Managing legitimacy in ecotourism

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In this article, we discuss the legitimacy problem currently facing ecotourism. We argue that while ecotourism represents an important opportunity for the international tourism industry, its potential is currently limited by a problem of legitimacy growing out of the tension between economic and environmental goals; a problem which is exacerbated by the relative newness of the industry. This legitimacy problem is especially intractable as expectations and understandings vary so dramatically across critical stakeholder groups. In order to better understand the problem of legitimacy facing ecotourism, we draw on the existing literature in organizational analysis to develop a theoretical framework for understanding legitimacy and legitimacy management at the level of the firm, the organizational field, and the industry. Throughout the article, we draw on the example of the Canadian ecotourism industry to explore the crisis of legitimacy surrounding ecotourism and to provide a context for understanding how the management of legitimacy in ecotourism should proceed. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

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Introduction

In 1990, the World Wildlife Fund joined forces with Ecosummer Canada Expeditions, one of the largest ecotourism firms in British Columbia, to offer ecotourism vacations to exotic locales. In 1992, during a three-week Arctic expedition, the local guides hired to lead the trip ran short of supplies and shot five polar bears to feed their sled dogs. In response to the public outcry following this event, the World Wildlife Fund severed its ties with Ecosummer Expeditions. The management of Ecosummer Expeditions denied responsibility for the incident, saying that the actions of local Inuit guides were within the traditional rights of the Inuit to hunt polar bears, although there had been an expectation that seals and food from caches en route would have been used to feed the dogs. Other BC ecotourism firms expressed indignation and frustration, stating that the incident was against the basic tenets of ecotourism and reflected poorly upon the entire industry.

What Ecosummer Expeditions faced in this situation was not some practical difficulty in providing a service, nor a lack of interested clients, but rather a crisis of legitimacy. The activities of Ecosummer were judged to be inappropriate by important stakeholder groups. As new ecotourism activities are developed, their success depends not only on the attractiveness of the offerings and the efficiency of their provisions, but also on the legitimacy of the commercialization itself. One of the strongest conclusions from legitimacy research is that firms must be perceived as legitimate by key stakeholders in order to access critical resources. Consequently, unless they are perceived as legitimate by critical stakeholders, organizations involved in the development of ecotourism will be unable to ensure needed resource flows and political support. This is an especially difficult problem in ecotourism since, in bringing together environmental concerns and commercial tourism, it depends on the support of a particularly diverse group of stakeholders including private entrepreneurs, aboriginal groups, established tourism firms, industry associations, academic institutions, environmental groups, and regulatory bodies.

In this article, we examine the problem of legitimacy in ecotourism and in emerging industries in general. We argue that the problem of legitimacy can best be understood in terms of the interaction among stakeholders, social and political issues, and the frameworks used by stakeholders to evaluate those issues. We then develop a framework for understanding legitimacy management at the level of the firm, organizational field, and industry. Here, we discuss strategies for managing the legitimacy problems facing the ecotourism industry in Canada.
Another researcher defines ecotourism as 'trips taken in which travelers learn about and appreciate the environment or trips taken to advance the cause of conservation.' A Canadian regulatory organization defines ecotourism more broadly: '(activities) comprising nature, adventure and cultural experiences in the countryside'.

From our perspective, what is important is not to precisely define ecotourism, but to observe that it claims to have some purpose beyond making a profit by providing an enjoyable tourism experience. Instead, ecotourism can be broadly defined as travel oriented towards the natural environment or indigenous cultures of a region and it is generally expected to respect and protect the environment and culture of the host country or region. It is this larger goal of protecting and even enhancing the environment defined more or less broadly that delimits ecotourism, and it is here that both its strength and weakness lie: its strength in that it is here that it differentiates itself from more traditional consumptive forms of tourism; its weakness in that it is here that the tensions between profitability and more altruistic goals arise. It is this tension that leads to the problem of legitimacy that plagues ecotourism in Canada and around the world.

The problem of legitimacy in ecotourism begins with its historical genesis as both an entrepreneurial opportunity based on an increasing demand for more 'natural' vacations and an environmentalist strategy for promoting conservation and education. In place of potentially unsustainable economic development activities such as logging, mining, and intensive agriculture, ecotourism has been proposed as a viable alternative, especially in countries with growing populations and worsening environmental conditions such as those in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Ecotourism has also been seen by tourism industry experts as a way that economic development opportunities can balance environmental conservation activities, serving as a vehicle for promoting environmentally sound and socially responsible behaviour.

