

# ‘As Unspoilt As Possible’ – A Framework for the Critical Analysis of Ecotourism

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With the critique of ‘fortress conservation’, ecotourism has become an important element of biodiversity conservation (Butcher 2007: 22ff, Chatty/Colchester 2002): local people are no longer driven out of nature reserves, they are included in conservation efforts instead. Ecotourism has been developed in the context of such conservation efforts. Promising to reconcile ‘man’ and ‘nature’, ecotourism is increasingly popular across the globe. In countries like Laos, where I am currently conducting research on ecotourism, tourism is one of the main economic sectors, and natural and cultural ‘heritage’ are primary tourist attractions (e.g. Schipani 2007: 5, LNTA undated: 25). Biodiversity conservation is central to Lao PDR’s socioeconomic development strategy, and so is ecotourism, as it helps to alleviate poverty in rural areas and at the same time protects natural resources. And Laos is just one example regarding the relative importance of conservation-through-enjoyment. Thus, investigating into ecotourism promises a whole range of sociological insights about current forms and forces of globalisation.

The rise of sustainable tourism is accompanied on the one hand by a profusion of manuals, project assessments etc. dealing mainly with the ‘How’s’ of ecotourism policy and practice and thereby tending to disregard the concept’s specific socio-cultural ‘nature’ – ecotourism as such, its inner logic, remains largely a black-box. This kind of approaching the matter extends into academic writing as well. On the other hand, there are also accounts critical to its ideological, particular and hegemonic ‘nature’ (e.g. Mowforth/Munt 2009, Butcher 2007, Cater 2006, West/Carrier 2004) – the ‘What’s’, so to say. They in turn largely dismiss the practical side of ecotourism. In this article, I would like to further a critical approach to ecotourism that combines both, its ‘what’s’ and ‘how’s’. The ‘nature’ of ecotourism is also made up and socially mediated by its very practice. From a pragmatist’s perspective, in turn, a reasonable way of conducting ecotourism, if there is any, can only be pursued when the inner logic, the historical and cultural premises of the ecotourism concept as it is applied is accounted for. Hence, a critical view on ecotourism has got to understand how the symbolic structure of ecotourism conjoins with institutional power and social practice, i.e. how hegemonic logics realise themselves, or are realised respectively, via the action of conscious social actors.

In order to understand the reality of ecotourism, it is important to view ecotourism as a culturally particular construct (Cater 2006) that has been generalised around the world. The following discussion deals with the ecotourism concept as a social fact constituted by particular socio-cultural rationales. The purpose is to develop an analytical framework that serves the empirical investigation of the social re-/production of inequality and dependence through ecotourism. Throughout this paper, I will develop a series of interrelated concepts that can be usefully applied to study the power relations implied in the social phenomenon of ecotourism. The framework presented here is essentially theoretical and, even though developed on the basis of some initial empirical research, it is a generalisation largely disregarding any concrete context. The analytical framework developed here combines two important strands of critical sociology: Bourdieu’s theory of social practice (e.g. Bourdieu 1984, 1993) and critical theories of the ‘Marxist’ tradition (e.g. Horkheimer/Adorno 2003, Horkheimer 2004, Adorno 2003, Marx 1959a, Marcuse 1964). The model presented is not to be ‘applied’ in the sense that empirical reality is treated to fit its scheme. To the contrary, fieldwork will be vital for its correction or, possibly, its invalidation. The following discussion draws upon the assumption that binary rationales of mutual exclusion symbolically reflect and facilitate actual, ‘material’ social exclusion through legitimisation. For example, the man-nature divide in biodiversity conservation renders the imposition of restrictions concerning resource extraction on local communities in and around nature reserve reasonable. The basic analytical problem is how and where discursive figures translate into

practice and vice versa. This is also an empirical question which must be dealt with in a concrete empirical context.

However, some generalisations are possible already. In what follows, I am concerned with how such a translation and the re-/production of unequal social relations through ecotourism is thinkable. For this purpose, I develop a terminological apparatus on the basis of the ecotourism concept (see chapter 1) and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, namely: the symbolic order of ecotourism (chapter 2), the ecotourist's habitus and ecotourism's self-limitation, and frontier labour (chapter 3). Chapter 4 briefly discusses the considerations and provides an outlook for further research.

## 1 The Concept of Ecotourism: Confluence of Sociocultural Rationales

The concept of ecotourism I aim to come to terms with can be thought of as the hegemonic idea of what ecotourism is about, which broadly corresponds to the definition given by the cross-section on Tourism and Sustainability of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD):

[Ecotourism] [...] does present a significant potential for realizing benefits in terms of the conservation of biological diversity and the sustainable use of its components. Among the benefits are direct revenues generated by fees and taxes [...]. These revenues can be used for the maintenance of natural areas and the contribution of tourism to economic development [...]. If [...] local communities receive income directly from a tourist enterprise they, in turn, increase their evaluation of the resources around them [...] followed by greater protection and conservation [...]. Other benefits include the provision of incentives for maintaining traditional arts and crafts, traditional knowledge, and innovations and practices that contribute to the sustainable use of biological diversity.

