6 Ethics and Values

Introduction

Ethical concerns underpin the sector of sustainable tourism. Ethics is what allows us to make decisions about daily interactions with others and the world around us – it is fundamental to constructing the types of sustainable relationships that we have already discussed in Chapter 1. At its most basic level ethics distinguishes right from wrong.

Its place in sustainable tourism is so important that an ethics-based platform has been suggested as an extension of the advocacy → cautionary → adaptancy → knowledge-based platforms that we reviewed in Chapter 1. Macbeth (2005) calls for a sixth platform in tourism studies, an ethics platform – he places this even after a fifth sustainability platform. An ethics platform provides us with the moral compass to make decisions about all our travel-related decisions, especially the hard ones that we don't like to think about.

Discussions of ethics in tourism are not new; ethics in this case is concerned with moral judgments, standards and rules of conduct, and is usually understood as the ethical behavior of operators and less commonly as the ethical choices and preferences of the tourist. Studies of ethics in the tourism realm have focussed on ethical challenges at an operational level (and associated managerial decision-making), codes of ethics within the industry, the use of ethics as a marketing tool, ethics in tourism education, and finally ethical considerations the development and planning of tourism and related impacts on social, cultural and natural environments (Hultsman, 1995; Weeden, 2002; Yaman & Gurel, 2006).

One common thread to all studies of ethics in tourism is that, compared to other sectors, it is under-studied. One lead author in this area has argued that tourism is more often than not viewed as

"a club that bases its ethics on being free to do and say as one pleases […]:
I paid for it, so I deserve it" (Fennell, 2006, p.356).

The hedonic nature of tourism means that we do not think about ethics as much as we perhaps should do. Moreover, as we have already discussed in Chapter 2, that relationships in tourism can be tenuous or ephemeral, and

therefore appear less important or salient than relationships in our everyday lives. In fact, some researchers have stated that "the absence of ethical leadership in the tourism industry has been truly 'astounding'" (Donyadide, 2010, p.429). Indeed, of all the reasons to become more sustainable, ethical and moral arguments are often deliberately excluded as being the least considered factor by most tourism businesses (Hall & Brown, 2006).

On the other hand, Hall and Brown (2006, p.6) outline at least five reasons why tourism would particularly benefit from the application of ethics:

1   It is an activity focussed on human behaviour.
2   It includes several different actors representing a range of perspectives and objectives.
3   It has an applied context.
4   It has social, cultural, economic, ecological and political dimensions.
5   It can create a range of different combinations of impacts in a wide variety of contexts across the globe.

This chapter will introduce some of the basics of ethical thinking and decision-making, how and why these apply to tourism. We'll look at some specific cases where the ethical dimensions of tourism are particularly challenging, why talking about ethics can be uncomfortable and why it is important that we give voice to our values, in a way that acknowledges and diffuses that discomfort. Those stakeholders who do this well, often through the framework of Corporate Social Responsibility, are those most likely to achieve sustainability.

As a little thought experiment, consider that most tourism businesses operate within an interconnected system, facing many of the same challenges, constraints and policies, so why are some clearly more progressive in terms of sustainability than others? This is where the issue of ethical decision-making and giving voice to values may make all the difference in our progress towards greater sustainability.

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Key words and concepts

- Deontology
- Moral relativism
- Utilitarianism
- Ethics of care
- Virtue ethics
- Phronesis

- Moral dilemma
- Preference projection
- False consensus bias
- Corporate Social Responsibility
- Certification schemes

6.1   Basics of ethics

Many of us are used to operating out of a rational decision-making process – what is sensible, and more often than not, what is sensible according to principles of entrepreneurial self-interest. An ethics-based approach asks instead what is *good* (rather than what is *sensible*), and most importantly what is good for others.

But the question of what is good is also not easy to answer, and is commonly the starting point of an ethical position – the literature lists a range of positions including moral relativism, utilitarianism, rights, distributive justice, communicative ethics, ethics of care, the ethics of difference and the ethics of authenticity (Smith & Duffy, 2003). For the uninitiated the literature is confusing, but this basic understanding is important to distinguish black from white, and question whether grey can ever be better than either.

Four different understandings of what is right form a starting point for ethics:

- ☐ A **deontological** position talks about moral duty; an act is ethical if it adheres to that duty. There are rules established by society that must be abided by, black and white, regardless of your personal sense of what is right based on consequences of that moral duty.

- ☐ A **utilitarian** position does consider the consequences of an action, and tells us that we should act based on securing the greatest good from that action. There is no black and white and each action must be weighed up according to actors, context and consequences.

- ☐ **Relativism** delves even deeper into the shades of grey and says that there is never an absolute moral wrong or right, instead our morals evolve and change with social and cultural norms over a period of time, and it is up to the individual to establish his or her own moral compass (subjective relativism) or act in accordance with their socio-cultural norms of right and wrong (cultural relativism).

- ☐ **Virtue ethics** on the other hand, relates entirely to the individual and her or his virtues, as well as her or his ability to practice those virtues wisely, with– what Aristotle called *phronesis* – discretion and with good intent. There is no codifiable set of ethical principles, based either on moral duty, good consequences or social norms, as such.

These different positions set up how we view right and wrong, and how much we engage with shades of grey, and can heavily influence the outcomes of ethical decision-making.

These starting positions are just that – a starting position. Next we need to act on these positions, through an ethical decision-making process. The starting point for ethical action is the recognition of a moral dilemma – an ethical transgression – where an ethics-based decision-making process needs to be employed.