Unfortunately, this balance is not easily achieved. The ecotourism industry faces the paradoxical situation that the more popular the product becomes, the more difficult it becomes to provide. One aspect of the problem stems from the direct impact of ecotourists themselves. As an ecotourism destination becomes popular, the increase in visitors can begin to damage the environment that the ecotourism experience depends upon. One industry expert summarized the problem as follows:

If the tourists go in and you have 20,000 people tramping through an alpine meadow, then the alpine meadow is destroyed. There are groups going into the Amazon to look at the rainforest and to see the traditional peoples there. But if the culture of these traditional peoples is destroyed because of the tourists, this is not ecotourism.

To take another example, early ecotourists responded to the call of adventure by taking part in guided climbs of Mount Everest. However, by 1990 it became necessary for a team of US, Soviet, and Chinese climbers to band together to clear off the estimated two tons of garbage that earlier climbers had left behind. Ecotourism activity was destroying the ecosystem upon which it depended.

Another aspect of this problem arises from the overdevelopment that accompanies success as an ecotourism destination: if a destination becomes truly popular, portions of the natural land that serve as the attraction are often relegated to become roads, hotels, gift shops, and parking lots to accommodate growing numbers of visitors. A sizable chunk of the original attraction—not to mention its charm as a 'natural' destination—can be lost. This kind of problem has plagued the National parks system in Canada, where the increasing popularity of the natural environment requires more and more development which reduces the 'naturalness' of the parks system. As the ecotourism destination becomes increasingly developed, participants become unsatisfied with the experience. Everyone wishes to participate in these sorts of ecotourism activities, but they all wish to be the only ones. Arguing for more development in support of ecotourism is therefore often destructive and counter to the ideals of ecotourism.

Canada in particular has much to lose from this tension between tourism development and environmental conservation, given that so much of its image relies upon its reputation as a unspoiled nature.
destination and on the unique cultures of its indigenous people. These problems of impact and development are a serious challenge to ecotourism in Canada given the association of ecotourism and environmental protection and the relatively underdeveloped standards and policies that are in place in Canada. The high expectations raised by the idea of ecotourism are difficult to meet given the demands for profitability, access, and the development of a commercial ecotourism industry. The challenge facing the Canadian ecotourism industry is how to expand the industry in a way that fulfills the high expectations of the industry's many stakeholders. The failure to do this up to this point has resulted in an ongoing problem of legitimacy that will require significant management if ecotourism is to develop successfully. Understanding the process of legitimacy management that must occur will occupy us in the remainder of the article.

Understanding legitimacy in emerging industries

In a recent review of the subject, Suchman defined legitimacy as:

a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.1

Taking this definition as our starting point, it is clear that the creation of legitimacy is a social process concerned with the relationship between a set of socially constructed and culturally bound expectations with respect to organizational activities, and similarly constructed and bound by perceptions of the organization's activities and impacts.6 In the case of the Ecosummer expedition discussed in the introduction, the legitimacy of the expedition as an ecotourism venture was challenged by a number of stakeholders in a very public way while simultaneously being defended by Ecosummer. The question in this case was not the 'facts', but how they should be interpreted (i.e. environmentally unsound practice vs traditional hunting rights). The political process of negotiating the 'facts' and their meaning is what we refer to as legitimacy management;17-19 it's outcome determines the legitimacy of, in this case, one firm's activities in offering ecotourism expeditions.

The political nature of legitimacy management is particularly acute in the context of emerging industries like ecotourism:

New industries emerge when entrepreneurs succeed in mobilizing resources in response to perceived opportunities. Identifying opportunities, assembling resources, and recruiting and training employees are challenges facing all entrepreneurs, and all of these activities require the cooperation and strategic interaction of individuals and groups. However, founders of entirely new activities, by definition, lack the familiarity and credibility that constitute the fundamental basis for interaction.20

Although the lack of familiarity and credibility creates significant challenges for entrepreneurs in new industries, it also provides a situation in which individual stakeholders can play an extraordinarily important role in the definition of expectations and perceptions of performance. Without a highly institutionalized context to rely on as a source of shared expectations and perceptions, individual stakeholders are able to act more proactively in negotiating advantageous social understandings.21,22

Understanding the process of legitimacy management begins with an analysis of the stakeholders involved, the kinds of evaluative frameworks being used by stakeholders, and the issues that are being evaluated. We will examine each of these topics—stakeholders, evaluative frameworks, and issues—in turn in this section.

