a whole, the local environment and biodiversity at the tourism destinations. Additionally, from an economical point of view it is crucial to conserve and protect the environment and diversity at tourism destinations in order to ensure the continuation of the business and profit brought into the country by tourists. As a researcher, I am culturally apart from the vast majority of the authors of the trip reports as well as the chosen destinations Costa Rica and Kenya. However, regardless of the cultural differences and due to my competence in the English language, I have had no issues analyzing and interpreting the data. Additionally, being able to scrutinize these two countries and the trip reports as a person with no cultural ties to either destination has enabled me to stay neutral and relatively objective.

4 COSTA RICA AS AN ECOTOURISM DESTINATION

4.1 Short overview of Costa Rica

The name of the country, Costa Rica, is Spanish and means rich coast. The descriptive name originates in the 16th century when the Spanish explored the area. Consequently, Costa Rica remained under Spanish ruling until 1821 when, among other states in Central America, it declared independence from Spain. However, it was not until 1838 that Costa Rica became and independent country. Nowadays the country has relatively high standards of living and strong economy. (CIA 2016.)

Costa Rica is a small country of 4.8 million inhabitants located in Central America, bordered by Nicaragua in the north, Panama in the south, the Pacific Ocean in the west and the Caribbean Sea in the east. The map of Costa Rica can be found below (figure 7). It is 280 km wide at the widest point, and the longest point is just 480 km. (Väyrynen and Väyrynen 17.) It has a total area of 51,100 km^2 of which only 40 km^2 is water. (CIA 2016.) The climate is tropical and subtropical; it is located at the point where North and South American flora and fauna meet. (Väyrynen and Väyrynen 17.) Therefore, the environment is extremely diverse. It has been argued that Costa Rica contains about 5 percent of the world’s biodiversity within just 0.035% of the earth’s surface. As former minister of natural resources Alvaro Umana said; “Costa Rica is a biological ‘superpower’.” (Honey 2003, 40.)

Costa Rica is located near the seam of four continental plates. This leads to a constant danger of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. For over 50 years, the Arenal volcano was one of the most active volcanoes in the world. After its latest eruption in 2010, Arenal entered into a resting phase, and further eruptions are unlikely for the time being. In addition to Arenal, there are six active volcanoes in Costa Rica and 61 inactive ones. (arenal.net 2016.) One of the latest eruptions was in late 2015 when the Turrialba volcano erupted (Arias 2015). In general, the terrain mainly consists of coastal plains, rugged mountains and some highlands. The highest point of the country is the mountain *Cerro Chirripó* with height of 3818 meters.

The democratic republic of Costa Rica has stable economic and political environments. Costa Rica has enjoyed a steady economic growth in previous years. The effects of the recent economic crisis also hit Costa Rica as the economic growth rate slumped to -0.7% in 2009 but resumed to about 4% per year in 2010-2015. The backbones of the Costa Rican economy are agriculture and tourism. The main agricultural exports are bananas, coffee, sugar, and beef. Also, the remarkable biodiversity makes Costa Rica an excellent tourism and more specifically ecotourism destination. Over 74% of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) comes from services, and tourism represents a significant portion of the service sector. The GDP per capita of Costa Rica in 2015 was $15,500 making it the 105th highest in the world. Comparatively, the GDP per capita in the US was $56,300 (19th in the ranking), and in the bordering country Nicaragua only $5,000 (169th). (CIA 2016.) According to World Travel and Tourism Council, tourism accounted for 12.5% of the GDP in 2014, including direct, indirect, and induced contribution (WTTC 2015a). Therefore, tourism is a significant contributor to the country's economy.

The unemployment rate 8.7% is noticeably higher than in the United States where the rate is 5.2%. Additionally, there are more people living below the poverty line in Costa Rica than in the US, with percentages of 24.8 and 15.1 respectively. The median age in this Spanish-speaking country is 30.4 years, which is much lower than in the US, 37.8. 97.8% of Costa Ricans are literate, compared to 99% of Americans and 82.8% of Nicaraguans. (CIA 2016.)

In 2010, the first female president Laura Chincilla Miranda was elected. She served one term as the chief of state and head of government. The current president is Luis Guillermo Solis Rivera, elected in 2014. The cabinet is selected by the president. (CIA 2016.) The legislative branch of the multi-party government is the Legislative Assembly with 57 deputies chosen for a four-year period through elections. Costa Rica has no military, but maintains Police and small National Guard forces (Barash 2013). In addition, Costa Rica allegedly has the happiest people of the world (Kristof 2010).

As already mentioned earlier, the biodiversity and natural wonders are exquisite in Costa Rica. There is no other place in the world where so much diversity can be found in such a small area. Due to this uniqueness, Costa Rica has taken extensive measures in the efforts to preserve and protect the flora and fauna of the country. Overall, Costa Rica has 25 national parks, eight biological reserves, 32 protected areas, 56 wildlife refuges, 14 wetlands (including mangroves), two national monuments, and two natural reserves. All of these initiatives are geared toward maintaining, protecting, and conserving the more than 500,000 species of flora and fauna found in Costa Rica, including 860 species of birds, 150 species of orchids, 100 species of frogs, and 150 species of bats. (Costa Rican Tourism Board.)

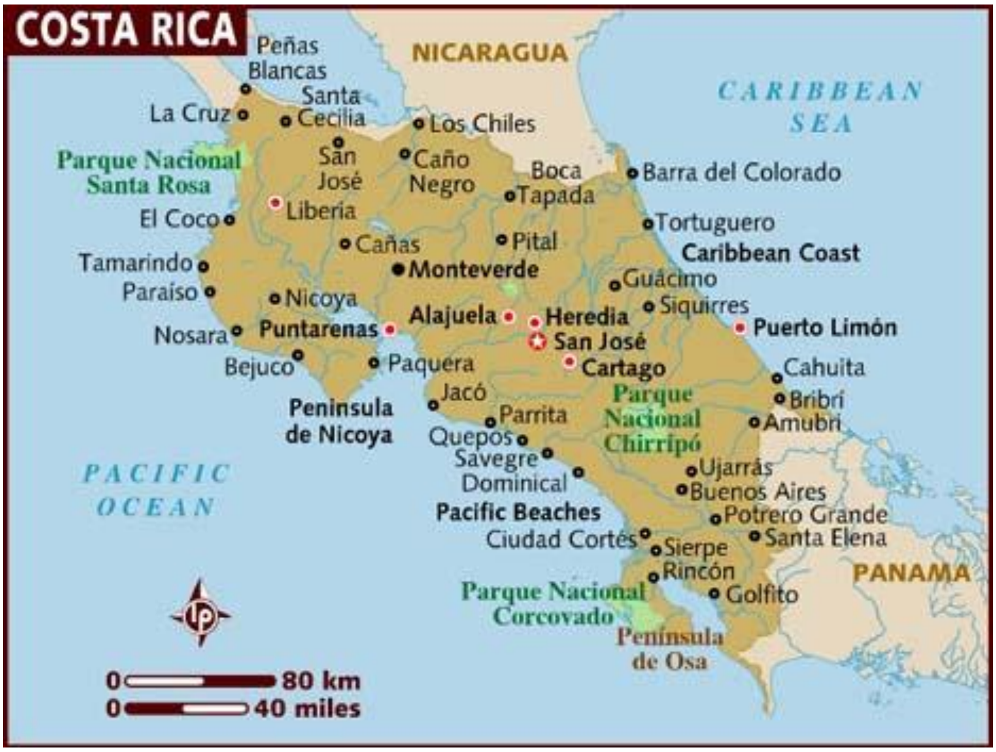


Figure 7 Map of Costa Rica (Lonely Planet 2016a)

Among numerous tourist attractions in Costa Rica, the most popular places to visit are the Manuel Antonio National Park, the Arenal volcano and lake, and the Monteverde Cloud Forest. See figure 7 for the map of Costa Rica. The Manuel Antonio National Park is located just south of Quepos on the Pacific Coast, 132km from San Jose. It includes 682 hectares of land and 55,000 hectares of sea. The park is famous for its beautiful white sand beaches and an evergreen forest. The Arenal volcano was one of the top ten most active volcanoes in the world, and before going into a resting phase it regularly emitted lava and enormous ash columns. It is located in the northern lowlands of Costa Rica. Monteverde is the place for cloud forests and coffee plantations, monkeys, mist, and friendly locals. Due to its high altitude (1,440m above sea level) Monteverde receives a steady supply of clouds and the life-giving moisture that they contain, and therefore the ecosystem of the Monteverde cloud forest is unique and extensive.

4.2 Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST)

Costa Rica is a pioneer in promoting sustainability. The development of sustainable tourism seeks to find balance in the interactions between the use of the natural and cultural resources, the improvement of quality of life of local communities and the economic success of the industry. All of these contribute to national development and hence to the well-being of the people and economy. (CST 2014.) One of the best known ecological certification programs is the Costa Rican Certification for Sustainable Tourism (Certificación para la Sostenibilidad Turística, CST). It is awarded and managed by the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT), the Costa Rican Tourism board. The CST claims that its (CST 2014)

> *"fundamental purpose is to make sustainability a practical and necessary reality within the context of the country's competitiveness in tourism, while looking to improve the way that natural and social resources are used, encourage the active participation of local communities and provide a new source of competitiveness within the business sector"*.

The Certification for Sustainable Tourism has many benefits, such as increased competitiveness among certified companies and businesses, and a way to prevent greenwashing. The CST program evaluates four fundamental aspects when carrying out the certification process. These aspects are (Certificado para la Sostenibilidad Turística de Costa Rica)

- "physical-biological parameters (interaction between the company and its surrounding natural habitat)
- infrastructure and services (exclusive for lodging companies) / service management (exclusive for tour operator agencies)
- external client (company's interaction with its clients)
- socio-economic environment".

Only nineteen tour operator agencies and fifty hotels have been awarded the level 5 certification, which is the highest possible accreditation they can achieve (CST).

4.3 Ecotourism strategy of Costa Rica

According to the World Bank, Costa Rica receives over 2.5 million tourists every year. The trend has seen a steady increase in the past years, and number of tourists is expected to continue increasing in the future as well. (The World Bank 2016.) The Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT) estimates that between 2006 and 2010 77% of the tourists engaged in 'sun and beach' activities. More than half of the visitors specifically observed the flora and fauna, and 45% went for walks in the nature. Bird watching and visiting a volcano were popular activities as well, as 35% and 25% respectively participated in these activities. Canopy tours attracted 32% of the visitors. (ICT 2010b.) These numbers reveal the importance of the nature in Costa Rica and activities related to the nature. If half of the tourists arriving to the country are interested in observing the flora and fauna in Costa Rica, the result is over 1.25 million people per year in the country's national parks and other natural areas. For a country of this size this can be a tremendous strain on the nature, and therefore ecotourism and sustainability efforts are crucial in Costa Rica.

Costa Rica has taken protecting the nature to heart, and today it is one of the few countries in the world that has recovered its forests instead of clearing the land for agriculture or development. Within just 26 years, the country has been able to increase the area of wooded territory from 21% to 52%. (Institutional press kit 2014, 38.) Sustainability is an integral part of Costa Rica's tourism plan, and there are multiple measures in place to ensure the responsible and sustainable increase of tourism within the country. Two of these measures are the CST program that was mentioned in the previous section, and the Bandera Azul Ecológica (Blue Ecological Flag) program. The Bandera Azul Ecológica program's objective is to produce incentives for the creation of "local committees in coastal areas, communities, schools, protected natural spaces, and other tourist and environmental areas in order to guarantee their conservation and the development according to the protection of natural resources, the search for better hygiene and health conditions and to improve the Costa Rican public health". (Institutional press kit 2014, 41.)

Costa Rica's current national sustainable tourism plan has been in effect since 2010, and it is due for renewal in 2016. The official tourism plan, Plan Nacional de Turismo Sostenible 2010-2016, identifies three main tourism areas in Costa Rica; sun, beach and sea, adventure, and ecotourism. The attractions in Costa Rica are grouped into following categories; natural, beach, rural, port, and cultural. The plan aims to build the Costa Rican tourism image around the abovementioned categories, with a special emphasis on sustainability. (Plan nacional de turismo sostenible de Costa Rica 2010-2016, 12.) In the Institutional Press Kit that summarizes the national sustainable tourism plan, published by the ICT in 2014, the foundation for building the tourist brand in order to achieve the planned development model are the following purposes: (Institutional press kit 2014, 35)

- "Keep the tourist industry as one of the main driving forces of the country's economy, which generates direct and indirect benefits for human development
- An activity with high-quality standards and with a wide variety of competitive and high-impact products in social well-being
- Tourism will be the country's sustainable means, human wellbeing, and it will promote opportunities for local direct participation"

The official sustainable tourism program outlines seven actions how sustainability can be supported and developed in Costa Rica. These actions are: (Plan nacional de turismo sostenible de Costa Rica 2010-2016, 31-32.)

