

## **Greenwashing eco(?)tourism in New Zealand: What climate change?**

**Sandi Ringham**

### **Abstract**

The impacts of global warming are changing the environments we tour. This paper aims to add to the debate on tourism adaptation to climate change by investigating tourism policies and recommendations for climate change adaptation. The Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change suggests diversification of attractions is needed as a response to increasingly warmer winters, extreme events (disasters), rising sea levels and to reduce tourism's contribution to global warming. A post-colonial theoretical framework is applied to a critical discourse analysis of eco(?)tourism in New Zealand and tourism adaptation discourse.

Recommendations written by the World Tourism Organisation are reviewed and discussed to expose the perspectives that are driving global discourses that shape tourism's adaptation to climate change. Eco(?)tourism and the greenwashing of tourist sites are then discussed to highlight the need for a rigorous critique of the consequences of unregulated 'eco-' branding.

**Keywords:** adaptation, diversification, greenwashing, climate change.

## **Introduction**

This paper investigates eco(?)tourism in New Zealand and tourism adaptation discourse as a response to climate change. The impacts of global warming are changing the environments we tour. Tourism is playing a part in the causes of global warming because of high GHG (greenhouse gas) emissions and has been responsible for unequal allocation and consumption of resources. Tourism is one of the key industries in need of adaptation to climate change listed in the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report (IPCC, 2007). The report acknowledges tourism's contribution to global warming and the impact climate change is having on the tourism industry. The IPCC suggests diversification of attractions is needed as a response to increasingly warmer winters, extreme events (disasters), rising sea levels and to reduce tourism's contribution to global warming. With changing environments such as shorter winters, lack of snow, and also the loss of land in Pacific Island countries, tourism is in dire need of re-thinking (Becken & Hay, 2007; Fennell, 2009). This paper aims to add to the debate on tourism adaptation to climate change by investigating the greenwashing of ecotourism and New Zealand's policies on tourism and climate change.

In the following sections a post-colonial framework is applied to a discourse analysis of sustainable tourism development as a globalised and prescribed response to climate change. Recommendations written by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2009a) are reviewed and discussed to expose the perspectives that are driving global discourses that shape tourism's adaptation to climate change. Ecotourism and the greenwashing of tourist sites are defined and discussed to highlight the need for a rigorous critique of the consequences of unregulated 'eco' branding. Before the final discussion, New Zealand's tourism policies are touched on to bring the reader back to the issue of climate change and

tourism adaptation in New Zealand.

### **Theory and methods**

Post-colonialism is defined as an intellectual movement towards contesting the uneven distribution of political power (Gregory, 2009). A post-colonial framework is capable of highlighting any existing power relationships, environmental half-truths and/or social inconsistencies in recommendations for tourism adaptation to climate change and in the branding of eco(?)tourism in New Zealand. As a critical analysis it considers how representations, relationships and practices have been (re)produced through colonisation and are now being transformed through globalisation (Yeoh, 2009). Tourism can be seen as “a prominent component of the process of globalisation and a primary channel for economic exchange” (Williams, 2009, p. 21). In *Rethinking Tourism and Ecotravel* Deborah McLaren (2003) states: “tourism has become the new form of colonization over the poor of the world.” (p. 60). By considering the way that discourses are maintained and negotiated to construct perceptions, awareness interests, and values that become public discourse, post-colonial theory can be used to critique neo-liberal attitudes (d’Hauteserre, 2011) and globalisation of development, which continue to produce unequal power relations and monopolisation of resources. A post-colonial framework enables a researcher to critique western structures of power and knowledge by cross-examining the terms that construct discourses (d’Hauteserre, 2004). Discourse analysis under the lens of post-colonialism contests hegemonic discourses constructed through binaries of dominance and subordination (d’Hauteserre, 2011).

A critical discourse analysis is an attempt to expose hegemonic discourses that maintain political arrangements of power that shape public opinions (Berg, 2009). It aims to articulate the relationship between dominant discourse and social practices. The critical turn in tourism studies is now beginning to challenge the discourses that prescribe destinations as

‘eco’ friendly (Piper & Yeo, 2011). The use of a critical discourse analysis to critique climate change adaptation recommendations for tourism may highlight discrepancies in adaptation policies and destination promotion. Applied to a study of greenwashed ecotourism a discourse analysis may also expose how the values of ecotourists are capable of being undermined.