Stakeholders and the politics of legitimacy

The production of expectations and perceptions associated with some organization or activity involves social actors with various interests and intentions interacting directly, or indirectly through the media in an effort to understand themselves and convince each other. Therefore, we can say that legitimacy is socially produced in the communicative interaction among stakeholders.23,24 As such, the management of legitimacy is a political process where the interests of stakeholders come into conflict as they work to construct expectations and perceptions that favor their goals and interests. Stakeholders focus attention and resources on this process as it is in their interests to encourage the formulation of expectations and perceptions that advantage their own positions.

When thinking about this process, it is important to keep in mind that it is likely that some stakeholders may argue for the illegitimacy of an activity rather than for its legitimacy, as in the Ecosummer example given above. The process is not just one where managers manage the legitimacy of their companies, but includes the active participation of a range of stakeholders. If a stakeholder can successfully argue that an activity is illegitimate, it is likely that the organization or individual carrying out the activity will come under increased pressure to stop whatever it is that they are doing. The management of legitimacy therefore has two modes: trying to legitimize some activity and trying to delegitimize it. The outcome of this conversation between stakeholders (and the outcome will generally be different from stakeholder to stakeholder) determines the degree of support that stakeholders will provide for the organization.

One of the critical issues in managing the legitimacy of ecotourism is the plethora of interested stakeholders:

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Travel writers are trying to get the latest word on this new idea. Conservationists are investigating it as a tool for conservation. Rural development specialists are trying to identify its economic potential. Governments are considering it as a source of foreign exchange and as a means to garner national appreciation and support for wildlands. The tourism industry is booming with new trips to exotic nature spots dubbed ecotourism. Private sector funding agencies are looking into the financial viability of ecotourism investments. And of course, travelers—the primary drive behind all of this enthusiasm—are becoming more adventurous, more nature-oriented, and more participatory when they travel.\textsuperscript{25}

With environmental responsibility at the forefront of ecotourism issues, and consumers expecting that product offerings will respect both nature and local cultures, a key issue in the ecotourism industry concerns the roles that various stakeholders should play in achieving the goals of ecotourism.

For example, the indigenous peoples of Canada are a critically important stakeholder group that remains relatively 'unmanaged'. In a paper presented at the June 1993 Annual Conference of the Travel and Tourism Research Association, a researcher outlined the potential for aboriginal involvement in tourism:

Of the 60000 tourism businesses in Canada, only 1368 are owned by aboriginal peoples. Tourism as a whole is approached by the aboriginal community with cautious optimism. It is seen as an industry with real growth and market potentials; however, it is clear that danger lurks if the opportunities are not approached with an understanding of the damage that can occur to aboriginal communities, their lands, and their culture. The main challenge for aboriginal people who enter the industry is to be culturally-oriented business people. (There are) several barriers to changing the role of aboriginal peoples in tourism, including the need to clarify roles and responsibilities of non-native tourism organizations and the native communities, and the lack of resources and funding.\textsuperscript{26}

More and more, aboriginal groups are becoming attracted to the lucrative prospect of booming tourism activity in their areas. However, perhaps more than any other stakeholder this desire for economic prosperity is heavily countered by the desire to retain cultural identity and to preserve the natural state of the lands that are these peoples' home.

