

# Connecting nature, culture, and art in the context of socially responsible ecological tourism

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After facing with mass tourism and its destructive impacts on particularly national parks, alternative approaches have come into the focus of tourism literature. The World Tourism Organization (EC, 2003:5) predicted alternative tourism movement and facilities would take 20% of the general tourism economy in near future and a shift from “sun and sand tourism” to other segments. The shifting is shaped by several factors: a) people are encouraged to experience new places and cultures, b) transportation opportunities become more available, c) holidays become longer, d) people are more active for cultural and social activities, e) awareness of environment impacts. This shift to nature, culture, religion, sports, ecological, scientific, has driven sustainability concept permeating all practices after a milestone report (WCED-1987) for conservation of resources effectively (Krüger, 2005:579; Leung, Marion, & Farrell, 2008:20). In ecologically sensitive areas, sustainable tourism has become the umbrella concept for acquiring economic, social, and environmental benefits continually. Ecotourism is then defined as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (TIES, 1990). It has also been described as small-group “appropriate travel”; “socially responsible tourism” (Sirakaya, et al., 1999); and it is highly related to commercial activities, such as SMEs (Gala, Galb, & Hadasc, 2010:281). Ecotourism could provide the impetus and economic investments and conservation of species and habitats (Lopez, 2002) and also amalgamate with the other tourism activities (Wommels, 2009).

Ecotourism contributes to (Diamantis, 1999; Moskwa, 2010): a) conserving natural areas where initial criteria for assessing ecological sustainability in tourism related economy is to monitor and lessen the unintentional harms of tourism activities (Leung, Marion, & Farrell, 2008:20); b) deploying gathered income which means ecotourism is a business industry, a network industry, and a market driven industry (Libosada, 2009: 391) and the portion is held by ecotourism in tourism industry increasing; c) promoting cultural and traditional values by educating tourists which relies on the ethical and cultural assumption that respect the cultural assets (Donohoe, 2011), d) containing interpretation/learning experience; e) prompting responsible actions for tourism industry and tourists; and f) emphasizing cultural identity and participation on decision making process particularly for local governments, entrepreneurs, and community (Wood, 2002). Emphasizing cultural and artistic assets is vital for socially responsible ecological tourism (SRET). The description for SRET suggested in this study is “*Social ecological tourism concept that contains and enhances facilities of culture, science, and art, promotes both learning and entertaining while considering in respect to local people, nature, and existed culture.*” The concept of social

ecological tourism is based on the principle of sustainable development, learning by doing, practices of science, art, nature and cultural living and it boosts the values of nature and culture with respect. The conceptual framework is given in Figure 1.

The purpose of this study is to provide SRET and review an example of the current and past activities and local initiatives in wildlife and biodiversity conservation in Kackar Mountains of Eastern Black Sea Region. This case is about a local outdoor recreation initiative, bringing local communities in action to promote ecological values while connecting the elements with culture and art, such as drama, music, drawing, traditional lifestyle of mountain villages. We discuss that such local initiatives are, in fact, effective in keeping the nature in balance with other activities through applying socially responsible tourism as a sustainable business case. We will address the benefits of SRET to society by looking at the needs of the communities where SRET could make contribution to their well-being and living conditions SRET promotes the values of nature and culture are in need to conserve for future generation.

The components of SRET (McKercher & Hom, 2002; TIES, 2000; Amatya, et al., 2010:74-75) are taken up at national, regional, and local levels; therefore the methods applied for this study are: a) SWOT analysis; b) participative observation; c) semi structured interviews (with entrepreneurs and local authorities); d) documentary analysis.