In this passage the general concept of ecotourism is set out. Basically, ecotourism is applied to situations where a particular locality is designated as 'nature reserve' while it is not feasible, for one reason or another, to simply relocate the local communities. Ecotourism aims to make nature reserves economically self-sustaining, to provide an alternative income to people who would otherwise be forced to rely 'illegally' on protected natural resources, and establish the idea of 'intact nature' as a fundamental moral value (since its intactness is the source for material well-being). Ecotourism is seen as an adequate solution to the conflict that generally arises between man and nature when a new nature reserve is established. Without going too much into detail about the multiple ways in which ecotourism is thought to preserve natural as well as cultural diversity in concrete settings, the definition given by the CBD conceptualises ecotourism as instrumental for 1) economic development and 2) the preservation of nature and tradition. Another element which is implicit to the above definition is that 3) ecotourism is an 'industry' with a market-driven logic. 4) Economic development and the preservation of nature and tradition are obviously thought to be mutually reinforcing, and the tourism industry is what makes the combination possible: conflictive goals (economic development, nature conservation) and the culture industry as facilitator are integrated under the ecological modernisation paradigm (see below). Each moment is a distinct aspect of ecotourism. Ideas such as these originated in specific historical experiences, in particular parts of the globe. They reflect social conditions in the industrialised, largely urbanised centres of global capitalism. I shall now briefly elaborate on the culturally and socially specific ('Western') content of these moments in order to explicate the particularist and hegemonic 'nature' of ecotourism (see figure 1 below).

### 1.1 Developmentalism: tradition vs. modernity

This element refers to the logic of (unidirectional) modernisation and thus is characterised by the opposition of tradition vs. modernity. Within this logic, modernity is set as positive value: it is modernity which is to be achieved, tradition is to be overcome. This binary opposition has been shaped by developmentalist

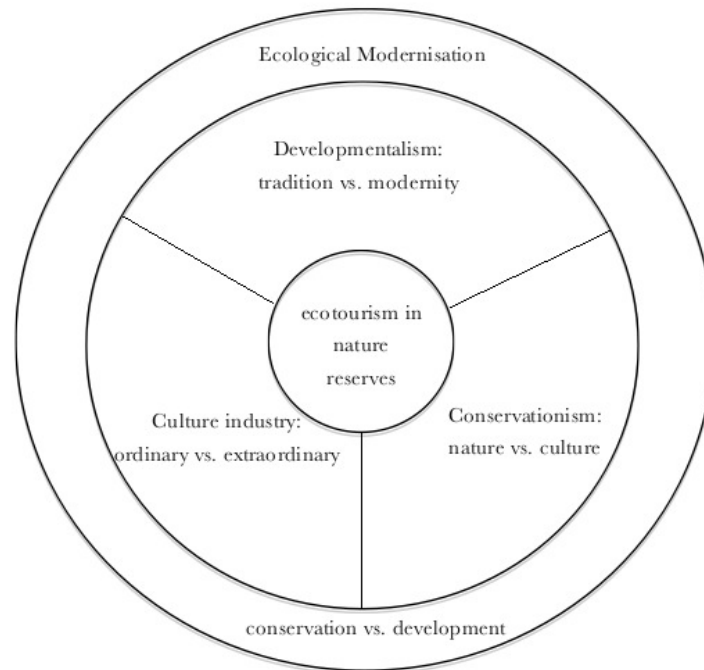


Figure 1: Ecotourism as confluence of sociocultural rationales

discourse and has been instrumental to the legitimisation of colonialist expansion (see Kößler 1998: 90ff, Said 1979); developmentalist discourse is still prevalent in international development ‘cooperation’ as well as in intra-national development policies and politics, above all in the aid-receiving countries. With the exception of the ‘socialist bloc’, throughout history modernisation and development were coextensive with the spread of capitalism, driven by its internal force to steadily extend and intensify capital accumulation (see Marx 1959b: 27). Economic development meant, and continues to mean (see below), economic growth. The ‘modern’ form of politically organising this economy of private capital accumulation was (and to a large part still is) the nation-state (see Demirovic 2001: 153, Hirsch 2001: 20). In the capitalist centres, industrialisation, urbanisation and wage labor characterised economic development; in the peripheries created by colonialist expansion of industrialising nation-states other features (e.g. slavery, forced labor) may have been striking (Wallerstein 1974).

The historical experience of the industrial and the French revolutions was an outcome of previous historical experiences but also represented a fundamental break with pre-capitalist social organisation. This is indicated by the tradition/modernity opposition. This rupture was made up by the mechanisation of central labour processes, mass production and production of machines by machines; massive rural-urban migration due to widespread dispossessions in the name of private property; labour, land and money turned into commodities on a virtually free market; in short: social production was fundamentally reorganised in order to conform to the abstract principle of generalised commodity exchange (see Kößler 1998: 131ff, Escobar 1995: 21ff). The relation to the material basis of social re-/production, ‘nature’, changed accordingly. Like labour power, capitalism exploited natural resources according to the abstract and irrational principle of accumulation disregarding specific local conditions: if resources are used up at one place, the industry would just move on (Pedersen 2008: 22). The subjective feeling of ‘up-rootedness’ and alienation produced by this fundamental reorganisation of society gave rise to a widespread cultural pessimism that glorified ‘nature’ and ‘tradition’.