- Promote the implementation of incentives for businesses, according to the level of sustainability achieved under the CST program
- Develop programs and specific actions for climate change, carbon neutral, and other actions that complement the sustainability development in Costa Rica
- Establish a training program and practical training in municipalities, local communities, schools, and all tourism planning departments on issues related to waste management, recycling, energy conservation, biodiversity, sustainability, and others
- Support implementation of management programs for liquid and solid wastes, to ensure proper handling and disposal thereof at the municipal level
- Promote the adoption of the code of ethics, promoted by the World Tourism Organization and adapted by the private sector in the tourism industry
- Support the Bandera Azul Ecológica program as a mechanism that seeks environmentally friendly practices
- Promote the application of codes for good social and environmental practices in projects with marinas and guest harbors, and encourage these companies to apply for a sustainability certification

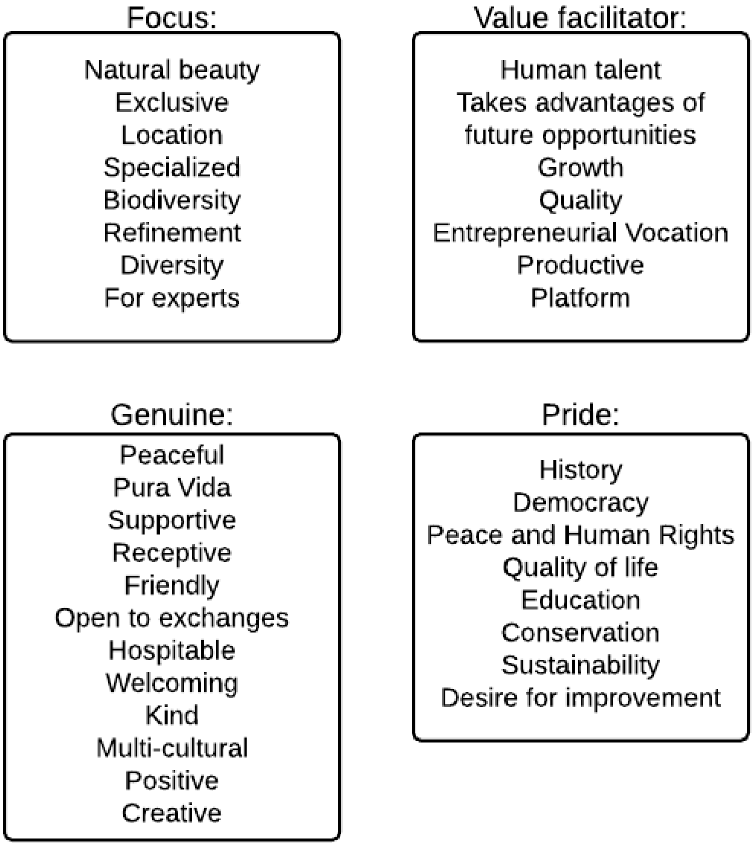
It is clear that Costa Rica is emphasizing and supporting the different programs promoting sustainability, most importantly the Certification for Sustainable Tourism program, and also increasingly the Bandera Azul Ecológica program. The seven points of the sustainable tourism program mentioned above are just one part of the larger tourism development program. The Institutional Press Kit outlines the sustainable tourism goals in a simpler manner, with the fundamental idea of becoming the most outstanding destination for nature tourism. Costa Rica's strategy is to be a unique destination, and keep the differentiation it has reached up to so far in order to (Institutional press kit 2014, 35)

- “Gradually become the classic destination par excellence for nature tourism
- control the way how the territory is used, and try to reduce impacts on tourist resources
- Invest on improving tourist attractions to expand the production base of tourism
- Strongly promote the innovation of tourist products, strategic marketing planning and integrated management of marketing for the continuous improvement of competitiveness
- Improve the level of training and comprehensive training in sustainable tourism – both, in making civil society aware and in obtaining professional technical knowledge and tourism job skills

- Promote fundraising strategies, economic incentives, and financial and non-financial mechanisms, micro-credit systems and business promotion that allow executing programs for sustainable tourism”

Essentially, Costa Rica invests significantly in promoting and supporting different sustainability programs that aim to conserve the nature and resources, and educate and inform residents and visitors alike. The CST program that was introduced in 1997 has steadily increased in popularity, and the number of certified companies increase every year. The 2014 press kit reveals the target to increase the number of certified companies to at least 500 by 2016, in 2014 there were 299 certified operators. (Institutional press kit 2014, 37.) However, according to the official website of the CST program, currently there are 344 certified hotels, tour operators, car rental companies, restaurants, and theme parks (Certificado de Sostenibilidad Turística 2016). Therefore, it seems that the plan has not advanced as rapidly as planned. Regardless, the CST program has expanded in the recent years, and most likely will continue to do so in the future.

The country brand “essential Costa Rica” is based on four main features; focus, value facilitator, genuine, and pride. Figure 8 illustrates the features outlined by the ‘essential Costa Rica’ brand. These features guide the promotion measures taken by the country.



Focus:

Natural beauty
Exclusive
Location
Specialized
Biodiversity
Refinement
Diversity
For experts

Value facilitator:

Human talent
Takes advantages of future opportunities
Growth
Quality
Entrepreneurial Vocation
Productive
Platform

Genuine:

Peaceful
Pura Vida
Supportive
Receptive
Friendly
Open to exchanges
Hospitable
Welcoming
Kind
Multi-cultural
Positive
Creative

Pride:

History
Democracy
Peace and Human Rights
Quality of life
Education
Conservation
Sustainability
Desire for improvement

Figure 8 Four main features of ‘essential Costa Rica’ brand (Institutional press kit 2014, 42-43.)

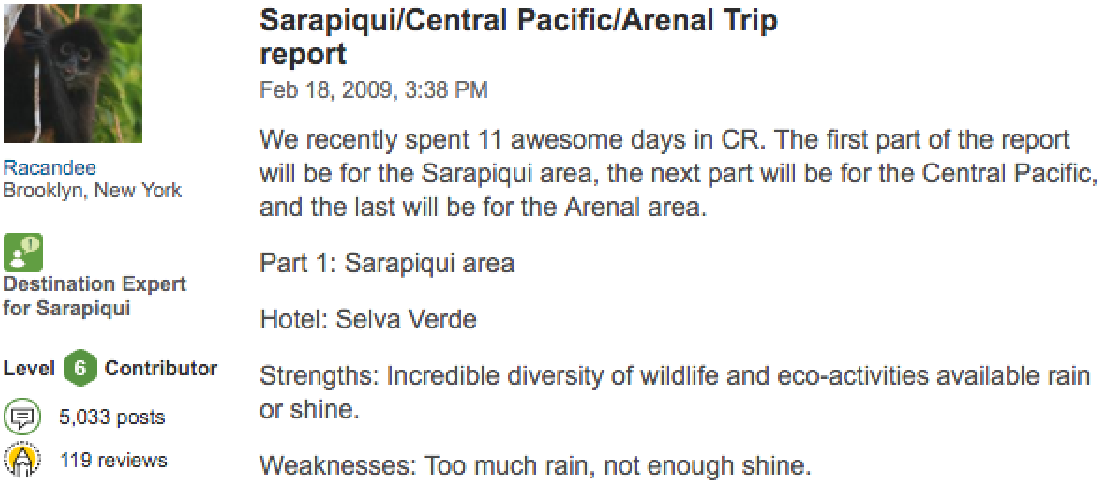
This country brand intends to position Costa Rica as a destination that is recognized for its natural beauty, but also for the high technology and innovation industry within the country. As the Institutional Press Kit summarizes, “in essence Costa Rica is a concentrated country full of a unique and exclusive value mainly generated by its people.” (Institutional press kit 2014, 43.) Costa Rica still continues to pioneer in ecotourism (International press kit 2014, 10).

4.4 Visitor perceptions of Costa Rica 2003-2011

The main objective of this research was to determine how visitors to Costa Rica perceive the country as an ecotourism destination, and how those perceptions align with the country’s desired ecotourism image. Additionally, this research set out to determine how visitors in fact perceive the country, and whether ecotourism is a motivator for the tourists. The main findings of the research give a reason to state that the majority of tourists visiting Costa Rica enter the country for reasons other than ecotourism. However, the ICT suggests that about half of the visitors in Costa Rica participate in some sort of activities in nature, and this in turn could be interpreted as a type of ecotourism (Plan nacional de turismo sostenible de Costa Rica 2010-2016, 14; Anywhere Costa Rica 2016). This first set of trip reports were collected in February 2011, and they include reports from 2003 to 2011.

4.4.1 Ecotourism

Out of the 89 travel reports in this data set only two mentioned the word ecotourism. The comments in these instances were indifferent, such as “There are still untouched areas if you are more into the ecotourism thing.” (Kiah Duncan, TripReport.com) The other one was staying at Ecolodge San Luis, which is essentially the Costa Rica campus of University of Georgia. He mentioned that the “campus director offers a short presentation on ecotourism.” (‘daveobrien’, Lonely Planet) No additional information was given in either case. Other than these, eco was mentioned two more times; “Racandee” (Trip Advisor) states that Costa Rica’s strengths are “incredible diversity of wildlife and eco-activities available rain or shine”, as illustrated in figure 9.



Sarapiqui/Central Pacific/Arenal Trip report

Feb 18, 2009, 3:38 PM

We recently spent 11 awesome days in CR. The first part of the report will be for the Sarapiqui area, the next part will be for the Central Pacific, and the last will be for the Arenal area.

Part 1: Sarapiqui area

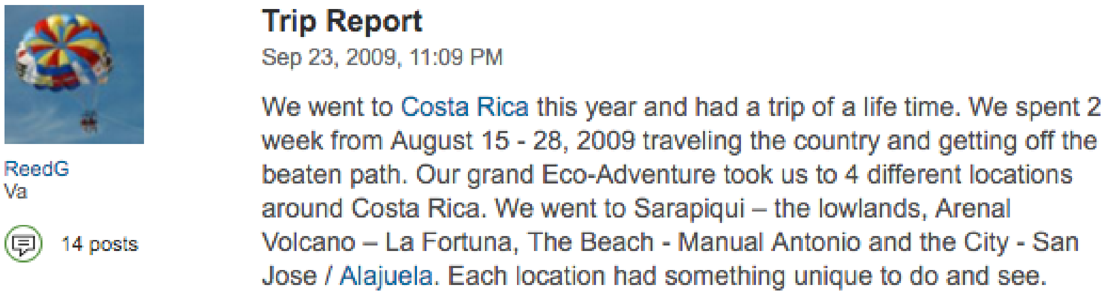
Hotel: Selva Verde

Strengths: Incredible diversity of wildlife and eco-activities available rain or shine.

Weaknesses: Too much rain, not enough shine.

Figure 9 One of the few eco-related comments (TripAdvisor 2011)

These eco-activities were barely mentioned throughout the rest of the travel report. The last related mention was by “ReedG” (Trip Advisor), see figure 10. He said that “Our grand Eco-adventure took us to 4 different locations around Costa Rica.” Based on this comment and other content in this particular travel report, I concluded that this was the only vacation with real ecotourism intentions.



Trip Report

Sep 23, 2009, 11:09 PM

We went to Costa Rica this year and had a trip of a life time. We spent 2 week from August 15 - 28, 2009 traveling the country and getting off the beaten path. Our grand Eco-Adventure took us to 4 different locations around Costa Rica. We went to Sarapiqui – the lowlands, Arenal Volcano – La Fortuna, The Beach - Manual Antonio and the City - San Jose / Alajuela. Each location had something unique to do and see.

Figure 10 Visitor’s comment about “Eco-Adventure” (TripAdvisor 2011)

Even though the travel reports did not specifically mention ecotourism as one of their interests or reason to travel, 11 out of those 89 stated that they spent few nights at certain ecolodges. This implies that the tourists participated in the ecotourism scene whether they were particularly aware of it or not. Then again, six reported visiting the Eco Termales Hot Springs; the name suggests some ecotourism-related activity but in fact it is just another tourist attraction in the Arenal area. Sustainability or sustainable tourism was not mentioned once in this set of data.

Most of the visitors participated in a vast range of outdoor activities, such as hiking, white water rafting, horseback riding, ziplining, surfing, bird watching, guided nature tours and kayaking. Locations in which these activities take place are almost as numerous, these include cloud forests, waterfalls, rainforests, beaches, volcanoes, rivers, and national parks in general. Whereas these activities could well be a part of the travelers' ecovacations, they could also be included in a regular vacation of a regular tourist. The tours and activities are indeed outdoors and in the immediate vicinity of nature, but to qualify as an ecotourism activity, more requirements need to be met. These activities should be dedicated to conserving the nature and educating the visitors about it, but unfortunately this is not always the case. Just as in virtually every tourism destination, there are people who only care about making money, and therefore the nature or animals might get abused or neglected. Hence, no ecotourism related conclusions can be drawn from the participation rate on these activities based on the available information.