Consequently, land use is of extreme importance to Canadian indigenous peoples, who have the view that:

since all economies are based on the benefits of the environment, all land users must work in harmony to ensure a sustainable future. Tourism as a land user group and a component of the overall economy must be at the forefront of land use theory and technology. In real terms we all just visit the earth during our lifetime, so our vision must be to leave it, as much as possible, the way we found it.\textsuperscript{27}

There have been strong voices on the sides of native groups and the tourism industry alike who argue that there is an acute need for the two groups to begin to work together, from positions of mutual respect and importance, to successfully develop and sustain native lands through tourism. For example, Conservation International Canada (CIC) has undertaken a joint community-based program of training in native heritage, guiding, and ecosystem management with the Haisla people of Kitimat, BC. The project aims to develop young native people's job skills, improve local management skills, and generate data on how best to conserve and manage the Greater Kitlope Ecosystem (the largest undisturbed temperate rain forest watershed in Canada).\textsuperscript{28}

Evaluative frameworks
Stakeholders determine the legitimacy of a company or industry by applying some set of expectations, an evaluative framework, to their understandings of the activities of the company or industry.\textsuperscript{29} A critical part of the political process described above is therefore devoted to the negotiations that occur around which framework to use in determining legitimacy. For example, in the case of the Ecosummer expedition described in the introduction, should the company be evaluated on the basis of environmental criteria (one evaluative framework) or should the actions of the Inuit guides be understood as an appropriate application of traditional hunting rights (a very different evaluative framework)?

The issue of balance between economic development and environmental conservation in ecotourism is made more complex by the variety of evaluative frameworks that are brought to bear in its analysis. Each of the large number of stakeholders interested in the future of ecotourism brings with them their own set of standards for evaluating its successes and failures. Most obvious are the profit-oriented and conservation-oriented frameworks of the private entrepreneur and the environmental activist. Along with these, however, are the parochial economic and political ideologies of local governments, the concerns of local citizens, and the cultural concerns of indigenous peoples. Given the range of frameworks used to evaluate any instance of commercial ecotourism, the issue of balancing stakeholder priorities often becomes highly controversial.

Generally, the recent increase in popular support for ecological concerns has significantly altered the frameworks used in public discourse to evaluate the impacts and responsibilities of industry. While the importance of particular evaluative frameworks (e.g., environmental vs economic performance) depends on the type of products or services produced and the current economic environment, the growing importance of ecological concerns has
prompted a tremendous increase in the amount of information produced by governments, by activist groups, and by corporations themselves with respect to corporate environmental performance. Some corporations, such as The Body Shop, have adopted the promotion of ecological awareness as an intrinsic element of their strategies. Ecotourism, in general, benefits from this increased awareness and interest in environmental performance. However, it also places the industry in a difficult position as expectations for environmental performance are very high and, unless they are managed in some way, stand as potential threat to successful ecotourism development.

Social and political issues
The politics of legitimacy often coalesce around 'issues': controversial inconsistencies between perceptions and expectations of organizational performance that create some significant, perceived impact on stakeholder support. The importance of managing social and political issues has increased tremendously in the last two decades, as:

- Firms have been confronted by an organized, activist, and concerned set of stakeholders clamoring for improved corporate performance on a wide range of social and political issues, from clean air and nutritional labeling to equal employment opportunities.

- In both established and emerging areas of commercial tourism, the significance of social and political issues is great, involving such issues as the impact of tourism on the natural environment, the role of indigenous peoples and the influence of tourism in developing countries. These issues act as focal points for the legitimacy management activities of stakeholders: for example, social activists might utilize social and political issues in their attempts to delegitimize aspects of commercial tourism, while commercial operators and tourism-friendly governments might draw on the discourse around some social issue to support tourism development.

- One set of issues focus on the activities of individual firms and their fit with societal expectations. In the case of Ecosummer Expeditions, the difficulties which arose around the killing of the five polar bears is an issue that requires careful management. The strategy of the WWF was to admit that a mistake had been made and to distance themselves from Ecosummer. Ecosummer, on the other hand, was left trying to explain their behavior. They could not exit in the way that WWF did and instead had to manage the understandings of important stakeholders in some way.

- Other issues face groups of firms or even whole industries. As mentioned above, there is a growing pressure on ecotourism businesses to show that they are maintaining proper standards of environmental responsibility in order to maintain the political support of other stakeholders. This appears to be one of the most critical issues facing the industry. However, the definition of 'sound' environmental practices can be difficult. For example, the whale-watching industry in British Columbia is currently caught up in a struggle over what, exactly, constitutes harassment of Orca whales. Currently, there are numerous firms on Vancouver Island that offer whale watching trips. But there are only three pods of Orca whales resident in the waters surrounding the west coast of the island and a few additional pods that come through during their summer migrations. Thus, while there is usually a good chance of spotting whales in particular feeding areas, there are so many firms offering whale watching packages that when there is a sighting there can be a dozen whale watching boats, along with dozens of pleasure craft, crowding around the whales. Critics argue that this constitutes harassment of the whales, interrupting their natural activities and posing a danger to both the animals and the passengers on the boats. While whale watching operators deny any disruption of the natural environment, they are working on mechanisms for self-regulation in order to stem the 'perception' of harassment and to ward off more direct government regulation.