## 1.2 Conservationism: nature vs. culture

The radical transformation of social organisation and reproduction in the ‘West’ was accompanied by a counter-flow: conservationism was the downside of rapid development. Abstract resource exploitation and massive migration of former peasants into the industrial centres resulted in a fundamental break with the immediate environment. A concept of ‘nature’ became common-sense which imagined and idealised an untouched, pure realm devoid of any human ‘disturbance’. Culture vs. nature was the central opposition around which modern nature conservation emerged. Despite the ideological power of the ‘nature’ concept, the factor ‘nature’ did not show up in the balance sheets of the economy until quite recently (see point 4). Consequently, nature conservation remained outside mainstream national and international policies and politics.

Generally speaking, nature is thought in opposition to culture. This logic overlaps with a similar idea, which also has its origin in the industrial transformation: the idealisation of ‘tradition’. Pre-capitalist ways of producing and living and the knowledge and attitudes attached to them became subject to modern civilians’ idealising projections of ‘the simple life’ that was somehow ‘closer to nature’, ‘more original’ and hence ‘more true’ than ‘artificial alienated existence’ (see Adorno 2003). In this way, ‘tradition’ and ‘nature’ became closely interrelated. The result, from a discourse analysis perspective, is an ambivalence in the rather clear dichotomies between tradition vs. modernity and nature vs. culture. On the one hand, peasants are seen as being in opposition to nature (which is ‘bad’ from a conservationist perspective), but at the same time they are ‘traditional’ and thus allegedly closer to ‘nature’ (which is good’). This ambivalence, reflected in the double-image of the noble vs. the ignorant savage is still prevalent in current nature conservation policies and practices including ecotourism (Butcher 2007: 125ff, Görg 2003: 241ff). Because these symbolic oppositions reflect real historic ruptures, the relation to what is ‘lost’ by modernisation is largely a detached aesthetic one: ‘landscape’ is the paradigmatic form of conceiving nature and close-to-nature conditions, the ‘gaze’ being the paradigmatic mode (see chapter 3, Urry 2002): whether nature is intact or traditional lifestyles are in harmony with nature was and is to a certain extent a judgment from a distance, a matter of appearance. Another topos in this regard is the charismatic animal. With the example of charismatic species, Burckhardt shows (2006: 87f) that aesthetic attitude also influences the practice of ecologists. In a similar vein, the degree to which villages appear to correspond to what the observer has in mind when it comes to ‘nature-close tradition’, i.e. the degree to which the appearance satisfies the gaze’s demand, is an important factor in judgments about rural reality, not only but also regarding tourists.

## 1.3 Culture industry: ordinary vs. extraordinary

The conservatism implied in the nostalgic attitudes towards nature and tradition was fueled by industrialisation and in turn fueled development. In essence, it was a critique of capitalist industrialisation which itself became subject to modern tourism industry. As such, the longing for ‘nature’ and ‘tradition’ was institutionalised within the framework of modern organisation of labour: modernisation’s others were to be appreciated profitably in the realm of leisure. It was exploited by culture industries. The fundamental critique of capitalist society expressed in this romanticism, however limited and problematic (‘noble savage’), thus expressed itself in the ‘tourists’ that flee everyday life into the realm of the extraordinary (nature, rural places, exotic settings) – in structures that not only reappropriate the myth of the ‘noble savage’ but which constitute as a whole the biggest industry of the world today: tourism. The fundamental opposition created and exploited by tourism, hence, is the distinction ordinary vs. extraordinary: as tourists, urban subjects turn their back towards the everyday life in order to experience something extraordinary; they do it, however, as consumers and thereby in the mode of ‘ordinary’ market economy and social distinction. However, until quite recently, the tourism industry did not fully capitalise on the drive to conserve tradition and nature implied in the demand to experience what is not itself destructive capital accumulation. With the rise of sustainable tourism, this is about to change (see 3.1).

Being an industry, tourism in general is characterised by ‘objective’ constrictions such as cost-effectiveness, competition or trends, supply and demand etc. Furthermore it tends to fix the impulse towards the ‘extraordinary’ in the form of stereotypes that are easily understood, catchy and allegedly consumable. Moreover,

tourism lives off a relationship of distance (socially, spatially, symbolically, and economically) between hosts and guests and thus exploits the socio-economic and socio-cultural condition of the former as well as of the latter by allegedly bridging the gap between both and bringing them together as hosts and guests.

#### 1.4 Ecological modernisation: conservation vs. development

The so called fordist mode of production (cf. Alnasseri et al. 2001: 169ff, Juillard 2002: 155ff) exploited its material preconditions ('natural resources') with complete disregard for their scarcity and limits. In 1972 the Club of Rome, a non-profit organisation concerned with future global issues, made the 'limits to growth' explicit (Meadows et al 1972). The oil crisis of 1973/74 marked a milestone in a comprehensive crisis experience (Görg 2003: 151) which also manifested itself in flourishing social movements founded not only against the destruction of nature but also against the Vietnam war, nuclear energy or social inequality.