### **Deconstructing tourism adaptation discourse**

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) states that climate change is not a remote event separate from tourism but a very real phenomenon that is affecting destinations stretching from the polar regions to tropical islands and mainland coasts (UNWTO, 2009a). Physical changes may induce cultural changes because new social practices will evolve along with changing environments. In response to this, the UNWTO held its 'Second International Conference on Climate Change and Tourism' and from that event the Davos Declaration was produced in Switzerland, 2007 (UNWTO, 2007; Simpson, Gossling, Scott, Hall & Gladin, 2008). The Davos Declaration considers why and how tourism needs to adapt to the loss of tourist amenities. The key elements in the Davos Declaration are listed below in Box 1.

#### **Box 1: Key elements of the Davos Declaration**

Source: From Davos to Copenhagen and beyond: advancing tourism’s response to climate change. (UNWTO 2009a)

The Declaration not only acknowledged the reality of climate change and the interrelationship with tourism and travel, but also that a long-term adaptation strategy is required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from within the sector. The Declaration outlines firm recommendations and a clear commitment for action, by the key interest groups involved in tourism, to respond to the climate change challenge. It called for the urgent adoption of a range of sustainable tourism policies and also provides global guidance on the issue. The goals included within the Declaration are not only achievable but provide a link to the interrelated poverty agenda. Four key areas that will require action were agreed upon:

- Mitigate greenhouse gas emissions from the tourism sector (especially from transport and accommodation activities)
- Adapt tourism businesses and destinations to changing climate conditions
- Apply existing and new technologies to improve energy efficiency
- Secure financial resources to assist poorer regions and countries.

Some adaptation policies suggested in the document are based on not only protecting the environment but also manipulating it. These suggestions (see Box 2) are based on the IPCC's report (IPCC, 2007, p. 57). Product diversification, tourist awareness and carrying capacity management are also seen as important measures to ensure the continuation of destinations and tourist arrivals (UNWTO 2009a).

Box 2: Adaptation and mitigation options  
Source: Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report (IPCC 2007 p.57).

Sector	Adaptation options/strategy	Underlying policy framework	Key constraints and opportunities to implementation (Normal font = constraints; <i>italics</i> = opportunities)
Tourism	Diversification of tourism attractions and revenues; shifting ski slopes to higher altitudes and glaciers; artificial snow-making	Integrated planning (e.g. carrying capacity; linkages with other sectors); financial incentives, e.g. subsidies and tax credits	Appeal/marketing of new attractions; financial and logistical challenges; potential adverse impact on other sectors (e.g. artificial snow-making may increase energy use); <i>revenues from 'new' attractions; involvement of wider group of stakeholders</i>

While the UNWTO acknowledges social inequalities and the need for tourism to encourage community participation, values are still based on a 'globalisation' of development approaches and adaptation and mitigation strategies may fail to increase resilience and protect all communities from the negative effects of climate change (Tobin & Montz, 2009). Tourism has its roots firmly rooted in a colonial past where cultural and economic exchanges were the drivers behind its economic growth and imperial power (Lester, 2009; d'Hautesserre,

2004; Williams, 2009). These exchanges are still practised within tourism and tourism can be seen as a 'prominent component of globalisation' led by stateless corporations (Dann, 2002; Robinson, 2004; Williams, 2009). Tourism is not only a mobilisation of (mostly First World) people but also a mobilisation of economic power and development. Unwittingly (or not) the UNWTO may be playing a part in increasing economic and development globalisation. Much like the colonial concept of 'for their own good', prescribing adaptation policies that do not consider the social and cultural values of individual countries or alternative development practices may lead to the loss of valuable cultural knowledge and continue to push minority groups further into the margins.