In summary, the problem of legitimacy facing ecotourism involves the interaction of a large number of stakeholders with overlapping and potentially conflicting interests. These stakeholders, including entrepreneurs, environmentalists, native peoples and government bring particular frameworks to the domain with which they evaluate the issues and actions of others. Although these evaluative frameworks vary significantly across stakeholder groups, ecological conservation and economic development considerations have both become dominant themes in public discourse. Finally, problems of legitimacy involve social and political issues around which this discourse often develops. We argue that these issues emerge in relation to specific firms, groups of firms, or whole industries, an aspect of the problem of legitimacy that is critical to the process of managing legitimacy.

A framework for understanding legitimacy management
From a managerial perspective, the process of legitimacy management is, therefore, the process of managing stakeholder perceptions of corporate and industry activity, managing the evaluative frameworks—the expectations—that stakeholders bring to bear on the firm or organization, and managing issues as they arise to ensure that they do not damage the carefully tended image of the firm or of the industry. On the other hand, from a stakeholder point of view, legitimacy is a tool to pressure firms or industries to change their activities: if a stake-
holder can convince other stakeholders to change their perceptions of the firm or to re-think their expectations and thereby reduce the legitimacy of the firm from that stakeholder's perspective, then it is more likely that some sort of change will occur.

But this process of legitimacy management does not occur at just the firm level. There are three important levels at which legitimacy management (as we have described it) occurs (see Table 1): at the firm level, at the organizational field level, and at the industry level. The processes which occur at each level are critically important to the determination of legitimacy that is carried out by each of the stakeholder groups. At different times, different levels will take prominence, but all three levels must always be considered if one is to have a complete understanding of the processes that support or undermine the legitimacy of particular activities.

**Firm level**

At the firm level, each individual firm must work to ensure that their activities are perceived by important stakeholders as deserving their support. This micro level of legitimacy management is a critically important aspect of management. But how should legitimacy management at a firm level be conceptualized? Legitimacy problems, as we have discussed above, occur when societal expectations for corporate behavior differ from societal perceptions of a corporation's behavior. Sethi suggests that we can usefully understand this difference as a 'legitimacy gap'. Understanding this difference as a 'gap', highlights the fact that it can be wide or narrow and that it is a continuous rather than a dichotomous variable. According to Sethi, it is the existence of a legitimacy gap that drives corporate efforts to manage legitimacy:

At any given time, there is likely to be a gap between performance and societal expectations caused by business actions or changing expectations. A continuously widening gap would cause business to lose its legitimacy and threaten its survival. Business must therefore strive to narrow this 'legitimacy gap' in order to maintain maximum discretionary control over its internal decision making and external dealings.39

But how does a legitimacy gap arise? Sethi suggests that there are two important sources of a legitimacy gap. First, societal expectations can change, resulting in a widening gap between the corporation's image and societal expectations. For American tobacco companies in the 1970s, for example, the increasing awareness of the health consequences of smoking resulted in a significant and widening legitimacy gap with several important stakeholder groups.39 The tobacco companies had not changed their activities and their image was much the same as it had been, yet they suddenly faced a significantly different evaluation of their role in society; they faced a significant and widening legitimacy gap.

Second, a legitimacy gap can arise if new information about the activities of the corporation suddenly becomes known that varies dramatically from the corporation's image. The potential body of information about the corporation which is unavailable to the public—the organizational shadow40—stands as a constant potential threat to a corporation's legitimacy. When part of the organizational shadow is revealed, either accidentally or through the activities of an activist group or a journalist, a legitimacy gap may be created.

In examining the dynamics of legitimacy gaps, Sethi suggests four possible strategies for dealing with a legitimacy gap:41

1. Do not change performance but change public perceptions of performance through education and information.
2. If changes in public perception are not possible, change the symbols used to describe business performance thereby making it congruent with public perceptions.
3. Attempt to change societal expectations of business performance through education and information.
4. When strategies 1 through 3 are unsuccessful in completely bridging the legitimacy gap, bring about changes in business performance, thereby closely matching it with society's expectations.