The perceived crises in different social realms were part of a comprehensive crisis in the fordist way of capital accumulation. If capitalism was to persist (and not only the most powerful actors were and are interested in its persistence), the finiteness of its own preconditions had to be reflected in the economy itself. Similar to one century earlier, when massive pauperisation turned problematic for the industry itself (the 'social question', see Escobar 1995: 21ff), the limitations to fordist natural resource exploitation became an integral part of 'post-fordist' capitalism. Consequently, the problem of 'sustainability', which was originally formulated, at least by some, as a critique of capitalist economic practice, was selectively integrated into the dominant mode of capital accumulation and its symbolic representations during the 1980s and 90s (Görg 2003: 138): 'sustainability' came to designate a way of continuing capital accumulation under the premises of its limitations – more or less restricted growth and 'growth of the limits', to be achieved by increased efficiency and high technology. Sustainability can be attained, it is argued by a whole range of social actors from conservative and conservationist political parties to donor agencies, NGOs and individual advisors, by the very means that lead to over-exploitation (science and technology); this is the basic logical flaw of ecological modernisation (Dingler 2003: 322), the cure is the disease. The discourse of ecological modernisation is in fact structured around the dichotomy development vs. conservation, even if, in its self-description, post-fordism reconciles both (see below). Hence, ecology today virtually means ecological modernisation and, in principle, amounts to 'long-term capitalist economy'.

Nature conservation and more specifically the establishment of nature reserves is no longer external to generalised accumulation but rather central. Nature reserves today must be seen in the context of the *mise en valeur* of nature as capital under the heading of 'biodiversity conservation'. The claim to general moral authority (and who could possibly oppose saving the world?) is the symbolic side of future economic exploitation by private actors. Biodiversity is an important future resource for a range of industries, from industrial agriculture and pharmacy to life sciences. More specifically, it is the genetic diversity that these industries have crucial stakes in. These 'knowledge-based' industries are mainly located in the 'global North', while highest biodiversity is in the 'South'. Their interest in genetic diversity is represented in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (ibid: 293ff). Nature reserves today are, simply put, sites of in-situ conservation (CBD) of mainly genetic resources. They are managed collectively, but will be exploited and appropriated by private companies in the future.

The destructive moments of capital accumulation let loose, i.e. the undermining of its own preconditions, are to be contained by 'responsible' or 'reflexive' forms of economic practice, sustainable development. This is true also with regard to tourism. When a broad section of Western populations could afford travel for travel's sake, tourism became a means of development cooperation. Social conflicts, perceived cultural destruction and ecological degradation generated by the common forms of mass tourism became more and more inviable, i.e. 'unsustainable'. This was also due to the rise of the 'responsible' consumer in certain social strata, a consumer who demanded responsible tourism products.

To sum up, the brief outline of the socio-historical background of central elements which make up the concept of ecotourism indicates that it rests on culturally specific premises of the (hitherto) centres of the world system: it is by no means a neutral concept. Furthermore, the oppositions indicated above are not merely intended to methodologically bring a chaotic or ambivalent phenomenon into any kind of order. Rather, these symbolic-logical contradictions represent lines of social conflict, of domination and exploitation,

and they arise out of the material itself. The very fact that the specific logics of ecotourism are generalised via international organisations and agreements indicates power inequalities on different scales. They play an important part in how ecotourism actually works. They do not determine ecotourism practice, but at least partly structure the ‘doxa’ of the ecotourism field (see below). They make up a part of the social fact that the ecotourism concept as such represents: something that has to be dealt with locally, regardless of the specific cultural context (as the installation of such projects may disregard cultural particularities).

## 2 The Symbolic Order of Ecotourism

As a result of the above considerations, a symbolic order of ecotourism (see table 1), inspired by Bourdieu’s concept of a system of homologous oppositions (see Bourdieu 2005: 63ff), can be constructed. In short, the homology between a set of oppositions refers to a specific kind of relation between these oppositions where each one denotes something qualitatively distinct but resembles other oppositions *somehow*, depending on the practical contexts. This symbolic order, I presuppose, at least partly frames local practice since ecotourism is first and foremost a top-down enterprise, an established social fact. It is made up by the oppositional logics carved out above. It might be possible for ecotourism actors to question the concept’s logic in principle but it still has to be dealt with practically. The oppositions have in common that they are capitalised on by different actors, i.e. they are ideological and thus serve to produce or maintain social exploitation and domination.

conservation	development
<i>nature</i>	<i>culture</i>
<i>tradition</i>	<i>modernity</i>
<i>extraordinary</i>	<i>ordinary</i>
rural	urban
poor	rich
other	self
passive	active
female	male
etc.	etc.