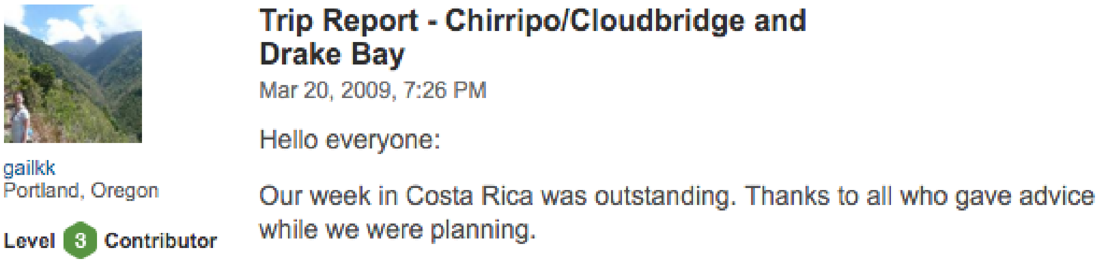
4.4.2 Types of tourism

As mentioned earlier, I divided the travel reports in groups based on my rough judgment. In this case, the tourism types were regular tourism, ecotourism and adventure / wildlife / nature tourism. According to my assessment only one of the 89 vacations could be considered as ecotourism vacation, and this was open to interpretation as well. 30 of the vacations fell in the adventure / wildlife / nature category, and the rest (58) were regular tourism.

Distinguishing between regular and nature tourism solely based on the travel reports is challenging because the reports were originally written for other purposes than to discuss the motivation behind choosing the kind of vacation they had. Mostly these reports were written for other travelers who are interested in Costa Rica. They generally evaluate, review and judge the destinations, hotels and tours and pass these opinions on so that other travelers could potentially avoid the same mistakes or enjoy the same good experience. Many of the travel reports included detailed information on hotels, food and activities, but revealed nothing personal. However, a certain pattern could be detected among the reports; those interested in the nature wrote more and more precisely about it than those who rather chose to spend their time on the beach.

4.4.3 Overall satisfaction

The amount of praising and complaining works as a good indicator of the overall satisfaction and mood of the vacation. The very general overall feeling conveyed by the travel reports was very positive, as illustrated by the example in figure 11. Roughly evaluating, 68 out of 89 travel reports had a positive or very positive feeling, eight had a negative feel and eleven were in between as there were significant negative issues but very positive remarks as well. Two of the reports were inconclusive in this matter as they revealed no opinions or evaluations, only what they had done and where they had stayed.


gailkk
Portland, Oregon
Level 3 Contributor

Trip Report - Chirripo/Cloudbridge and Drake Bay
Mar 20, 2009, 7:26 PM

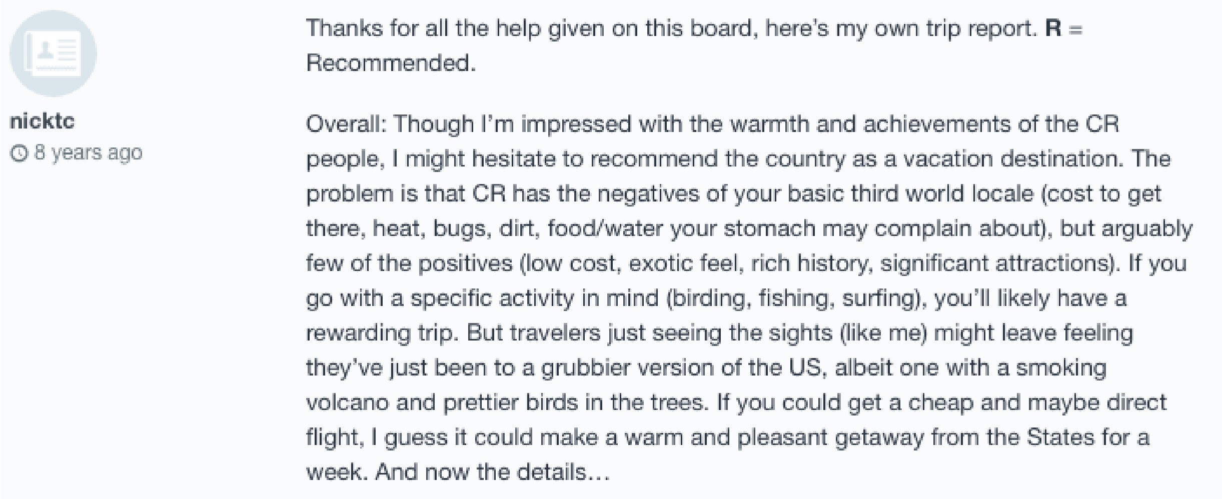
Hello everyone:

Our week in Costa Rica was outstanding. Thanks to all who gave advice while we were planning.

Figure 11 Example of a positive comment (TripAdvisor 2011)

Even though eight travelers were not fully satisfied with their vacations, there still was something positive in every report. More often than not the tourists were incredibly happy with their decision to travel to Costa Rica. Even those who spent most time complaining about various issues eventually came to a conclusion that Costa Rica is an “enchantingly beautiful” country, as one of the reports said. Few of the reports also included a comment stating that they usually never visit the same place twice as there are so many amazing destinations to see, but Costa Rica made them change their minds. Many felt that it is such a beautiful country that they are willing to make an exception in their principles and return to Costa Rica in the future. Furthermore, couple of the visitors were seriously considering moving to Costa Rica permanently.

In general, visitors were willing to recommend Costa Rica as a vacation destination. However, only few actually mentioned that they recommend Costa Rica as such, but more often the visitors would recommend a certain hotel, tour, town or destination, attraction, or even a tour guide. The overall satisfaction with Costa Rica and everything it has to offer is so high that it is justified to assume that those visitors would also be willing to recommend the country to others. On the other hand, there was one person who said that he might hesitate to recommend the country as a vacation destination even though he found some positive aspects as well and was willing to recommend certain hotels and such. See ‘nicktc’s comment in figure 12 below.



Thanks for all the help given on this board, here's my own trip report. **R** = Recommended.

Overall: Though I'm impressed with the warmth and achievements of the CR people, I might hesitate to recommend the country as a vacation destination. The problem is that CR has the negatives of your basic third world locale (cost to get there, heat, bugs, dirt, food/water your stomach may complain about), but arguably few of the positives (low cost, exotic feel, rich history, significant attractions). If you go with a specific activity in mind (birding, fishing, surfing), you'll likely have a rewarding trip. But travelers just seeing the sights (like me) might leave feeling they've just been to a grubbier version of the US, albeit one with a smoking volcano and prettier birds in the trees. If you could get a cheap and maybe direct flight, I guess it could make a warm and pleasant getaway from the States for a week. And now the details…

Figure 12 Example of a critical opinion on the destination (Lonely Planet 2011)

He argued that "the problem is that CR has the negatives of your basic third world locale (cost to get there, heat, bugs, dirt, food/water your stomach may complain about), but arguably few of the positives (low cost, exotic feel, rich history, significant attractions)" (Lonely Planet 2011). The point was, however, that Costa Rica is an excellent destination for activities and adventure, but for a traveler who just wishes to see the sights and not much else it may not be as rewarding to travel to Costa Rica.

4.4.4 Positive and negative aspects of the vacation

There were numerous aspects the tourists really enjoyed and liked about their vacations. By far the most common thing the visitors really liked was the beautiful scenery Costa Rica has to offer. In most of the travel reports there were some remark or mention about the beauty of the nature in Costa Rica. Other positive notions about the nature included: rainforests, beaches, wildlife, sunny weather, volcanoes, waterfalls, sunsets, hot springs, gardens, ocean, cloud forests, and the impressive world of colors. All of these were praised in tremendous amount of flattering comments and wonder.

Other than the nature, the visitors truly liked the local people who are "wonderful, friendly and helpful." Most of the hotels and restaurants were favorable and the food is "tasty and affordable". Also, generally the level of service was highly thanked for. On top of that, the activities and different tours were very popular and greatly enjoyed. The most liked tours and activities included hiking in national parks, volcanoes and rainforests, white water rafting, surfing, ziplining, horseback riding, kayaking, snorkeling, bird watching, turtle nesting tours, spice farm tours, mangrove tours, canopy tours, the Hanging Bridges, and the Hummingbird Garden.

The negative aspects were concentrated around certain issues, such as the condition of roads, bad weather, pollution, and too many tourists. Many of the tourists chose to rent a car in Costa Rica in order to be able to see more of the country through the convenience of a car. However, almost everybody was at least somewhat dissatisfied with the condition of roads. They reported huge potholes in roads, the unpaved roads were dusty, speed limits were not quite right, street signs either were terrible or did not exist at all and also it may take a lot of time to travel a seemingly short distance.

Costa Rica is a very popular vacation destination, and therefore some places are packed with tourists. Some of the travelers were unhappy with these “crazy tourist areas” and either chose not to stay in the area or not to go to a certain national park for example. In addition to being “over-touristy”, the visitors felt that some of the towns were dirty and some of the bigger towns were reportedly full of prostitutes. Other grievances included the country being more expensive than its neighboring countries, local people not speaking enough English to satisfy the (mostly American) tourists, locals trying to rip off the tourists, the capital city San Jose being polluted, and also there were seemingly too much development going on; the construction sites annoyed many.

The weather was another continuous receiver of complaints. The travel reports revealed various feelings towards the weather; too rainy or too dry, too hot or too cold. Heavy rains can cause flooding, which in turn can wipe out roads and bridges. This is very unfortunate because consequently the visitors are unable to go to a certain beach or particular part of a rainforest. The visitors rarely seemed to realize that the local people may suffer from the floods far more than any tourist. The tourists also complained about too many bugs and bug bites, and trash on the beaches, mostly washed up from the sea or the ocean. On top of all this, some were unhappy with the amount of wildlife they saw while on vacation in Costa Rica. They expected to see more wild animals, and more impressive scenery. However, it is possible these individuals set their expectations too high, they had mentally created an unrealistic image of the destination, or they otherwise failed to observe the nature’s diversity. Many of the visitors stated that while hiking they saw far more wildlife with a guide than without, and hence if wildlife is what the tourist desires, hiring a guide is advisable.

4.4.5 Perceived wildlife

In general, the visitors were extremely fascinated by the diverse wildlife they encountered in Costa Rica. They reported seeing over 18 different species and numerous subspecies of birds, four species of monkeys and numerous other wild animals. The reported bird species included hummingbirds, honeycreepers, tanagers, macaws, quetzals, toucans, oropendolas, mot mots, trogons, hawks, herons, and gallinules. Other spotted animals included armadillos, sloths, coatis, crocodiles, iguanas, basilisks, turtles, dolphins, sea slugs, tayras, agoutis, kinkajous, peccaries, ants and spiders, and various other species. Experiencing the diverse wildlife in their natural environment was the absolute highlight of the vacation for many of the visitors.

4.4.6 The tourists

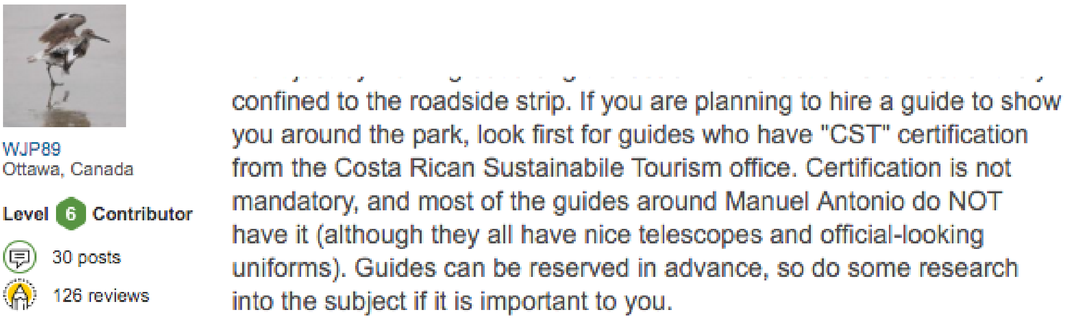
Earlier in this paper the ecotourist was defined as 25 to 54-year-old professional with relatively good income. The travel reports gave only a little insight into the tourists' personal lives but nevertheless some details were available. Approximately two thirds of the travel reports revealed some demographic details. Identifiably 23 out of 59 were families with children, 21 were couples of all ages, nine were traveling alone and six were traveling with one or more friend. The rest 30 did not include any details about their demographics. On average, the visitors spent 9.44 days in Costa Rica, although the trip durations varied from 3 days to 20 days.

The sample of travel reports contained one report that could be identified as an ecotourism vacation. Contrary to the ecotourist profile described in section 2.3 the tourists who went on this vacation were not 'DINCs', or empty nesters as Kurt Kutay suggested, but rather families with children. However, they were in Costa Rica for two weeks, which is longer than on average. This was one of the ecotourist's characteristics Wight identified. Similarly, their intention was to get off the beaten path as much as possible, and they visited national parks, went on hiking tours as well as several other nature-related tours. They had hired a personal guide for the duration of the trip and therefore they were able to truly learn about Costa Rica while in the country. All of these aspects comply with the ecotourism guidelines, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that this vacation was in fact ecotourism.