The management of legitimacy involves choosing and implementing one of the above strategies. Managers have options depending on their preference for changing behavior, changing perceptions, or changing expectations. There is no particular order to these strategies; their application in a

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particular situation presumably depends on the available resources and the manager’s estimates of success. What is important is that managers implement these strategies at a firm level to deal with legitimacy problems—gaps—faced by individual firms.

Examples of firms managing their legitimacy are common. The activities of the WWF and Ecosummer in dealing with the crisis discussed in the introduction are a good example. WWF chose to change their behaviour and distanced themselves from Ecosummer. Ecosummer, on the other hand, argued that stakeholder expectations were inappropriate and that the killing of the polar bears was a legitimate act on the part of Inuit hunters. To avoid just such issues, and as a reaction to a growing legitimacy gap around the environmental expertise of guides, some firms are now undertaking extensive training programs for their guides, to ensure that they adhere to environmentally sound practices when leading tours. In fact, the need for responsible tourism companies became increasingly apparent as tourists have become more environmentally conscious, they have accelerated the need for firms to hire only those guides that will meet or exceed these consumers’ idea of sound practices. Based on this demand, a new training centre for ecotourism guides was created in 1993. The Adventure Tourism program at the College of the Caribou in Kamloops, B.C. was created to professionally accredit guides and teach them not only adventure tourism activities, such as hiking, skiing, rock climbing, etc., but administrative and management skills as well. The two-year program is the only one of its kind in the world, and job offers come in that far exceed the number of graduates each year.

Organizational field level

Second, legitimacy management is required at the level of the organizational field. By organizational field we mean a set of firms defined by their participation in a recognized area of life such as, in the case of ecotourism, mountain treking in the Rocky Mountains or cultural tours in Peru. An industry usually contains a number of organizational fields and members of the same organizational field often come from different industries. The whale watching companies mentioned earlier, along with related organizations such as researchers, government fisheries departments, environmental groups, and related tourism companies, constitute an organizational field; while all tourism companies in Canada would constitute the Canadian tourism industry.

At the organizational field level, ongoing interaction between members produces recognized and highly legitimate practices and structures. The problem of legitimacy management is reduced as standard organizational forms and practices become institutionalized and available for firms to legitimate their activities. While this process of the development and institutionalization of standard organizational forms and practices often happens without management of any kind, organizational collaboration speeds the process and allows industry members to control the result.

But what is organizational collaboration? Collaboration is inter-organizational activity that is intended to produce a decision or an action that will solve a shared problem or deal with a shared issue. There are many forms of ongoing inter-organizational activity that are not intended to solve a problem or deal with an issue and are therefore not the topic of interest here. For example, professional associations that concentrate on providing opportunities for social interaction between members are not collaborative groups as we define them here. In contrast, we would be interested in a professional association—like the Northwest Whalewatchers Association—that was formed with the intent to lobby the government on some regulatory issue.

At a very general level, collaboration can be thought of as an inter-organizational conversation that occurs on an ongoing basis over an extended period of time. As such, it has the potential to change and develop as the collaboration continues. The ‘shared rules, norms and structures’ (Wood and Gray, 1991: p. 149) upon which the collaboration depends are negotiated on an ongoing basis, often beginning with some sort of existing collaborative activity that is redefined and shaped over time as the participants work to define the issue, to include and exclude participants, and to deal with the issue or problem. Thus, collaboration results in changes in the shared rules, norms, and structures that characterize the inter-organizational domain in which they occur. This is an important ‘unintended consequence’ of organizational collaboration that we feel is critically important. Collaborative activity results in the development of relationships and the exchange of information that would never occur in a purely competitive situation. In this way, collaborative activity acts as an adjunct to the competitive behavior of the participants.