Table 1: System of homologous oppositions in ecotourism

A result of far-reaching transformations in the mode of capitalist accumulation, ecotourism is structured by: *conservation/development* as its guiding principle; *tradition/modernity*, *nature/culture*, *ordinary/extraordinary* as more general but constituting logics. Further opposing associations are possible such as rural/urban, poor/rich, other/self, passive/active, female/male, static/historical etc. and also good/bad. These oppositions are homologous in the sense that they are applied to social reality by the actors and are related to one another according to practical contexts, strategies and interests (Bourdieu 1993: 160). This is where the schematism above becomes fluid. While every opposition by itself expresses something distinct and is not reducible to another, relating them to one another in certain situations can rationalise, legitimise, guide or in other ways facilitate the actors’ individual practice without necessarily making up a closed and coherent system as a whole. Nevertheless, the symbolic universe is basically reproduced through its application in practice.

The commonality which constitutes this relation of homology between diverse oppositions is the oppositional constellation itself. It is the symbolic downside of social relations of dominance and dependency and facilitates the practical reproduction of these relations and vice versa. As already said, these oppositions apriori relate to one another in certain ways: due to the ambivalence of modernisation reproducing its ideal others ‘tradition’ and ‘nature’, the tradition/modernity and nature/culture oppositions can result in the constellation ‘authenticity’ (nature/tradition)/‘alienation’ (modernity). This is even more so with regard to tourism exploiting and therefore investing into this kind of opposition. In the context of ecotourism in

particular, on the one hand human existence as such is thought as being external to nature (hence ecotourism as a tool to manage this critical relation) while on the other hand it draws on the naturalisation of the locals (in propagating the stereotype of ‘indigenous’ people, tightly bound to ‘their’ land). Ecotourism is thus based on a contradictory idea of ‘culture’ as being, on the one hand, per definition irreconcilable to nature, and on the other hand, as ‘indigenous culture’, per definition unified with nature. This is the conceptual contrariness which is implied in the rhetorical synthesis of conservation and development (at least with regard to ecotourism in nature reserves). What is in fact aimed at, however, is the economic exploitation of moral values (nature/tradition) which, by locally creating a touristic service industry ‘conserves nature and tradition’. Thus, ecotourism facilitates a ‘sustainable’ *balance* (see chapter 3.2.) of nature and culture and their preservation precisely through their economic exploitation as moral values. This synthesis, however, is no quasi-harmonious ‘reconciliation’ or *Aufhebung* of a contradiction. The fact that in practice ecotourism needs constant and careful management and regulation indicates an inherent crisis-riddenness instead of a smooth, harmonious operation.

### 3 Towards a Theory of Ecotourism Practice

#### 3.1 Elements of Ecotourism’s ‘doxa’

The symbolic cosmos outlined above serves as a frame of orientation for social practice through which it is presumably (re-)produced – and with it actual relations of dominance and dependencies that are legitimised by it. What appears as a rather rigid system of oppositions on the theoretical level is applied to practice in an opportunistic, incoherent way.

However, according to Bourdieu, the participation in social practice on a particular field involves a certain ‘doxa’ (belief) that remains largely unquestioned, self-evident. In using the term ‘doxa’ I do not want to suggest something which is per se shared and unconditionally believed in by all actors involved. Rather, ‘doxa’ refers to established ‘facts’ that can, as such, be questioned; but in the context of practice they simply are how the world is working (whether you like it or not). Those joining the ‘game’ thus have to acknowledge them. In the case of ecotourism, such facts are 1) the existence of a nature reserve and 2) the ecotourist’s habitus.

##### 3.1.1 The existence of a nature reserve

The establishment of a nature reserve is a top-down process which institutionalises and legally codifies the man/nature divide. However arbitrary, it is a social fact which cannot be ignored. It is, in one way or another, to be practically acknowledged as long as the designation of a specific area as ‘nature reserve’ exists. Even ‘poaching’ or ‘illegal timber extraction’, i.e. violations of the rule, are determined by the rule itself (without it, ‘extraction’ would not be illegal). More precisely, the rule of a nature reserve also determines its own violations in a very remarkable way: it establishes by law a treasury of resources while at the same time precarising the sustenance of local people. This constellation, constituted by the rule, renders its violation rather likely. However, the ‘doxa’ of a per se problematic relationship of man and nature and the overall aim of privileging nature over man, is primary.

As soon as the fact ‘nature reserve’ and its implications and the necessity to facilitate local people’s ‘food security’ without simply driving them out are acknowledged (and who would not), ecotourism appears as a legitimate and reasonable means to achieve this. This is the case also for the ‘target group’ itself. Thus, ‘informed consent’ and ‘participation’ of local communities in ecotourism projects in and around nature reserves is premised on a top-down decision (Butcher 2007: 61ff). Even if there was a possibility for locals to ‘opt out’ of an ecotourism project (which is barely the case), under these conditions it is more reasonable for them to ‘opt in’.

### 3.1.2 The Ecotourist's Habitus

Introducing ecotourism structures into a specific locality involves another 'doxa' which could be termed the ecotourist's habitus. This is a specific attitude inherent in ecotourists as a social group; at least those who actually structure and facilitate ecotourism, i.e. tourism experts, advisors and operators, presuppose this attitude. Urry conceptualises the romantic gaze as a form of the tourist gaze 'in which the emphasis is upon solitude, privacy, and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of that gaze' (2002: 43). This attitude which consumes landscape and solitude displays 'good taste', thus expresses a distinct class habitus (Bourdieu 1993: 111f) and consequently unequal social relations (not the least between host and guest). Typically, according to Urry, intellectuals representing the new petite bourgeoisie carry this sort of habitus which includes an aesthetic ascetism and thus a predilection for activities which represent the intellectual's taste for "natural", wild "nature" (Urry 2002: 81).