4.5 Visitors' perceptions of a Costa Rican vacation 2012-2014

The second set of trip reports from Costa Rican vacations was collected in April 2014. The vacations took place between 2012 and 2014. Any significant differences between the data sets could not be found. In general, the visitors spoke of their vacations in similar manner; marveling the splendid nature and wildlife, complaining about infrastructure, enjoying the beaches and the weather.

A total of 45 new trip reports were analyzed, but of these none mentioned ecotourism or even sustainability or conservation. Ecotourism does not seem to be important factor when deciding to travel to Costa Rica, and most visitors were not openly concerned about the sustainability of the hotels, tour operators, or national park operations. However, one individual did comment on the CST program, which implies that it is known among some visitors. The credibility of a tour operator for example can increase quite significantly with a CST certification, as this visitor's comment suggests:



WJP89
Ottawa, Canada
Level 6 Contributor
30 posts
126 reviews

confined to the roadside strip. If you are planning to hire a guide to show you around the park, look first for guides who have "CST" certification from the Costa Rican Sustainabile Tourism office. Certification is not mandatory, and most of the guides around Manuel Antonio do NOT have it (although they all have nice telescopes and official-looking uniforms). Guides can be reserved in advance, so do some research into the subject if it is important to you.

Figure 13 Visitor recommending CST certified tour guides (TripAdvisor 2014)

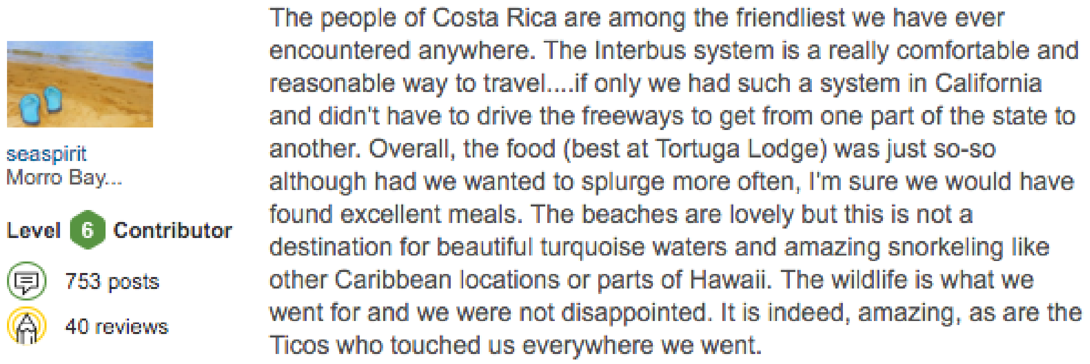
Several of the visitors mentioned having visited places such as Chilamate Rainforest Eco-Retreat or Eco Termales Hot Springs, but neither of these places are certified under the Certification for Sustainable Tourism program. Additionally, one person recommended a place called La Flor de Paraíso, which "cater[s] to the eco-adventure set" ('noh', TripAdvisor 2014).

The CST program has awarded 232 accommodation providers with a sustainability certification level 1 through 5. Not all of the trip reports disclosed what accommodation the visitors had chosen, but 40 reports did reveal this information. 26 visitors from these 40 stayed at a CST certified accommodation for one night or more during their stay. Fourteen only stayed at hotels that are not currently certified. Most visitors who travel to Costa Rica seem to move between different areas of the country, and thus stay at more than one hotel or hostel during their visit. None of the visitors stayed in a certified hotel for the whole duration of their vacation.

Out of the 45 vacations, 23 were deemed regular. However, most of the regular vacations included some type of nature activities, but regardless the overall purpose of the travel was not to perceive the nature but rather to relax on the beach and enjoy the weather. 19 vacations were categorized as nature / wildlife / adventure tourism. These vacations emphasized the nature and different activities, and the visitors talked about their experiences and perceived wildlife in an enthusiastic manner. Two of the vacations were clearly separated in two parts, for spending a certain amount of time relaxing on the beach, and another portion of time in a different location enjoying the nature and activities. In the first set of reports there were no other types of tourism present, but in this group there was one person whose primary reason to travel to Costa Rica was medical. The visitor stayed in the country for nine days, and during that time went through a dental implantation.

What is interesting to see, however, is that the percentage of vacations that can be categorized as nature / wildlife / adventure tourism decreased between the data extraction points. In the trip reports collected in 2011, 58 percent were categorized as nature / wildlife / adventure tourism, but in the second batch of trip reports gathered in 2014, the percentage had dropped to 42 percent (see table 3 in section 3.3 for details about the frequencies). The reason for the decrease was not directly evident from the data.

The visitor’s overall satisfaction has slightly increased in the recent years. Whereas during 2003-2011 eight visitors were visibly dissatisfied with their vacation, during 2012-2014 no one voiced such strong displeasure. One of the trip reports was neutral in the overall feeling, but the rest had positive experiences in the country. ‘Seaspirit’ expressed their satisfaction with their 2014 vacation beautifully. Figure 14 below reveals her comment.


seaspirit
Morro Bay...

Level 6 Contributor

753 posts

40 reviews

The people of Costa Rica are among the friendliest we have ever encountered anywhere. The Interbus system is a really comfortable and reasonable way to travel....if only we had such a system in California and didn't have to drive the freeways to get from one part of the state to another. Overall, the food (best at Tortuga Lodge) was just so-so although had we wanted to splurge more often, I'm sure we would have found excellent meals. The beaches are lovely but this is not a destination for beautiful turquoise waters and amazing snorkeling like other Caribbean locations or parts of Hawaii. The wildlife is what we went for and we were not disappointed. It is indeed, amazing, as are the Ticos who touched us everywhere we went.

Figure 14 Comment praising the wildlife (TripAdvisor 2014)

’Seaspirit’ also commented that “the wildlife is what we went for and we were not disappointed. It is indeed, amazing, as are the Ticos[1] who touched us everywhere we went” (Tripadvisor 2014). This is just one example among numerous reports of the magnificence of the wildlife and nature in Costa Rica, as well as the friendliness of the local people. One person did feel like the locals treated the tourists condescendingly, but the vast majority of the visitors writing these trip reports regarded the Ticos as warm and friendly people.

The demographics of the visitors largely followed the same lines as in the first set of data. Majority of the visitors seem to be from the United States or Canada, and only a handful of people from Europe. To the researcher’s knowledge, other continents were not represented at all. However, not all authors talk about themselves or who they are

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[1] ‘Tico’ is an affectionate nickname for Costa Ricans used by locals and visitors alike.

traveling with when recounting the events and experiences of their vacation. According to the trip reports, Costa Rica is a popular destination among families with children, and older couples. Of course, there were reports from very different visitors traveling either by themselves, with a significant other, a friend or group of friends, or family, including grandparents and children. Additionally, one report was written by a male who traveled to Costa Rica with his four friends for a bachelor party. Another person vacationed in the country with their two children and grandparents. One individual who resides more or less permanently in Panama traveled to Costa Rica in order to renew their Panamanian visa. There was no one group or type of people who were the dominant demographic. Costa Rica as a vacation destination attracts people from all walks of life and for a number of reasons.

5 KENYA AS AN ECOTOURISM DESTINATION

5.1 Short overview of Kenya

Named after Mount Kenya, the second tallest mountain in Africa, Kenya is a culturally and naturally diverse country on the eastern coast of Africa along the equator. Kenya is a medium sized country with an area of 580,367 km^2, of which only 11,227 km^2 is water. Its 44 million inhabitants are ethnically very diverse with seven main indigenous ethnic groups that represent 74% of the population. The remaining 16% comprises of other African and non-African groups. The two official languages of Kenya are English and Swahili. (Central Intelligence Agency 2014.) See Figure 15 below for a map of Kenya.

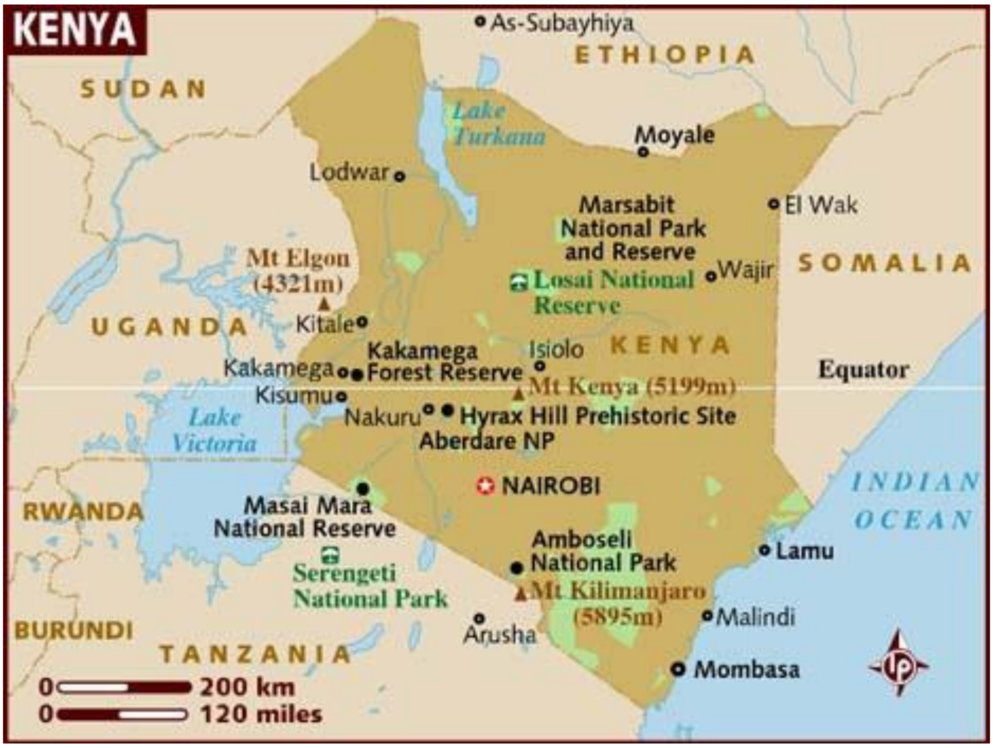


Figure 15 Map of Kenya (Lonely Planet 2016b)

Kenya declared independence from Great Britain in 1963 with the lead of Jomo Kenyatta. Kenyatta became the founding president of the country and led Kenya until his death in 1978. The political environment suffered from violence, fraud and corruption on several occasions in the years after Kenyatta's death. (Central Intelligence Agency 2014.) The situation escalated in the 2007 elections, when the results were allegedly rigged, and later confirmed by international observers. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan came to Kenya to mediate the peace talks, and as a result, the violent encounters subsided for a while. (The Hague Justice Portal 2011.) However, the violence has not completely stopped in the country, as the political climate is still deeply divided and ethnically polarized (International Crisis Group 2013).

Even greater troubles existing in Kenya are the terrorist attacks targeted to the capital city, Nairobi, and the port city Mombasa in the recent years. A terrorist organization Al-Shabaab claims to be responsible for the attacks, of which the most severe was an attack to Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi in September 2013. (BBC News 2013.) These attacks have had a severe impact on the economy and atmosphere of the country. Several foreign governments, including the British government, have issued a travel warning, saying that their citizens should avoid travel in certain parts of Kenya since the threat of new attacks is still high (Foreign travel advice Kenya 2016).

Kenya is known for the incredible diversity of its nature. Being a relatively small country, the amount different landscapes and native animals, birds and insects is astounding. There are snow-capped mountains, volcanoes, flat deserts, granitic hills, rainforests, beaches and coral reefs. (Magical Kenya 2014.) The best known natural areas in Kenya are Mount Kenya that rises 5,199 meters above the sea level, The Rift Valley area with small national parks and lakes, Maasai Mara National Park along the Tanzanian border, Amboseli National Park, Tsavo East and West National Parks, Lake Naivasha, and Kakamega forest, the only remaining part of the unique Guineo-Congolian forest ecosystem in Kenya (Kenya Wildlife Service 2014). The Maasai Mara, Amboseli and Tsavo National Parks are known for their large array of wildlife. A number of the biggest mammals on earth reside in these areas, including lions, leopards, cheetah, rhinos, hippos, elephants, giraffes, wildebeest, zebras, hyenas and gazelles. The yearly wildebeest migration in Maasai Mara is a spectacular event that attracts thousands of visitors to come witness the movement of over million animals from Serengeti National Park in Tanzania to Maasai Mara. (Experiece Kenya 2012.)