One example of successful cooperation among independent operators has taken place in the Queen Charlotte Islands (also known as Haida Gwaii), an archipelago endowed with an impressive wealth of both natural resources and cultural heritage (dating back over 10000 years). Following government declaration of South Moresby Island as a national park reserve, the international profile of the area was significantly raised resulting in an ever-increasing number of visitors. In 1989, in an effort to construct both reasonable expectations and positive perceptions with respect to visitation practices, approximately 54 tour operators met to develop a Code of Conduct for Commercial Tour Operators in Gwaii Haanas/South Moresby.
extensive agreement outlines a series of guidelines for operators, including acceptable behavior in approaching wildlife and visiting cultural and historical sites, the utilization of ‘no-trace’ camping techniques, and the maximization of local resident involvement in the tourism sector.

**Industry level**

Third, at the broadest level, the activity of the entire industry must be perceived as legitimate if it is to prosper in the long term. If the activities of industry members are understood to be highly legitimate, that is if their actions are widely understood to be congruent with the interests of society generally, then the industry can expect support from a broad range of societal institutions. But this sort of situation does not usually come about on its own. In most cases, a range of different legitimacy management activities occur to produce the widespread industry level legitimacy that characterizes successful industries (think, for example, of the legitimacy of the computer industry or of biotechnology). In general, the management of legitimacy at the industry level involves reacting to specific sets of issues that affect the industry as a whole and, more generally, working to ensure general support from the industry’s wide variety of stakeholders. Consequently, processes of issues management and public relations are central to this level of legitimacy management.

Unlike the direct collaboration that occurs at the organizational field level, legitimacy management for the ecotourism industry as a whole generally requires the involvement of some dominant stakeholders or superordinate associations. Because the legitimacy of the entire industry is at stake, the strategies required to deal with the problem at this level require action from stakeholders with the resources and legitimacy to affect general societal attitudes and behaviors. One of the most important strategies at this level is the development of industry standards, including their communication to important publics. Although standards are often considered the purview of government, standard-setting can also involve industry associations, environmental groups and other organizations with sufficient influence at the industry level. Ensuring that certain standards are met by all industry participants is vital to ensure that the reputation of the industry is not damaged by the actions of a few participants.

Governments involved in setting standards for the industry, like other actors’ attempting to manage legitimacy in ecotourism, face the need to balance the pursuit of economic rewards with environmental protection of popular areas. As representatives of a wide range of constituents, however, the problem of legitimacy is even more complex for government, necessitating strategies that acknowledge different expectations and perceptions. As an example, one issue that government faces as the custodian of much of the land that ecotourism employs, is that of carrying capacity. In some cases, governments have already stepped in to impose limitations on the number of visitors to a particular area of attraction. Parks Canada had to limit access to the West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island to 8000 hikers a year. At the Tatshenshini River, which starts in the Yukon and runs through BC before feeding into Glacier Bay National Park in Alaska, a management plan was developed by the Glacier Bay park to limit the number of rafting trips on the river. The popularity of Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario has necessitated the development of a first come, first served waiting list, which in 1993 was more than a year long for hiking trails and canoe routes.

As the story that began this article highlights, the involvement of environmental groups in ecotourism has raised a number of important issues and created significant pressure for regulation. Despite the many difficulties, non-profit organizations still hold high hopes for the industry. Their ideals are not only for protected lands and wildlife, but for the economic prosperity of indigenous peoples as a result of tourism activity. In an address to the 1992 World Congress on Adventure Travel and Eco-Tourism, Elizabeth Boo of the World Wildlife Fund has undertaken several initiatives to assist in the planning of ecotourism ventures around the world. Their goal is to ensure that new ventures be developed responsibly, that enough ‘learning through mistakes’ has taken place in the industry already. As such, they are intimately involved in the management of legitimacy at an industry level.

First, ecotourism is already increasing in so many parks that we must address this management issue. We must at least alleviate problems that tourism causes in protected areas. But more importantly, we believe there may be some margin of benefit to gain from these tourists. Perhaps these tourists can help address some of our conservation challenges such as underfunding, understaffing, and unsustainable development activities in and around parks ... We also hypothesize that tourism to parks may create a fair amount of employment for people living around protected areas. These tourism jobs would be based on natural resource protection, and provide a good alternative to other, less sustainable job options.7

Based on this perspective, the World Wildlife Fund has undertaken several initiatives to assist in the planning of ecotourism ventures around the world. Their goal is to ensure that new ventures be developed responsibly, that enough ‘learning through mistakes’ has taken place in the industry already. As such, they are intimately involved in the management of legitimacy at an industry level.