Following Bourdieu this gaze can be conceptualised as habitual *hexis*, where political mythology is realised, incorporated, and perpetuated in posture, ways of talking, walking, feeling and thinking (Bourdieu 1993: 129). The romantic gaze thus has to be conceptualised as a form of physical attitude, an aspect of socialised habitus: a member of a certain social milieu, the ecotourist has this way of looking at and going about things; he or she looks for solitude, untouched nature, tradition and adventure. At the same time, however, the ecotourist occupies a certain (elevated) economic position and his/her habitus is also structured by this fact: the ecotourist is used to a certain comfort. Thus, the *hysteresis* of habitus (e.g. Bourdieu 1984: 142) demands 'ordinary' and 'inauthentic' elements also in 'extraordinary' contexts. So while solitude and untouched nature is sought, the ecotourist does not want to be unconditionally alone but with friends and will need 'facilities'. These are created for tourists in the first place. Also, biodiversity is not unconditionally valued as good, the common trouble with leeches and mosquitoes in the jungle is proof enough.

Further, the romantic gaze establishes a visual scarcity or *perceptual capacity* (Urry 2002:42f): it tolerates only a limited amount of 'markers' (see *ibid*: 44, MacCannell 1976: 41ff) that contradict the desire for 'untouched authenticity'. Thus, the amount of signals of 'modernity' and consequently 'tourists' must be limited. Thus, ecotourism has got to limit itself: it has to contain itself in terms of infrastructure (which is essential, concurrently), tourist visits and its proportion of the local income if it is to be successful as ecotourism. This 'built-in' force to self-limitation makes ecotourism an expression and instrument of ecological modernisation because it ensures by itself landscapes 'unspoiled' by hotels and tourist masses and at least some 'remnants' of an 'original lifestyle' – if only because of and for the tourists, without creating a 'staged' culture in the strict sense. Hence, ecotourism is mostly planned as a source of income that only makes up a small part of the overall household income; in this way, the locals can/have to continue their 'real' life, e.g. as peasants. However, ecotourism's self-limitation also implies its opposite not only because '[the] romantic gaze is an important mechanism which is helping to spread tourism on a global scale [...] as the romantic seeks ever-new objects of that gaze' (Urry 2002: 44). Also, ecotourism, by its very claim to authentic experience, virtually commercialises 'a local lifestyle' as a whole: the fact that a certain destination is 'untouched' is the best ecotourism advertisement. Subjectively, the ecotourist pays exactly for what s/he is actually not allowed to pay according to his/her own terms: the experience of a seemingly pre-capitalist lifestyle. Ecotourists do not want a mere model of the 'real life' exclusively constructed for them. Ecotourism is a paradox as it exploits the existence of something untouched by itself.

It is further interesting that the inherent self-limitation is connected to the claim of ecotourism being an alternative source of income. On the one hand, ecotourism should not make up a major share of local household incomes due to the vulnerability going with it (e.g. (Tara/Acksonsay/Ongeun 2008: 35) – in this regard, ecotourism would be an additional source of income. On the other hand, ecotourism is thought to be an alternative income that replaces 'illegal' resource extraction (e.g. wildlife hunting, timber). This seems to be a fundamental contradiction that involves serious practical consequences. Thus, practitioners might find that 'tourism cannot replace food security and as long as villagers need to cultivate upland rice, there will be forest clearance' (*ibid*: 34). The problem of ecotourism's self-limitation undermining its own objectives as it necessitates additional sources of income for the hosts to sustain becomes even more crucial where the aim of community-based sustainable development (solely) to secure food security is not shared among the