The high plateaus of the Turkish Eastern Black Sea region are one of the most important areas of Eastern Europe regarding biodiversity and nature conservation. This area is extremely valuable with its old growth forests, plant diversity, wildlife, landscape beauty, and untouched nature. Kackar Mountains (3937 m) is partly protected under the status of a National Park, which is managed by the Directorate General of Nature Conservation and Natural Parks of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization. While there are many other sectors actively involved in the area, such as forests, agriculture (tea planting), rivers, and tourism, there is a fragmented administrative structure that may affect people’s lives, especially in the villages of the high plateaus of the precious natural resources. Over the past 10 years, these local actions bring people together from various parts of Turkey for outdoor camping on the Amlakit plateau (~2.600 m.) for promotion of the natural, historical, and cultural values through the involvement of local young people who support and generate local income from these activities. There are a wide variety of wildlife, with wolves, bears, pigs, wild goats, deer, jackals, and wild hens in this area. Facilities for outdoor recreation in the Kackar National Park are mainly in Ayder Plateau and Camlihemsin town. Others include few designated camping areas, because trekking is becoming more popular by national

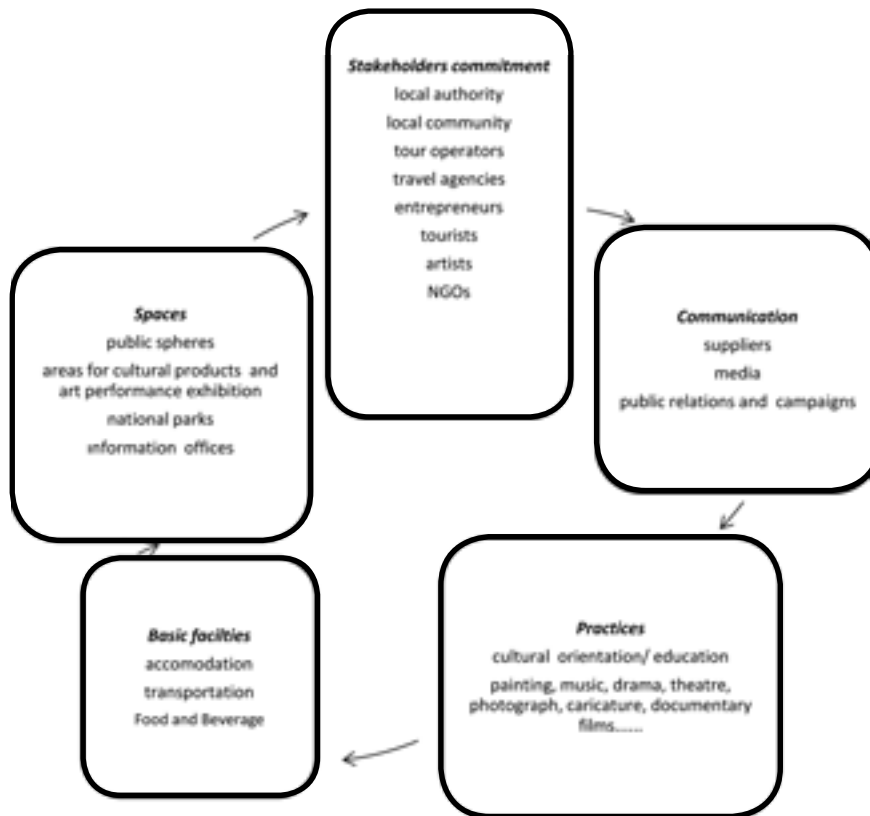


Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework for SRET.

and international tourists. The current trends and situation identified by SWOT indicated number of strengths; such as rich flora/fauna, endemic plants (orchids etc.), rare animals (Caucasian grouse), registered status of the national park and its accessibility with a strong cultural identity as well as high interest from academic (fishing, wild-life watching) and artistic (writing, nature photography, art performance) makes this location a unique place for its visitors. However, there are still lack of interests from 'green' NGOs and insufficient knowledge and skills by local guidance and governance about the value of the area mainly due to the low awareness of these values. In addition to these, absence of public management (info desks, leaflets, maps, etc.) and marketing leads to the migration of youth population to other big cities. By recognizing the room for improving the situation, local stakeholders found great opportunities

for collaboration with international nature conservation organizations, (NGOs, governments, science and education institutions) using national funds for targeted project development for this area. It is also found that local employment opportunities are better in the ecotourism field. Threat from mass tourism and planned hydroelectric power plans in the whole region combined with the unplanned urban development could only be tackled with the good practices and showcases.

In conclusion, we observed that mass tourism trend is still predominant in Turkey. The example provided in this paper suggests that more interaction between cultures (not talking to but talking with) have potential chances for such local initiatives to contribute the region's natural values and economic conditions with the assumption that SRET concept could interject these solid practices.

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