The national parks, lakes, and mountain areas are by far the most popular destinations among the tourists who come to Kenya. However, there are other major attractions around the country as well. Around Nairobi there are Nairobi National Museum, a good place to learn more about Kenyan history, Sheldrick Elephant Orphanage that aims to save orphaned elephants and rhinos, and The AFEW (African Fund for Endangered Wildlife) Giraffe Center, which was originally set up as a breeding center for the endangered Rothchild giraffe, but now operates mainly to educate Kenyan school children. (Magical Kenya 2014.) Few other significant attractions are located on the coast of Kenya in the second largest city, Mombasa, which is an important port both in the present day and historically. The UNESCO World Heritage Site in Mombasa, Fort Jesus, was built in the late 16th century to protect the port, and to this day it is “one of the most outstanding and well-preserved examples of the 16th [century] Portuguese military fortification and landmark in the history of this type of construction” (UNESCO 2014).

5.2 Kenya’s ecotourism strategy

In Kenya travel and tourism directly contributes for 4.8% of total GDP. When including indirect and induced contribution as well, the total contribution is 10.5% (WTTC 2015b) and therefore, tourism is an important source of income for Kenya. Nature and tourism have always been inseparably linked in rather a symbiotic manner in Kenya, and this has opened up excellent opportunities for ecotourism and conservation. In order to maintain the inflow of tourists into the country, it is crucial to conserve the main attraction, wildlife. With the income brought in by the visitors, Kenya has been able to implement several conservation acts and plans to preserve the wildlife and nature. (Kenya Wildlife Service 2014.) According to Kenya Wildlife Service (2014) ecotourism “means tourism that has no negative impact on eco-systems, and positively contributes to the destination on a social and environmental level”.

Sustainable tourism to Kenya is not only the priority of a small part of the industry in Kenya, such as Kenya Wildlife Service and Ecotourism Kenya, but it is crucial to the whole industry. Kenya Tourism Federation represents the private sector of Kenyan tourism industry, and it comprises of the associations of Tour Operators, Hotelkeepers and Caterers, Travel Agents, Air Operators, Mombasa & coast Tourism and Ecotourism Kenya. The mission of Kenya Tourism Federation is “to promote sustainable tourism sector through effective representation of private sector industry stakeholder interests” (Kenya Tourism Federation 2014). Their objectives include developing regulations and a code of conduct to promote self-regulation and industry best practices, the responsible use and development of natural resources and the legitimate rights and freedoms of tourists. These objectives aim to create a sustainable tourism industry within the country, where operations do not harm the environment, and tourists feel confident in the security of the country. (Kenya Tourism Federation 2014.)

In 2013, the government of Kenya published a National Tourism Strategy for 2013-2018. The report acknowledges that the changing world is causing challenges for Kenyan tourism. The following challenges were identified in the strategy: (National Tourism Strategy 2013-2018.)

- “Reinforce the Kenya tourism industry as a high quality service sector
- Better position Kenya as the number 1 tourism destination in the world
- Make the tourism industry part of the knowledge economy
- Develop Kenya tourism in a sustainable manner
- Increase the value generated from available resources
- Create environment conductive to tourism businesses
- Attracting and retaining a workforce
- Investing in tourism infrastructure
- Ensuring an efficient transportation system.”

This indicates that Kenya is attempting to improve the conditions for tourism in the country while keeping sustainability in mind. Sufficient infrastructure is essential for tourism, especially if Kenya wishes to reach its goal to increase the number of foreign tourists from 1.8 million per year to 3 million per year. (National Tourism Strategy 2013-2018.)

Developing sustainable tourism in Kenya is fundamental for the Kenyan government's goals. It has been argued that elephants bring in significantly larger revenue alive than the value of ivory. The ivory of one elephant is worth $21,000 whereas one elephant brings in tourism revenues of $1.6 million over its lifetime, therefore an elephant is worth 76 times more alive than poached. (Platt 2014.) Tourism in Kenya relies rather heavily on the diverse wildlife and nature, and therefore, investing in sustainable tourism operations is crucial for the future of the tourism industry in Kenya.

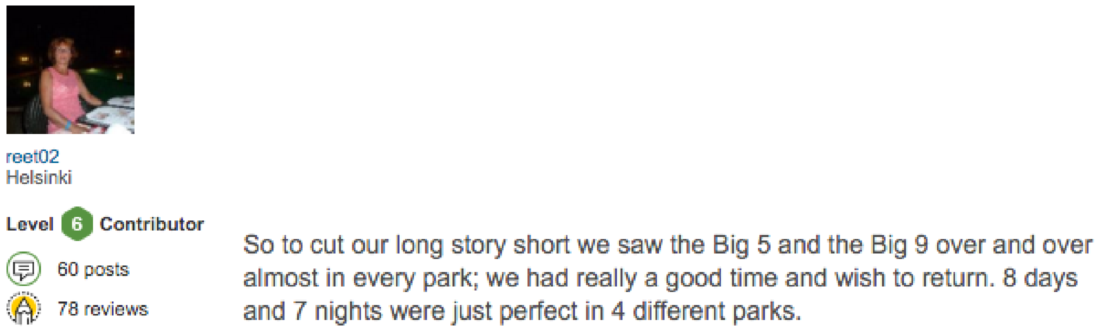
The SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) presented in the National Tourism Strategy identified numerous strengths and weaknesses in the Kenyan tourism. The main strengths in Kenya are the excellent reputation and image of the country, diverse nature and wildlife, and attention given to preservation and sustainability of these nature-based attractions. The most important weaknesses to overcome are inadequate infrastructure, financial resources for development, research and capacity of tourism, weak product and market diversification, and high costs. The number one opportunity listed in the SWOT analysis is the untapped tourism potential for example in ecotourism. Other important opportunities include high demand of tourism products, improving national and regional economy, increasing income, favorable climate, and rich natural and resource diversity. Threats, on the other hand, include terrorism, unfavorable attitude of Western media, global recession, and climate change. (National Tourism Strategy 2013-2018.)

This indicates that ecotourism is not the emphasis of the government of Kenya, but rather the objective of private businesses operating in the tourism industry in Kenya. These operators have recognized the potential of the Kenyan nature and wildlife, and work in cooperation to improve Kenya's reputation as ecotourism destination, and consequently attract more visitors. With the various green and eco-certifications and systems, the private sector has contributed significantly in the creation and improvement of ecotourism in Kenya.

5.3 Visitors' perceptions of vacations in Kenya 2012-2014

As mentioned in Chapter 3.3, the trip reports were analyzed based on their content and type. All in all, 45 trip reports from three different travel related discussion forums were analyzed (TripAdvisor; Lonely Planet; Fodor's). The first step was to divide the reports into two categories based on the type of tourism, whether it was regular, including normal beach and city vacations, or ecotourism, wildlife or nature tourism. Only these two categories were chosen because there were no other types of tourism present in the analyzed material. Out of the 45 trip reports, 44 trips were motivated by the wildlife or nature in Kenya, and only one was a beach vacation.

The reports were divided into these categories based on the content of the report. In case there was any direct or indirect mentioning of ecotourism, eco-activities, conservation, sustainability, or eco-lodging, wildlife, and/or nature, the report was classified as eco-, wildlife or nature tourism. The only beach vacation was in fact a honeymoon, and the couple spent their entire vacation at two non-eco-certified beach resorts and spas. Apart from this one anomaly, every group of people young and older engaged in eco-, nature and wildlife tourism in some form. Most often the visitors participated in organized safaris, and spotting "the Big 5" (elephant, rhino, leopard, lion and buffalo) was the goal for many visitors. In Figure 16, 'reet02' rejoices having seen the Big 5, and the Big 9 (the big 5, cheetah, giraffe, hippopotamus, and zebra) as well.

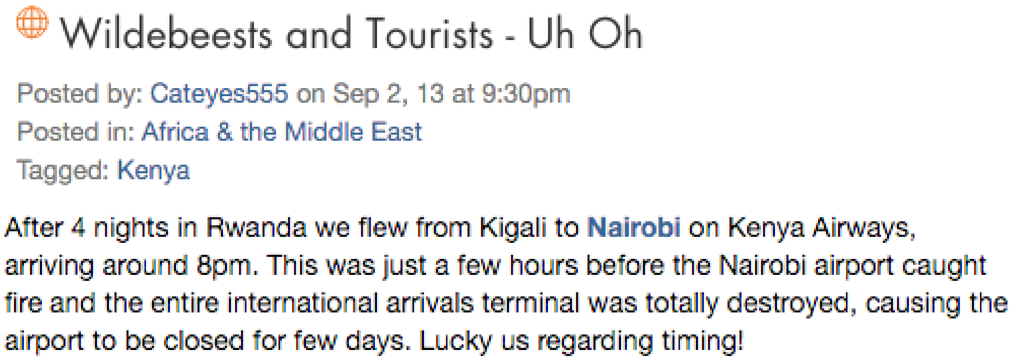

reet02
Helsinki

Level 6 Contributor
60 posts
78 reviews

So to cut our long story short we saw the Big 5 and the Big 9 over and over almost in every park; we had really a good time and wish to return. 8 days and 7 nights were just perfect in 4 different parks.

Figure 16 Seeing the famous Big 5 in Kenya (TripAdvisor 2014)

Throughout the reports, there was not a single mention of the word ecotourism. Therefore, the remaining 44 reports were deemed nature and wildlife tourism. Out of these 44 reports, 17 visitor groups stayed at one or more eco-certified lodges and camps. However, not everyone disclosed their accommodation and activity choices. Generally, a majority of the reports included sometimes rather detailed accounts of encounters with wildlife. Visitors were delighted to see animals such as wildebeest, zebras, giraffes, cheetahs, gnus, crocodiles, impalas, and various birds and insects, in addition to the Big 5. One of the visitors did not travel to Kenya only to see wildlife, but instead they opted to begin their trip in Kenya, and move on to Tanzania to climb the highest mountain in Africa, Kilimanjaro. Additionally, there were several occasions where the visitors travelled to East Africa to visit more than one country. Often the countries visited included Tanzania, Rwanda, and Uganda. For example, 'Cateyes555' traveled to both Rwanda and Kenya during the same trip, as shown in Figure 17 below.

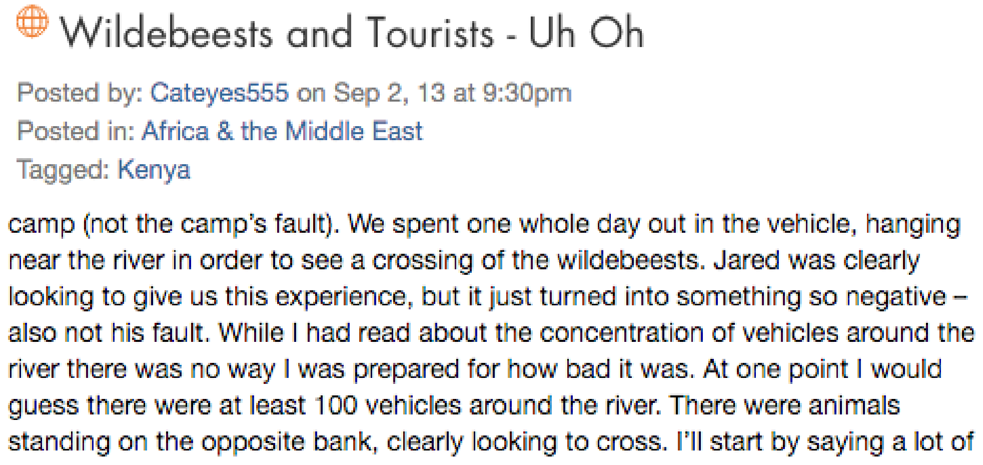

Wildebeests and Tourists - Uh Oh

Posted by: Cateyes555 on Sep 2, 13 at 9:30pm
Posted in: Africa & the Middle East
Tagged: Kenya

After 4 nights in Rwanda we flew from Kigali to Nairobi on Kenya Airways, arriving around 8pm. This was just a few hours before the Nairobi airport caught fire and the entire international arrivals terminal was totally destroyed, causing the airport to be closed for few days. Lucky us regarding timing!

Figure 17 Visitor traveling to multiple countries during the same trip (Fodor's 2014)

Another area analyzed was the overall satisfaction the visitors were left with after their visit. The satisfaction was determined based on the tone of the report, words used, and underlying implications that could be derived from the report. Based on these criteria, 40 reports were very positive, and the visitors were satisfied with their travels. The remaining five were in the neutral range, not quite reaching negative emotions. The biggest grievance of one of the visitors was the utter chaos they encountered at Maasai Mara National Reserve during the migration of wildebeest. During this time of year, thousands and thousands of wildebeest migrate to another area, and cross a river in Maasai Mara in the process.