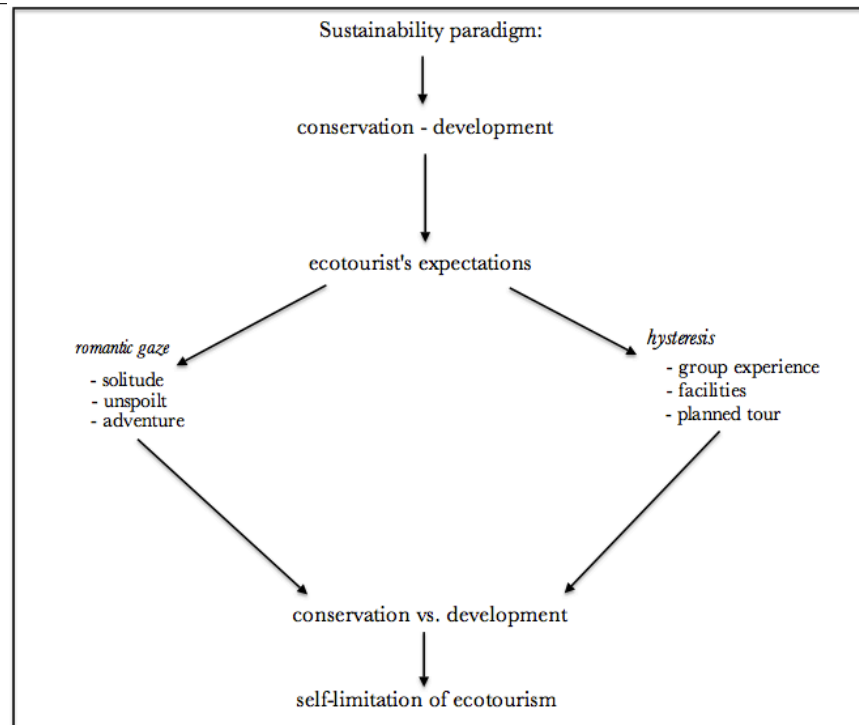


Figure 2: The ecotourist's attitude reproducing the guiding opposition

'target group'.

This contradictory or paradoxical attitude of the customers is a premise for ecotourism practice regardless whether it is actually shared among every participant or not since ecotourism practice by definition has its very foundation in the satisfaction of ecotourists' demands. In the two aspects of the 'doxa' (nature reserve, ecotourist's habitus) all symbolic relations outlined in the beginning are objectified: they are relevant no matter what the individual thinks. However, these general or globalised preconditions are always set into nationally and locally specific contexts and become subject to diverse, tangled social interests. They do not simply determine the whole field of actual practice but rather are arguably important structural features of it.

### 3.2 Frontier Labour – the Practical Definition of Ecotourism

With the introduction of ecotourism, the ecotourist's habitus and expectations become relevant in a location, and with it the conservation/development distinction. As already mentioned, the hypothetical system of fixed oppositions translates into practice according to the rules of practice – and theoretical contradictions are not practicable. Thus, the qualities set into fixed oppositions are 'quantified' in practice, i.e. they are related gradually. An important practical imperative for actors involved in ecotourism is thus to find a 'balance' between too much development and too much conservation, or, in other words, as much development as necessary (for mediating the man-nature conflict and for tourist facilities etc.) and as much conservation as possible.

The 'frontier' between (too much) conservation and (too much) development is not simply out there waiting to be found. It rather results from the complex interactions, struggles, alliances and compromises between actors' with unequal social power – it is negotiated like any boundary. The theoretical whole of the practices and relations in the context of ecotourism establish a viable space, a 'no man's land' between too much conservation and too much development, can be termed 'frontier labour': a complex and tangled

set of strategies that imply real material investment of capital and physical power (and the ability to do so) and, as a whole, have a also direction: biodiversity conservation. The result of the local frontier labour is a locally specific, practical definition of ‘ecotourism in X’. No participant has complete control over this process or its result, but given power inequality the result tends to be a compromise that is more to the use of certain actors than to others. In the end, the general idea of what ecotourism is, and how it has to work, i.e. the symbolic order of ecotourism, is reproduced, although in a locally specific fashion. This implies that ecotourism as a concept which directs practices in specific projects virtually produces or reproduces social relations of asymmetrical dependencies. That ecotourism practice reproduces symbolic oppositions and thus social inequality is itself due to social inequalities and domination being premises actors’ ‘participation’ . This, however, remains to be verified through empirical research.

### 3.3 Some Empirical Evidence

I shall present some empirical evidence in order to demonstrate how ‘reality’ can fit into this model. As interviews with different parties involved in the ecotourism project in Pu Luong Nature Reserve in Vietnam indicated, each side had its role in practically mediating the symbolic contradictions outlined above. As a first step, the nature/culture divide was made viable by a system of zoning in the nature reserve which mediates between strictly prohibited core zones and the sphere of human action through a buffer zone. This concept, in turn, was also applied flexibly: around each village in the core zone, buffer zones were designated – otherwise living there would have been impossible. According to the logic of ‘as much conservation as possible...’, the project practitioners (e.g. a foreign advisor and the park management), installed an infrastructure that was ‘basic’, i.e. no hotels but homestays, very simple toilets and showers, and thus pre-structured the tourists’ experience according to the underlying logic.

Interestingly, precisely this combination of homestay and basic facilities contributed significantly to the re-/production of inequality on the local level. Toilets and simple showers, a fundamental requirement for successfully hosting ‘industrialised’ visitors, turned out to be a hotly fought over resource. Due to the social distance between hosts and guests, what is of basic importance for the latter is a fortune for the former. Those facilities have been financed and built by the project, one toilet/shower in each ecotourism village; the respective hosts had to share. As tourists tended to choose those homestays that were nearest to the facilities, the competitive advantage of one host family could almost be measured in terms of ‘distance to the toilets’. Those who had the power to influence where these facilities were going to be built in the end had better chances to successfully compete than those who could not. Best off were those who could afford to finance toilets by themselves; only the most successful ones could and their success was based on previously high local social positions. This competitiveness between villagers was mainly due to the administrations’ decision to establish homestays as opposed to guesthouses, for example. The supposed demand to get an intimate insight into local people’s lives was arguably a main driver of this decision. However, this specific way of realising ecotourism gave rise to a new local ‘class’, the hosts, and new relations of dependence, e.g. between hosts and suppliers of food. One of the requirements for becoming a local host was to own a ‘not-too-old’ stilt house – stilt houses are a central touristic image in Southeast Asia. Concurrently, ownership of such houses is not equally distributed, let alone of one that is old enough to appear ‘authentic’ but new enough to ensure tourists’ convenience. Furthermore, hosts were asked to have a certain mindset, like hygiene awareness, open-mindedness and the willingness to carry the risk of a new way of earning a living. In this example, ecotourism was built on former inequalities and produced new ones based on the exclusiveness of access to the resource ‘ecotourist’.