The UNWTO document (2009a) acknowledges that climate change has become a key area of global concern: supported by 'sound' scientific reports, economic studies and increasing media coverage but fails to consider different ways of thinking. It is focused on a Western concept of development which disregards indigenous values and knowledge. 'Sound' scientific knowledge about climate has been debated across disciplines and can be seen, and indeed used, as an elusive concept by multinationals who aim to boost their economic and political power (Demeritt, 2006). Scientific knowledge on climate change is now a target of contention from a neo-liberal perspective. The idea that climate change is a hoax may be an effort to delude the public into continuing to consume energy resources and unsustainable practices. This is a prime example of how neo-liberal discourse has the power to push opposing discourses into the margins (Watts & Peet, 2004). While the scientific community is screaming out for changes to be made to the way we are 'using up' natural resources, some corporate 'fat cats' are using the debate on the validity of science to deny the reality of global warming in order to continue economic globalisation and monopolisation of energy resources.

There is a burgeoning amount of literature that critiques the human causes of climate

change (Cannon & Muller-Mahn, 2010) and it is not the intention of this paper to add to the debate. Cannon & Muller-Mahn argue that environmental changes will change cultural practices but the effects of economic globalisation have been and remain a driving force in prescribing social and political climates across time in fragile cultural and heritage sites. The UNWTO (2009b) states: “Climate Change adaptation can only be effective with the participation of all stakeholder groups” (p. 6). Stakeholders listed include national governments, regional and local authorities; public and private sector; international bodies and researchers (Simpson et al., 2008; UNWTO 2009b). The UNWTO Davos Declaration has failed to include local and indigenous communities in their list of stakeholders, or the benefits and costs that tourism adaptation measures may have on these communities.

From a post-colonial perspective it seems that the UNWTO is more concerned about continuing lucrative tourism practices and adapting environments for tourism, therefore continuing the accumulation of tourist dollars, and less concerned with the concept of tourism as way to decrease vulnerability at the grassroots of destinations. It is clear that while the UNWTO is promoting sustainable practices, there are also underlying perspectives that continue the manipulation and (mis)appropriation of the environment and tourist amenities. For instance, in response to warmer winters the UNWTO Davos Declaration recommends that ski sites move to higher ground and employ snowmaking machines to ensure successful ski seasons (UNWTO 2007). While skiing may not be included in an ecotourist’s itinerary, the recommendations for the use of snowmaking machines in the IPCC Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report and the UNWTO Davos Declaration are good examples of policies that recommend continuing resource consumption rather than diversification of tourist attractions. Artificial snowmaking requires the burning of fossil fuels and while the economic benefits may outweigh the costs of snowmaking, the environmental cost of snowmaking is likely to be a continuation of environmental degradation, global warming and

consumption of energy and water (Becken & Hay, 2007). In my mind there seems to be no point trying to ski when there is no snow and continuing to manipulate the environment to support mass consumption only adds more pressure on ecological and social systems. I feel tourism adaptation policies may need to shift away from prescribing adaptation of current tourist practices that are no longer viable and instead concentrate on developing, or diversifying to new tourist experiences that enhance and protect both the environment and the host communities who live in tourism sites.

### **Defining eco(?)tourism**

The emergence of ecotourism as a consumer response to climate change indicates a level of individual concern for climate change. Ecotourism, ideally, practises promotion of the environment and social equality, but when neo-liberal practices are applied, the boundaries between protection and consumption are blurred (Fennell, 2009). Concepts of ecotourism are woven with cultural values and practices based on sustainability. The Western version of 'sustainable' development can hide neo-liberal practices that continue inequalities that are powered by economic and political global forces (Cannon & Muller-Mahn, 2010, Cater, 2006, Fennell, 2009). Globalisation of tourism development and production has received some attention in critical tourism studies and the aim of this section is to consider the role of the environmentally aware tourist in constructing eco(?)tourism in New Zealand. As eco-friendly consumers, I wonder if they consider their individual carbon footprint? In *Tourism and Climate Change: Risks and Opportunities*, Becken and Hays state:

A typical New Zealand ecotourism itinerary covers 3773 km and results in a total transport energy use of 6388 MJ and concomitant release of 430 kg of CO<sub>2</sub> per tourist. These emissions are about the same as the one-way flight for

Australian visitors to New Zealand. Visitors from Great Britain emit about six times the emissions of their destination-based travel on their one-way flight to New Zealand (Becken & Hayes, 2007, p. 113).