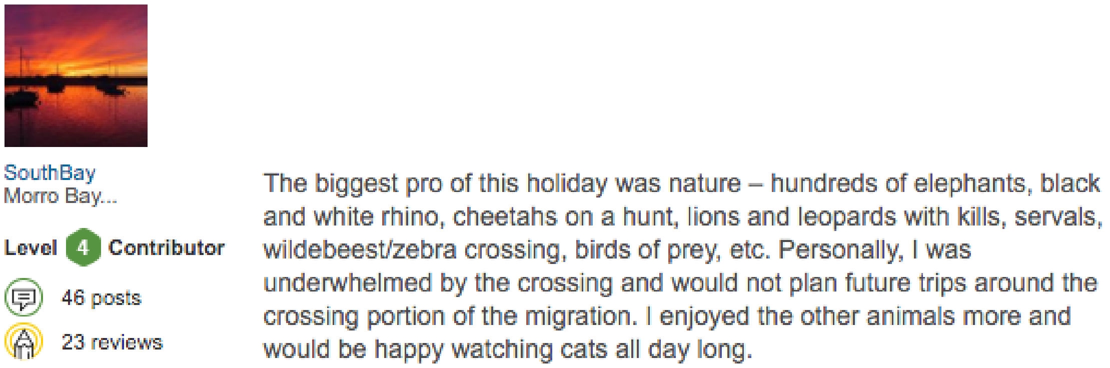

Wildebeests and Tourists - Uh Oh

Posted by: Cateyes555 on Sep 2, 13 at 9:30pm
Posted in: Africa & the Middle East
Tagged: Kenya

camp (not the camp's fault). We spent one whole day out in the vehicle, hanging near the river in order to see a crossing of the wildebeests. Jared was clearly looking to give us this experience, but it just turned into something so negative – also not his fault. While I had read about the concentration of vehicles around the river there was no way I was prepared for how bad it was. At one point I would guess there were at least 100 vehicles around the river. There were animals standing on the opposite bank, clearly looking to cross. I'll start by saying a lot of

Figure 18 Negative experience during the Wildebeest migration (Fodor's 2014)

The migration is a popular time to visit the reserve, and as these visitors came to realize, not all of the drivers who took tourist groups there were actual guides, but just hired to drive a group of people from Nairobi to Maasai Mara for the day. Often these drivers have no idea how to behave in the situation or they do not respect the nature and the animals, and they end up severely disturbing the wildebeest, for example by driving their cars very close to the river blocking the wildebeests' way out of the river. According to 'Cateye555's report, there were over a hundred white vans in the same area at one time, and this left very negative impact on the visitor's experience, as seen in Figure 18. The rest of the trip was smooth and the visitor overall enjoyed their stay in Kenya, albeit claiming they would not return at that time of the year again. An example of this is 'SouthBay's comment illustrated in Figure 19. The other grievances included problems with the tour company, the "money-grabbing" atmosphere at the Maasai villages and the country in general, seaweed on the coast, the higher price level than expected, and slight difficulties when travelling alone.


SouthBay
Morro Bay...

Level 4 Contributor

46 posts

23 reviews

The biggest pro of this holiday was nature – hundreds of elephants, black and white rhino, cheetahs on a hunt, lions and leopards with kills, servals, wildebeest/zebra crossing, birds of prey, etc. Personally, I was underwhelmed by the crossing and would not plan future trips around the crossing portion of the migration. I enjoyed the other animals more and would be happy watching cats all day long.

Figure 19 Example of some pros and cons of a Kenyan vacation (TripAdvisor 2014)

The visitors to Kenya generally tend to be couples and groups, but not so much families with small children. It is rational that the wild safaris in Africa are not the ideal environment for a family vacation. A large portion of the analyzed reports were written by visitors from Europe. Naturally there were a few trip reports from North American and Australian visitors, but the majority were European.

6 CONCLUSION

6.1 Reflection on research questions

Costa Rica is a versatile and easily adaptable destination, and it is reasonable to say that marketing the country for the larger audiences as a beautiful vacation destination has been successful. Sustainable tourism and ecotourism are clearly important concepts for the Costa Ricans, and the principles are thoroughly embedded in the national tourism strategy. The most visible way this is done is through the Certification for Sustainable Tourism program, which has turned out to be an effective way to promote sustainable tourism practices in Costa Rica.

Kenya, on the other hand, is similarly versatile, but the destination has been marketed differently. Majority of the visitors travelled to Kenya solely to see the nature and wildlife, and therefore it is a significant competitive advantage for Kenya. Luckily, the government of Kenya has realized the importance of sustainability in order to preserve the nature, and thus their competitiveness. As mentioned in Chapter 5.2, Kenya has recognized ecotourism as one of the main opportunities for the country, but the potential has not yet been fully developed. The image of ecotourism in Kenya has been created within the private sector.

When reflecting on the first sub-objective on this research “How has Costa Rica and Kenya branded themselves as an ecotourism destinations?”, it can be concluded that while ecotourism is an important component in the national tourism strategy in Costa Rica and the private tourism strategy in Kenya, it is not the only concept emphasized. As mentioned earlier in this study, the concept of ecotourism is very restrictive, and therefore it is only reasonable and desirable that the country invests on sustainable tourism as a wider concept and means to conserve and protect the environment. Costa Rica has successfully utilized sustainable principles in the tourism industry, mainly by instigating certification programs to promote environmentally friendly operation of hotels and tour operators, and taking measures to protect and conserve national park areas, and educating visitors about the nature and wildlife. On a national level, Kenya has not officially participated significantly in the creation of the ecotourism brand image. A major player in this field in Kenya is the Eco Tourism Kenya, an organization that plays a key role in ensuring that the tourism industry is sustainable, and conservation is taken into account at all levels. Eco Tourism Kenya enjoys huge support from the tourism industry within the country, and together they are able to work more efficiently in the efforts to market Kenya as a prime destination for ecotourism, wildlife tourism, nature tourism, and even volunteer tourism (voluntourism) and adventure tourism.

Conducting this research has allowed me to study how the visitors feel and think about ecotourism and what it means to the visitors. However, people generally were not discussing ecotourism issues in their trip reports. It seems that the visitors are not interested in ecotourism at all, or they just are not knowledgeable enough about the subject to appreciate the concept and the possible outcomes, or the visitors might not think that ecotourism is an important or necessary subject to mention in their trip report. Perhaps ecotourism is simply a term that marketers, conservationists, and government officials use to achieve their specific goals while regular tourists are unaware of its meaning. Learning about and understanding ecotourism is a long process and the general public may not quite understand the concept yet. At this point when the initial research is done and I reflect back to the beginning of this process I realize that my own knowledge of ecotourism was very limited before studying numerous ecotourism-related studies. Therefore, it may be erroneous to expect a regular tourist to be aware of ecotourism and all its traits and constrictions. In addition, if ecotourism was something the visitors were genuinely interested in, it is reasonable to assume they would have mentioned it in their trip reports. Ecotourism is a subject of certain seriousness, and therefore it is likely that people would express their interest in it, should that be the case.

The scope of this study represents only a fraction of the opinions of tourists visiting Costa Rica or Kenya, and it is not a sufficient sample to base wider assumptions on, but nevertheless the lack of discussion about ecotourism in the trip reports indicates the general indifference among the tourists. Of course, vast majority of the travel reports were written by American tourists and they might not regard Costa Rica as an ecotourism destination because their prevailing perception regards it as a more traditional 3S (sun, sea, sand) tourism destination. Also, Costa Rica is within a convenient travel distance from the United States, therefore it is easy to reach and hence creates perfect setting for mass tourism originating from the US. Visitors to Kenya were more diverse, mostly coming from different parts of Europe, Australia, and the US. Kenya is often perceived to be less easily reachable than Costa Rica, but this does not change the perception of ecotourism in Kenya.

Reflecting on the second sub-objective of this study “How visitors to Costa Rica and Kenya perceive the destination?”, it can be concluded that the visitors in fact do not highly value ecotourism in either country. However, visitors to Costa Rica and Kenya perceive the countries as excellent destinations for wildlife spotting, and the beauty of the country is often admired. The variety of different eco-systems and the sheer number of wildlife species deeply impress most of the visitors. Especially in Costa Rica the visitors seemed to place a high importance on the variety of activities available in different destinations, and it was not uncommon to travel to a few different destinations within the country in order to make the most of their time there.

The importance of visitor perceptions of a country can be easily overlooked in the tourism research, especially if proper scientific research in the region is scarce, as the case is in Kenya. However, through the trip reports, it was possible to see that much like any other country, both Costa Rica and Kenya have problems, too. Main issues for the visitors in both countries were the poor infrastructure, especially bumpy roads, the crowdedness of certain destinations during peak periods, and the greediness of the indigenous people. Regardless, the visitors were generally impressed enough to swear to return to the country one day, and recommending the destination for other people.

Ecotourism as a concept and term was not generally present at all in the reports analyzed. Therefore, the visitors seemingly do not consider ecotourism when choosing a destination. More important factor is the overall image of the country as a tourist destination where the nature is protected and conserved. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of the visitors chose an eco-certified accommodation during their travels, and this implies that whereas ecotourism as a restrictive term is not widely popular, the visitors still care about the environment. While ecotourism was not a visible and detectable theme in the travel reports, it still is likely that the ‘greenness’ of Costa Rica as a tourism destination was a positive determining factor for some visitors when deciding the travel destination. Perhaps concentrating on improving the green and sustainable tourism ideas in Kenya might have greater effect on the overall image and country brand, and consequently attract more ecotourists to the country.

The third sub-objective, “How do visitor perceptions align with the country’s desired image as an ecotourism destination?”, can be assessed through comparing the visitor perceptions to the national tourism strategy. According to the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo over half of the visitors to Costa Rica are ecotourists, however, it is unclear how this estimation was made. Based on the trip reports analyzed for this research, ecotourism as a concept is not essential for the visitors, but nature related activities are very important to majority of them, therefore an interpretation could be made in favor of the ICT. Defining what constitutes ecotourism and what does not is still ambiguous, with distinctions made in terms of the length of the time spent participating in ecotourism, and what activities fall in the strict category of ecotourism, just to name a few. A visitor spending an hour at a national park could be considered ecotourism, just like another visitor spending a week at an eco-certified lodge.

In Kenya, the ecotourism image is mainly created and maintained by private businesses within the Kenyan tourism industry. Based on the trip reports the visitor perceptions do not align perfectly with the desired image of an ecotourism destination. Yet, the Kenyan government in their tourism strategy stated that the country will concentrate on sustainability and infrastructure, among other things, and these are few of the issues that could be isolated from the trip reports. Therefore, to a certain extent the visitor perceptions support the vision and mission of the tourism strategy; “to make Kenya the preferred destination of choice”, and “to develop, manage, and market sustainable tourism in Kenya” (National Tourism Strategy 2013-2018). In brief, Kenya is well positioned in the ecotourism market, but the message has not reached the general public. Visitors to Kenya are principally very satisfied with their trip and the services received in the destination. However, Kenya has not been able officially brand itself as an ecotourism country yet. It could be argued that Kenya’s strategy to concentrate on sustainable tourism is the right choice as of now.

However, giving a definite answer to the sub-objective is not enjoyable in this case, but rather retaining some of the ambiguity is necessary. The visitors are not explicitly expressing their feelings about ecotourism and sustainable tourism, but this does not mean that these issues are not important. Based on the findings of this study, it is justifiable to question whether the Costa Rican or Kenyan tourism strategies have influenced the visitors’ perceptions of the country. The tourism strategy most likely has help shape the visitors’ experiences and satisfaction in a positive way through offering a wide variety of activity and accommodation options, among others. This, however, can be a subtle effect, and not one that an individual would necessarily consciously think about.

The main research question for this study is “How do visitors perceive Costa Rica and Kenya as ecotourism destinations?”. The visitor perceptions were relatively unanimous in terms of ecotourism; it is not an essential factor for the visitors. Nevertheless, nature and wildlife are very important for the travelers, but the vast majority of them refrained from defining or mentioning ecotourism or sustainable tourism. It seems that for the visitors Costa Rica is first and foremost a nature, beach, and adventure destination while Kenya is a wildlife and nature destination. In conclusion, both countries are taking rather substantial measures to improve the ecotourism within the regions, but so far the tourists are seeking experiences and adventure when traveling to these destinations, and ecotourism is a secondary factor.

6.2 Discussion on ecotourism in Costa Rica and Kenya

Ecotourism is a fantastic concept that brings immense value to the local communities and environment at tourism destinations around the world. The countries analyzed in this research, Costa Rica and Kenya, both emphasize ecotourism and sustainability in their public and private sector tourism plans. However, the average visitor as represented by the data does not particularly voice their interest in ecotourism. This does not mean that the visitors are not interested in or care about ecological tourism, but rather that it is not an issue major enough for the visitors to talk about in their trip reports.