Other organizations are trying to manage problems of legitimacy on an international scale by working to regulate and standardize the activities of ecotourism firms. The Ecotourism Society is a ‘non-profit, membership organization working to conserve the environment and sustain the well being of local people through responsible travel worldwide’.28 In May of 1992, the Society commenced a study to develop a ‘green evaluation’ program for
international nature tourism services. Recognizing the need for the maintenance of certain environmental standards, and acknowledging that there had been no real effort to monitor the adherence to such standards, the Society began researching the feasibility of a monitoring program that would be performed by ecotourism consumers. This approach was seen as most likely to succeed, given the highly dispersed nature of the ecotourism industry. The Society understands the broad scope of this undertaking: it recognizes that a foundation of consensus be constructed among tour operators, conservationists, governments and consumers... The Ecotourism Society will need the assistance of government, tour operators, and non-governmental organizations to make (this) first responsible tourism consumer evaluation program in the world work.

Conclusions

The potential of ecotourism as a source of jobs and economic growth worldwide is significant. Yet, equally significant problems face the industry. One of the primary problems is a crisis of legitimacy growing out of a complex arrangement of stakeholders with very different expectations and a lack of institutionalized standards for ecotourism practice and performance. This problem of legitimacy must be addressed or the industry will face an increasing number of crises like that faced by Ecosummer Expeditions and the resulting erosion of legitimacy will threaten the future viability of the industry.

The future success of the ecotourism industry depends on the successful management of legitimacy at all three levels. At a firm level, individual companies must develop the skills necessary to deal quickly and efficiently with issues as they arise, and perhaps more importantly, to foresee the kinds of responses that their activities will provoke. This kind of expertise is difficult to develop, however, and very expensive to purchase. Yet, the kind of difficulties faced by Ecosummer Canada Expeditions create tremendous barriers to the successful development of ecotourism products in an industry where reputation is critically important. The literatures on the management of legitimacy and on issues management provide some insight into the ways organizations can reduce the chance of facing a legitimacy crisis and deal effectively with one should it occur.

Part of the solution to this difficulty lies in the development and communication of standards for ecotourism, both at the organizational field and the industry levels. Along with government regulation, industry associations and collaboration among ecotourism companies and other important stakeholder groups form parts of the answer. These sorts of interaction provide contexts for the institutionalization of standard practices and organizational forms which lessen the possibility of public relations disasters and reduce the risk faced by individual companies as they work to develop ecotourism. An active industry association provides a context for dealing with stakeholder concerns and carrying out legitimacy management activities. A more developed organizational field would have provided Ecosummer Canada with established norms of behavior against which their activity could be more clearly judged. At the same time, an industry association could provide public relations and marketing advice to reduce the probability of a legitimacy crisis and the amount of damage that the firm and the industry sustain should one occur.

In this article, we have argued that the politics of ecotourism legitimacy are made more complex by the large number of critical stakeholders. The legitimacy of ecotourism practices and standards is being negotiated in a domain that includes commercial operators, governments at all levels, not-for-profit organizations including environmental activists and aboriginal groups, as well as the ecotourists themselves. Each of these groups brings to the industry its own set of interests, capabilities, strategies, and traditions that may, and often do, conflict. Despite these obvious differences, however, there is reason for optimism: all of these disparate groups share a common interest in maintaining the natural resources that form the foundation of ecotourism. Commercial operators understand the need to manage resources responsibly to ensure the long-term survival of their industry. Governments and not-for-profit organizations may question the impact of ecotourism activities, but they also recognize their importance in conserving natural spaces from more disastrous exploitation. Similarly, aboriginal groups are confronted by choices with respect to commercial and use that involve the conservation or destruction of ecologically critical tracts of land.

We believe that the stakeholders involved in the development of ecotourism can successfully manage the problem of legitimacy. To accomplish this, however, will require an approach that accommodates the multiple perspectives and evaluative frameworks of stakeholders. Consequently, any attempt to address the central issue of balance between economic and ecological imperatives must recognize that this issue is not a simple equation. Stakeholders bring with them their own definitions of economic development and ecological conservation, as well as their own positions with respect to the appropriate balance. Bridging these perspectives to find the common ground demands an approach that emphasizes open communication and unhurried collaboration.

References


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