Ecotourism is becoming an increasingly lucrative market which accounts for seven percent of the international tourism market (UNWTO, 2007). Ecotourism can be defined in many ways but David Fennell (2009) defined ecotourism as being driven by a personal interest in the protection of both natural and social ecology. Fennell argues that an ecotourist is in search of experiences that provide nature based education, conservation of the environment and contribution to the community. Ecotourism began as an alternative to the mass tourist destinations of the early 1980's, but now the term is often used to greenwash products that are more to do with exploiting cultures and the environment than providing a responsible way of touring. Fennell asserts that if the product can be greenwashed, so too can the ecotourist's identity and goes on to ask whether ecotourists are aware of the greenwashing of tourism experiences. Some may be more interested in projecting an eco-friendly image, but there will be some who have a genuine desire to be responsible tourists. Fennell describes the ecotourist as predominantly white, male, educated and affluent.

As an occasional ecotourist I see a need for greater public awareness of the way social, economic and political discourses are capable of blurring the lines between ethical practices and consumption. It is possible, with current information technology, for tourists to make informed decisions, and I believe it is time for the general public who care about the environment and societies to take a stance and boycott companies who greenwash any 'eco' product, not just tourism.

### **Greenwashing ecotourism**

The term 'greenwash' was introduced in the late 1990's and is defined as "disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image" (Garrod, 2008, p. 202). In critical tourism studies the term is used to describe organisations that promote an eco-friendly image, but which lack any substantial efforts to care for environments or host societies (Garrod, 2008; Johnson, 2002). Greenwashing of tourism not only (mis)represents products and experiences but is also capable of hiding industry practices that cause harm to the environment and social inequalities in host communities (McLaren 2003). In *Rethinking tourism and ecotravel* McLaren states: "the tourism industry follows a well-trudged corporate path that exploits people and resources around the world in the name of economic growth" (p. 27). While the individual tourist is searching for ways to enhance and empower the protection of local communities and the environment, they are increasingly confounded by misrepresentation of what is promoted as ecotourism.

Some case studies of ecotourism in New Zealand have revealed that while companies are promoting ecotourism they are only giving 'lip service' to the concept (Bell, 2007). The environmental practices of these so called green companies do not always match up with their 'green' image. Bell found that while all tour operators felt the '100% Pure' branding was a great marketing strategy for the businesses, some felt the term was misleading. The study revealed that most backpacking hostels based the 'eco' of their tourism on the proximity of their business to national parks and reserves rather than on eco-friendly practices. The study supports other 'eco-criticisms' of the '100% Pure' branding and concluded that many 'eco' hostels are only subscribing to New Zealand's 'promotional myth' while very few attempt to follow 'best practices' and those that do are struggling to do so because of greenwashed market.

There is a growing concern among some in the tourism sector to develop

accreditation and/or certification of ecotourism (Bell, 2007; McLaren, 2003; Johnson 2002). While this would enable ecotourists to make informed decisions about destinations, the process of developing accreditation policies may be problematic because of cultural differences behind concepts of social and environmental protection. Like the globalisation of Western development approaches, the introduction of ecotourism accreditation could be seen as a way for international and private corporations to monopolise tourism markets and push out local and indigenous ideals and small tourism operations. While certifying ecotourism that, at the same time, embraces different cultural definitions of 'eco-friendly' may be difficult, responsibility also lies with the ecotourist. Ecotourists who are serious about best practice may need to ensure they are well informed about potentially greenwashed tourism sites.