Sustainability and ‘green’ values are increasingly popular around the world. There is an ongoing discussion about climate change and sustainability in the media and the internet, and therefore it is essential for tourism destinations to take sustainability into account. Today’s travelers are more aware of environmental issues than ever before, and utilizing this could prove to be beneficial for the countries on multiple levels, such as for economic, political, socio-economic, and reputational reasons. The income generated directly and indirectly by tourism is very significant on a country level, as tourism accounts for 12.5% of GDP in Costa Rica (WTTC 2015a) and 10.5% of GDP in Kenya (WTTC 2015b). In comparison, the total contribution of tourism to the GDP in the United States is 8% (WTTC 2015f), 9.4% in South Africa (WTTC 2015d), 14% in Tanzania (WTTC 2015e), and 17.5% in Panama (WTTC 2015c). This implies that richer countries rely less heavily on tourism to bring income into the country, whereas for poorer countries tourism is crucial for continued development. Both Kenya and Costa Rica are developing countries, and investing in sustainable tourism would help ensure this income source will not deplete in the future, but rather that it could be controlled and thus sustainably increased.

One of the most popular themes in the data from both countries was the opportunity for wildlife sightings. Climate change and unsustainable tourism are major threats to wildlife and biodiversity, and nations should be mindful about the continuity in tourism. It is extremely likely that the visitor flows to both Costa Rica and Kenya would be significantly lower if there were less wildlife to see. The large wild animals seen in the safaris are the main attraction in Kenya, while the rainforest with all its biodiversity attracts visitors to Costa Rica, and without them there would be significantly less interest to travel to these countries. For example, as mentioned in the chapter 5.2, an elephant generates 76 times more income during its lifetime alive than an animal that was poached for ivory. This is yet another important reason to invest in the future of the country by promoting sustainable tourism practices, including fighting poachers.

Another issue that emerged when analyzing the data was the lack of mentions of ecotourism and sustainability in the reports. The question is, what causes this phenomenon among visitors to two prominent ecotourism countries? There can be numerous explanations why this is happening, but one of the more critical factors is the marketing of ecotourism and sustainability, and relatedly the availability of information. This research paper did not dive into the world of tourism marketing in different forums and media, but it is possible, that the ecotourism campaigns and programs have not been efficiently marketed in the channels that easily reach this particular sample of visitors. It seems that the visitors are not knowledgeable about sustainability and ecotourism, but they are rather concentrated on the more tangible side of their experience; for example, the wildlife they were able to spot, nature destinations visited, and the accommodation options. The ecological side of these experiences seems to be almost irrelevant to the tourists. After all, the sample is small and does not properly represent the population, and therefore it is difficult to draw irrefutable conclusions. However, it might be beneficial to examine the marketing methods and channels and their effectiveness.

6.3 Theoretical discussion

The theoretical implications of this study revolve around the restricted definition of ecotourism, and the use of discussion forum posts as primary data. Perhaps one of the major challenges in ecotourism research is in fact defining it. Most researchers agree that the definition of ecotourism is very restricted, and a number of conditions have to be met in order for the tourism to qualify as ecotourism. One issue that was not widely discussed in various studies and research papers on ecotourism is the concept of time in relation to ecotourism. When talking about an ecotourism destination, and how visitors perceive it, the underlying question is what constitutes ecotourism? Do the visitors need to only engage in ecofriendly activities, only lodge at eco-certified lodging, and for example generally abide by the ten commandments of ecotourism (see Appendix 2), or is it acceptable to count any participation in ecologically friendly tourism practices as ecotourism? This research paper did not attempt to find a conclusive answer to this question, but rather chose to analyze the issues on a more general level regarding the type of tourism. For example, participating in eco-activities or staying at an eco-certified accommodation was not considered to be ecotourism in the strictest sense of the concept, because the trip reports lacked any mention of green values, ecotourism, or environmentally friendly travel. On the other hand, it seems that the case countries regard ecotourism as an activity that can be participated in only once and still count as being ecotourism.

The main research question ‘How do visitors perceive Costa Rica and Kenya as ecotourism destinations?’ was answered as well as possible based on the chosen sample and data sets. The research question and sub-objectives could have been answered based on the first data set from Costa Rica collected in 2011. The second data set collected in 2014 did not bring significant additional value to the research in terms of new data, but expanding the sample size aided in reaching more consistent results. Additionally, a clear distinction was made between the two case countries, and therefore, the findings from Costa Rica did not guide the analysis of the data from Kenya. The data sets were treated as two separate samples, but regardless, the researcher’s original hypothesis was proven wrong in both cases. Initially, the null hypothesis was that the visitors to the case countries acknowledged the presence of a strong ecotourism culture in both destinations, at least on a superficial level. However, neither visitors to Costa Rica nor visitors to Kenya mentioned ecotourism in their reports. The visitors were, perhaps quite naturally, more concerned with their own personal experience, than the destination's efforts to conserve the nature and educate visitors.

Most often visitors to both Costa Rica and Kenya chose the destinations because of the possible sightings of wildlife, in other words they expected to see exotic animals during their vacation and were usually not disappointed. Managing the expectations of a vacation is one of the key factors in improving destination satisfaction. The visitors themselves can adjust their expectations by searching for information about the destination, and choosing carefully how to execute the vacation, meaning who to travel with, where to stay, and which activities to participate in, just to name a few. However, a factor even more important than the aforementioned factors is the visitor's own attitude. Throughout the trip reports the visitors' initial expectations and attitude affecting the overall destination satisfaction was a noticeable trend. It was evident that some visitors did not expect the destinations to be significantly poorer than their own home towns or home countries. Both Costa Rica and Kenya are still developing countries, classified as third world countries, and this inevitably affects the quality of services and infrastructure in the country. Additionally, some visitors complained about the weather being rainy for example, but turns out they traveled to the destination during the rainy season. Therefore, it can be said that the visitors' own choices play a significant part in destination satisfaction.

In regards of the theoretical framework presented earlier in this paper, the flowchart on perception creation seemed to be reasonably accurate in terms of the data analyzed. It was clear that negative perceptions were in part affected by unrealistic expectations. Comparably, positive expectations often translated into positive perceptions and high satisfaction, which in turn is a key component in determining the destination success. Satisfied visitors are more likely to return. Ultimately, it is essential for both of the countries to ensure the continuity of the tourism business in the destinations, and two crucial factors affecting this are making sure the environment is protected, and keeping visitors and locals alike happy.

6.4 Suggestions for further research

The practical implications of this research are closely related to destination marketing and destination satisfaction. Studying how visitors talk about their vacations online gives the vacation destinations tools to improve the visitor satisfaction and hence the return visitor rate. With information on how visitors react to specific attractions, activities, accommodation, and other services at the destination, the service providers can adjust their product if necessary. Additionally, this type of research allows the tourism strategy decision makers to reflect on the strategy; how successful it is, and how well the visitors are aware of the tourism promotion efforts and in this case, ecotourism and sustainability. This research has some significant limitations regarding how descriptive of the population the data is, but these limitations are discussed further in chapter 6.5. There are several ways how this research could be made better applicable for tourism industry and national level strategizing.

Perhaps the most effective way to improve the applicability of this research is expanding the width and variety of the data. Collecting a larger amount of data from various sources would provide a more comprehensive view of the population, and therefore more trustworthy results. Triangulation would involve collecting data from multiple sources in order to reach a better understanding of the research topic and more thorough findings. Examples of alternative sources of data include questionnaires to visitors, exit polls at airports, field interviews, blog posts, and many others. Questionnaires could potentially be sent to a selection of visitors who for example stayed at a certain hotel or participated in a specific activity, however, a better cross section of the population could be reached by interviewing visitors at the airports and bus stations as most people pass through either or both of these places when entering the country. It is apparent that the authors on online discussion forums are only the select few of all of the visitors to a country, and it is difficult to know their demographics exactly. Therefore, expanding the demographics of the sample pool is key in improving the depth of this type of research.

Another method of gathering further data on the subject could be utilizing the online discussion forums to contact visitors to the case countries. Prompting a reciprocal communication with the trip report authors and others who frequent the forums could provide an array of new information on their vacation; expectations, motivations, experiences, and satisfaction. Additionally, while in this study only the initial first posts, or the actual trip reports were analyzed, it could be beneficial to not overlook the replies to the discussion thread. It is likely that at least in some forums, such as TripAdvisor, the initial trip reports yield a discussion on one or more issues, questions, or comments, and this in turn gives the original author a chance to provide additional information. Online discussion forums could be an expansive source of information and data that could be used for research purposes relatively easily.

This research only scrutinized two case countries that are prominent ecotourism destinations, Costa Rica and Kenya. However, the magnitude of this study could be expanded into a wide variety of other countries. Ecotourism after all is not a new concept, and it is practiced around the world in some urban locations as well as natural destinations. Comparing ecotourism or sustainable tourism between different destinations, such as urban and rural locations could be fascinating. Additionally, analyzing data from multiple countries the potential trends in ecotourism and sustainable tourism can be better detected. Are some locations more successful in promoting ecotourism than others? Do visitors care about ecotourism more in one destination over another? How likely visitors are to talk about ecotourism without the researcher bringing up the topic? Switching the focus from just two countries to multiple countries would be an interesting way to further test the hypothesis that people are after all relatively ignorant about environmental issues when it comes to their personal vacation and benefit.

One last issue to study further that could provide interesting results is the marketing of ecotourism. While both of the case countries have emphasized ecotourism in their tourism strategies, the tourists do not seem to be aware of it. This raises the question how well they know ecotourism, and do they know these two countries are great destinations for ecotourism? Studying how ecotourism is portrayed in the discussion forums used for this research, and other materials and channels the visitors could have an access to could provide an insight into the reason why the trip reports consistently ignored environmental issues and ecotourism. Conveying information about ecotourism and different eco-certification systems is an essential part of destination marketing. Generally, visitors are unlikely to ask for certain type of services if they do now know they exist. Spreading the knowledge about ecotourism and ecological activities, environmentally friendly accommodation and so forth is giving the traveler an alternative to the more ‘traditional’ options.

From my personal point of view, in any further research I would choose to emphasize sustainable tourism rather than ecotourism. The concept of sustainable tourism is less restrictive, and therefore could potentially do more good for the destination in the long term. Rather than concentrating environmental friendliness and conservation to a smaller segment of tourism, expanding the concept of sustainable tourism to cover the whole tourism industry within a region could be more beneficial in the longer term.

6.5 Limitations and strengths

This research paper set out to determine how visitor perceptions correlate with Costa Rica and Kenya’s respective ecotourism strategies. While the results achieved by analyzing trip reports from four different travel related online discussion forums were relatively conclusive, they are not directly comparable to the larger population. A major limitation in this research is a question about how well the data sample used for the analysis reflect the opinions of the population. The data only takes into account the experiences and perceptions of the visitors who, firstly, frequent these discussion forums, and secondly, sign in to the forum and post their own trip reports. This group of travelers is without a doubt a limited one, not everyone who travel internationally seek help from discussion forums nor share their own experiences with the public. Finding out who the authors are is a difficult task, because like in most online environments people are able to communicate under an alias in the travel forums as well.

Regardless of the anonymity of the discussion forum posts, the forums provide an interesting and authentic source of data. The internet and the increased popularity of online discussion forums enable researchers to tap into an alternative source of information in addition to traditional questionnaires and interviews. It is likely that the group of individuals who choose to share their experiences online are from diverse cultural, national, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds. Even though this group hardly represents the population, it is still diverse enough for the purposes of this research. Another benefit of posting to the forums anonymously or under a username is the assumed sincerity of the authors. When the text cannot be linked to the author personally, it is probable that they are more honest with their words. Lying in the trip reports would not serve a purpose. However, it is natural that as time passes memories can change shape and negative issues might not feel as bad anymore, or alternatively they might feel worse than when it happened, and vice versa for positive aspects.

The data and the authors provide other limitations for the research as well. Because the trip reports are voluntarily written by individuals who had traveled to either Costa Rica or Kenya sometime in the past, it is interesting to consider the underlying motivations for the travelers to post an overview of their trip. Are the visitors more likely to write a trip report if the experience was positive or if it was negative? However, based on the analyzed trip reports it seems that both positive and negative experiences were present in the data. One recurring trend among the trip reports was the desire to give something back to the community, provide their own trip report because reading other visitors' comments helped them plan their own vacation better. Additionally, even if the ecological side of tourism is important for some visitors, it is entirely possible that they do not convey this through the trip reports. Mostly the trip reports tend to be accounts of the tour operators, chosen accommodation, people who made their trip amazing, places visited, and the visitor's experiences of these. The author might not think it is important to cover ecotourism or any environmental issues in the trip report. Reading the discussion forums, we know what the visitors did and where they stayed, but not necessarily the reasoning behind it. For example, even if the traveler chose to stay at an eco-certified lodge he or she may not automatically mention this in their trip report. All in all, the data provides great many possibilities and wonderful insight into visitors' experiences, but also limitations, such as adequate background information on the authors.

The limitations regarding the research method are more challenging to evaluate. A direct existing method for this type of research does not necessarily exist, and therefore the method used in this research is a combination of multiple methods to create the appropriate approach to this data. Perhaps the most significant shortcoming of the chosen method is that while it reveals all essential information for the purposes of this research, it could also go more in depth and discover a significant amount of additional information. Choosing to collect any identifying pieces of information from the trip reports to slightly lift the curtain of shadows on the backgrounds of the travelers could have provided some elementary data on who these people are, hence improving the adaptability and applicability of this research. However, within the timeframe allotted for this analysis without the help of content analysis software, collecting this additional information was not agreeable. For the most part the chosen research method proved to be usable and effective, and this study was able to reach a conclusion, regardless of the limitations on the data and the method.

7 SUMMARY

The aim of the research was to identify the characteristics that shape ecotourism today, and how ecotourism is represented in two prominent ecotourism destinations. Furthermore, this research studied four different travel related online discussion forums and trip reports posted on these forums by individual visitors, revealing their perception of the destination. Ultimately the goal was to determine how well the country level ecotourism strategies align with visitors’ perception and image of the destination. Therefore, this study has two significant segments; the case countries’ ecotourism strategies, and the information revealed by the trip reports.

Ecotourism is a type of tourism that follows a strict set of rules that aim to support and improve the lives of local people through education, conservation and responsible travel. Ecotourism is a restrictive concept within the realms of sustainable tourism, and nature, wildlife, and adventure tourism. Essentially, it means tourism that minimizes impact to the local environment at the destination, builds environmental and cultural awareness and respect, provides positive experiences for both visitors and hosts, provides direct financial benefits and empowerment for local people, and raises sensitivity to host countries’ political and social climate (TIES 2010).

This study concentrated in two separate case countries; Costa Rica and Kenya. Costa Rica was among the first destinations that embraced the concept of ecotourism, and now it is one of the best-known ecotourism destinations in the world. Kenya, on the other hand, has picked up the pace in terms of ecotourism and sustainable tourism, and today it is among the top destinations for ecotourism. Both countries have an incredibly diverse range of observable wildlife and different natural environments, such as volcanoes, rainforest, and savannahs just to name a few. The countries are very different in terms of location and the type of wildlife and nature present, but in their own categories both have very unique characteristics that attract visitors from all over the world. Costa Rica and Kenya are two of the more well known ecotourism destinations, and hence they were selected as the case countries.

The main research question was ‘How do visitors perceive Costa Rica and Kenya as ecotourism destinations?’, which aimed to uncover the visitors’ expectations, experiences, perceptions, and satisfaction of the vacation. To a certain extent these countries have branded themselves as ecotourism destinations, and this research attempted to analyze visitors’ opinions of the countries, and whether ecotourism was a factor affecting the visitors’ decision making processes. This research problem was further divided into the following sub-objectives: “

- How have Costa Rica and Kenya branded themselves as ecotourism destinations?
- How visitors to Costa Rica and Kenya perceive the destinations?

- How do visitor perceptions align with the countries’ desired image as ecotourism destinations?

The purpose of these sub-objectives was to form a comprehensive view of the ecotourism culture and climate in the case countries and the visitors’ perception of the destinations. The level of success of the national level ecotourism strategizing and efforts was analyzed through the trip reports.

This study used content analysis methods combined with netnographic methods to analyze individual and anonymous trip reports posted online to the four chosen travel forums. The trip reports were accounts of individual people’s vacation in either Costa Rica or Kenya, where the authors discussed their past travel to either destination, including varying levels of information on activities participated in, accommodation and tour operators used, and wildlife perceived, among other information.

Generally, the findings of this research were not well aligned with the ecotourism image of either country. Costa Rica has emphasized ecotourism in their national tourism strategy quite heavily, but this did not translate into the visitor perceptions revealed at the discussion forums. Majority of people traveling to Costa Rica sought either a relaxing beach holiday or quality time spent in the gorgeous nature of the country observing different species of animals and plants. Nature and wildlife played a significant part in most visitors’ vacations, but regardless ecotourism or even sustainable tourism was not an important factor for the visitors.

Similar conclusions could be drawn from the Kenyan trip reports. The country itself has not invested significantly into ecotourism, but the private tourism sector has taken on the responsibility of advancing ecotourism and sustainable tourism in Kenya. The vast majority of visitors entered the country with an intention to go on safaris to see the wildlife and nature in Kenya. Visitors were generally very satisfied with their vacations, and sustainability was relatively important for some of the visitors while ecotourism as a restrictive concept was not. All in all, visitors perceived the country enormously well, and the government of Kenya would have a good foundation to continue building their sustainable tourism strategy on.

Since the visitors did not voice their opinions on ecotourism or sustainability in their reports, it raised the question of their level of awareness on environmental issues and the efforts these countries are undertaking in order to build a more sustainable future for tourism. Simply put, either the visitors are not knowledgeable about ecotourism, or perhaps they are merely uninterested in it. It could be argued that even though ecotourism is a wonderful concept in theory, in reality shifting towards sustainable tourism instead of ecotourism specifically may be more beneficial for the destinations in the long run. In both countries, the wildlife is evidently crucial in attracting visitors. Without wildlife to see it may be nearly impossible to attract visitors to the destination, and a significant amount of income would cease to flow into the countries.

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APPENDIX 1 ECOTOURISM PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

Blamey, R. K. (2001) Principles of Ecotourism. In: Encyclopedia of Ecotourism, ed. David B. Weaver, 11. CABI, UK.

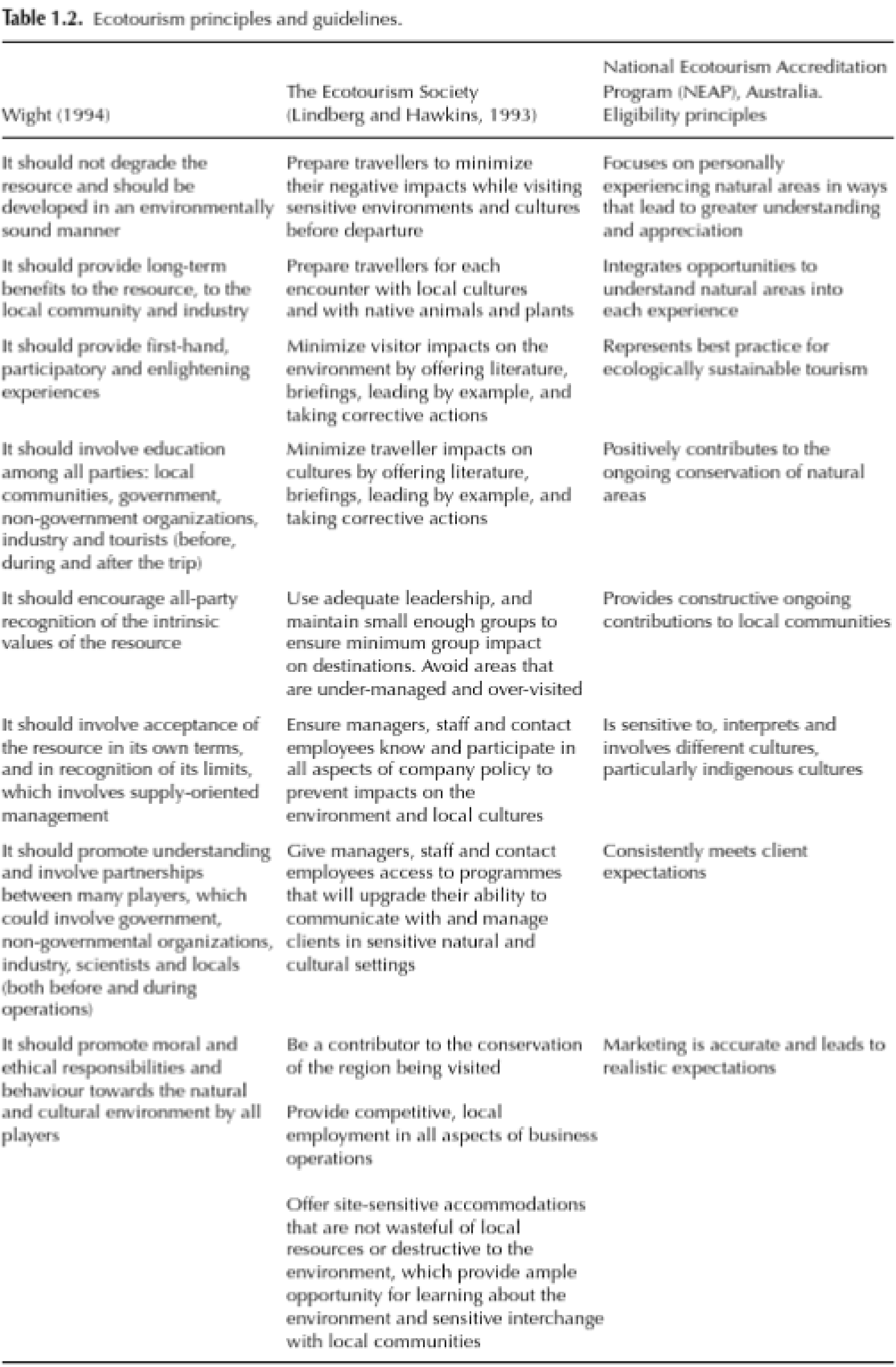

Table 1.2. Ecotourism principles and guidelines.

Wight (1994)	The Ecotourism Society (Lindberg and Hawkins, 1993)	National Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP), Australia. Eligibility principles
It should not degrade the resource and should be developed in an environmentally sound manner	Prepare travellers to minimize their negative impacts while visiting sensitive environments and cultures before departure	Focuses on personally experiencing natural areas in ways that lead to greater understanding and appreciation
It should provide long-term benefits to the resource, to the local community and industry	Prepare travellers for each encounter with local cultures and with native animals and plants	Integrates opportunities to understand natural areas into each experience
It should provide first-hand, participatory and enlightening experiences	Minimize visitor impacts on the environment by offering literature, briefings, leading by example, and taking corrective actions	Represents best practice for ecologically sustainable tourism
It should involve education among all parties: local communities, government, non-government organizations, industry and tourists (before, during and after the trip)	Minimize traveller impacts on cultures by offering literature, briefings, leading by example, and taking corrective actions	Positively contributes to the ongoing conservation of natural areas
It should encourage all-party recognition of the intrinsic values of the resource	Use adequate leadership, and maintain small enough groups to ensure minimum group impact on destinations. Avoid areas that are under-managed and over-visited	Provides constructive ongoing contributions to local communities
It should involve acceptance of the resource in its own terms, and in recognition of its limits, which involves supply-oriented management	Ensure managers, staff and contact employees know and participate in all aspects of company policy to prevent impacts on the environment and local cultures	Is sensitive to, interprets and involves different cultures, particularly indigenous cultures
It should promote understanding and involve partnerships between many players, which could involve government, non-governmental organizations, industry, scientists and locals (both before and during operations)	Give managers, staff and contact employees access to programmes that will upgrade their ability to communicate with and manage clients in sensitive natural and cultural settings	Consistently meets client expectations
It should promote moral and ethical responsibilities and behaviour towards the natural and cultural environment by all players	Be a contributor to the conservation of the region being visited	Marketing is accurate and leads to realistic expectations
	Provide competitive, local employment in all aspects of business operations	
	Offer site-sensitive accommodations that are not wasteful of local resources or destructive to the environment, which provide ample opportunity for learning about the environment and sensitive interchange with local communities	

APPENDIX 2 TEN COMMANDMENTS OF ECO-TOURISM

Ten Commandments on Eco-Tourism. ASTA-American Society of Travel Agents. <http://www.asta.org/ELibrary/content.cfm?ItemNumber=4525>, retrieved 10.11.2014

Whether you are travelling on business, pleasure or a bit of both, the citizens of the world would be grateful if you would respect the ten commandments of world travel and eco-tourism:

1. Respect the frailty of the earth. Unique and beautiful destinations may not be here for future generations to enjoy unless all are willing to help in its preservation.
2. Patronize those (hotels, airlines, resorts, cruise lines, tour operators and suppliers) who advance energy conservation; promote water and air quality; provide recycling; manage waste and toxic materials safely for people and the environment; practice noise abatement; encourages community involvement; and provides experienced, well-trained staff dedicated to strong principles of conservation.
3. Learn about and support conservation-oriented programs and organizations working to preserve the environment and the local culture. Consider a volunteer vacation where you could volunteer to help the local community during a portion of your vacation.
4. Walk or utilize environmentally-sound methods of transportation whenever possible.
5. Encourage drivers of public vehicles to stop engines when parked and not idle.
6. Leave only footprints. Take only photographs. No graffiti! No litter! Do not take away "souvenirs" from historical sites and natural areas.
7. To make your travels more meaningful educate yourself about the geography, customs, manners and cultures of the region you visit. Take time to listen to the people. Encourage local conservation efforts.
8. Respect the privacy and dignity of others. Inquire before photographing people.
9. Do not buy products made from endangered plants or animals, such as ivory, tortoise shell, animal skins, and feathers.
10. Always follow designated trails. Do not disturb animals, plants or their natural habitats.

Travel is a natural right of all people and is a crucial ingredient of world peace and understanding and with that right comes responsibilities. ASTA encourages the growth of socially responsible, sustainable tourism, and environmentally-friendly travel.