### **Tourism adaptation: in a 'greenwashed' New Zealand?**

Tourism New Zealand represents itself to the global community as '100% Pure' and ecotourists who come here are in search of clean green environments that are remote, natural and sustainable (Woods, 2011). As a so-called post-colonial nation, New Zealand is seeking to secure the nation's identity as distinctive and valuable to foreigners (Bell, 2007). The concept of New Zealand as 'post'-colonial is indeed a contentious idea that has received, and duly so, much debate. Some academics argue that the use of 'post' with colonialism suggests the end of colonialism while all the time continuing practices in the guise of globalisation (Smith, 1999). Bell argues that the branding of New Zealand is based on a romantic and Western view of the landscape. Tourists and citizens alike are convinced of a clean green image of New Zealand by, not only marketing strategies, but also the physical greenness of the landscape. The message we send to the wider world suggests New Zealand is a nation with little pollution, successful conservation, peace, and an absence of environmental

problems. But in reality, rivers are dammed, energy resources are sold off and allocated to powerful corporations, and social inequalities are increasing in both urban and rural regions.

The Tourism Association of New Zealand (TIANZ) has produced a strategy plan for the future of New Zealand tourism. Tourism is an important industry in New Zealand and contributes more than 8.6% of gross domestic product as well as directly and indirectly employing one in ten New Zealanders (TIANZ 2012). However, equal employment opportunity statistics published in the Tourism New Zealand Annual Report 2011 show that executive positions are held solely by New Zealand Europeans and that Māori only make up five percent of the professional support staff (Tourism New Zealand 2011). In the *New Zealand Tourism Strategy 2015* climate change is discussed in a small paragraph which acknowledges “an international concern with climate change” (TIANZ 2007, p. 12). It states that New Zealand’s response to these concerns will be fundamental to the future of tourism and there is a need for the sector to demonstrate ‘best practices’ and to provide visitors with options to reduce their carbon emissions. Tourism New Zealand also seems to have neglected to delve deeply into the issue of climate change. In *Statement of Intent 2013 - 2016* Tourism New Zealand briefly discusses environmental issues in terms of concerns about disasters or New Zealand’s distance in relation to international tourism markets (Tourism New Zealand, 2013). There was no mention of climate change or the need for tourism adaptation. But in government reports on climate change it is stated that New Zealand will experience climate and environmental changes (Ministry for the Environment 2001). It seems Tourism New Zealand has not considered that the industry will experience any difficulties.

## **Discussion**

While it is hoped that this paper highlights the need for ecotourists to be alerted to the greenwashing of ecotourism and to question the ethics of the companies they visit, it is also

hoped that it encourages further research into the consequences of a homogenised version of tourism adaptation discourse. This study found that while tourism adaptation policies are prescribed by the UNWTO and IPCC, New Zealand has yet to consider the industry's need to adapt tourism practices as a response to climate change. It was also found that most of the adaptation strategies recommended adapting the environment to suit tourism practices rather than concentrating on diversifying and promoting alternative tourist experiences. This may be rather presumptuous of me (if not downright cheeky) and I apologise for the use of such a cliché in an academic paper but isn't the definition of insanity: 'doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results' (quote attributed to Albert Einstein date unknown).

There is evidence of greenwashing in New Zealand's eco(?)tourism and I argue that some of Tourism New Zealand's and TIANZ's policies for 'sustainable' tourism practices may also be greenwashed but further research is needed to substantiate this claim. During the process of performing this research I have found it hard to remain focused on my topic because I found so many issues that raised my concerns for the environment and indigenous communities. One I found most disturbing was TIANZ's submission to the government for the protection of game hunting in New Zealand as a tourism practice (TIANZ 2012). Another environmental issue that has recently surfaced is the New Zealand government's granting of permits to the Texas oil giant Anadarko Petroleum Cooperation for oil exploration in the Taranaki Basin. This has caused much public concern about the coastline of New Zealand. I also found that there seems to be a lack of consultation with and representation of Māori in most of the New Zealand tourism reporting and planning documents I searched, which backs up the claim that in New Zealand we have not quite reached 'post'-colonialism.

While tourism is capable of causing environmental harm it may also be capable of shifting the focus of development away from industries and agriculture that are no longer viable because of changing environments. Tourism that is community based, with an

indigenous focus, may be capable of empowering those at the margins and relieving poverty (IPCC 2007). Alternative development approaches that embrace grassroots knowledge and sustainable practices may be the way to successful adaptation to climate change.

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