The tour operators in general turned out to be expectation managers: they were in a position to tell tourists as well as locals what to actually expect from ecotourism in Pu Luong, how to behave, what they were likely to experience or not and thus not only precluded tourists’ satisfaction but also tempered locals’ enthusiasm about tourism – they influenced expectations of both sides in the ‘realistic’ direction. In an e-mail interview, a tourist displayed a pragmatic attitude towards his own expectations: the locality ‘gives the feel [sic] that you are in an unspoiled area of Asia allowing to see life as naturally as possible’. You cannot experience the pure nature of social life but it can be more or less ‘natural’ and as naturally and unspoiled *as possible* would be fine. According to the local communities (no matter whether members actually gained

from tourism or not), there was no such thing as ‘too much tourism’: everyone would rather make a living from tourism revenues rather than carry out hard physical labour. Self-limitation being part of the rules (see 3.1), it is obvious who would have to lower their expectations. The local elites, furthermore, acted as behaviour managers: they were the ones to profit from tourism and saw themselves in the position to teach the rest of the village in matters such as cleanliness and conduct (for example, they would teach the other villagers not to let the dogs run around, put away cattle manure, or to be friendly and keep calm during tourists’ stays). All these practical relations complied in one way or another with the imperative of mediating mainly the conservation/development opposition.

## 4 Discussion and Outlook

The purpose of the above reflections was to sketch out a framework for analysing the concept and practice of ecotourism in nature reserves in order to trace the ‘power issue’ up to the actual results of social practice. Central to the question of analysis is how the concept translates into practice. The concept of ecotourism itself can be analysed along the lines of a symbolic order outlined in chapters 1 and 2. This system of homologous oppositions is the result of specific socio-historical experiences and thus made up of culturally specific assumptions. The course of the analysis could be pictured as in figure 3 below.

The symbolic order is reduced here to the guiding opposition of ecological modernisation. The translation into practice was conceptualised according to Bourdieu’s notion of how social practice differs from synthetic theory (see Bourdieu 1993: 147ff). It can be captured a) by the idea of ‘doxa’ (belief that the rules of the game are reasonable) of which the ecotourist’s habitus and the self-limitation of ecotourism are part (chapter 3.1). In this way the conceptual contradictions come to make up part of the practical frames of orientation in such a way that abstract dichotomies are gradated, ‘quantified’ (more/less) and flexibly applied for the sake of successful practice. The concept of frontier labour (chapter 3.2.) serves to trace the symbolic oppositions in social practice itself, to show whether and how they become relevant in the actual social process. Whether the symbolic order in general is reproduced or not is an empirical question. In order to claim this, it has to be demonstrated that the social practice of diverse actors is oriented towards the ‘coordinates’ of the symbolic order and results in social inequalities. There is, for example, an important link between the above analytical framework and the concept of habitus (e.g. in the ecotourist’s attitude, the local elitist behaviour management or the self-perception of some foreign tourism advisors of being ‘visionaries’ of a project). A habitus hermeneutical analysis (e.g. Bremer 2004) would have the potential to indicate whether such symbolic ‘coordinates’ are in any way relevant for social practice.

This framework provides a qualification of the cultural specificity of the ecotourism concept (beyond the mere claim to ‘cultural particularity’). It should enable us to observe whether and how the culturally particular logic of ecotourism is reproduced, by whom, for which reasons and with which results. The fact of its reproduction could in itself be an indicator for power inequalities since as an ‘external’ logic it involves enforcement in one way or another. It is not simply ‘self-evident’ but it is made to appear that way through the establishment of certain social facts even if the enforcement itself might not be characterised by sheer, open force.

In a similar vein, this framework reflects the social relations of exploitation and domination that make up the historical process that results ecotourism. As such, it is ‘halfway’ between a critical theory and a theory of social practice according to Bourdieu. Bourdieu, as I understand it, does not refer in any systematic or explicit way to capitalism (as opposed to other ways of social reproduction) but remains largely within an intersubjective mode of analysis. That is, features specific to capitalism, like ‘generalised abstract exchange of commodities’ etc., have no theoretical meaning in his approach: he does not explain but takes for granted and thus essentialises ubiquitous social distinction as a feature of society per se. He uses concepts that could be applied to any kind of social situation (habitus, symbolic violence). Critical theories (e.g. Marx, Frankfurt School, regulation school) try to qualify what is specific about capitalism, or even more about current forms of capitalism, but they remain too abstract. The framework presented here may allow for the combination of Bourdieu’s potential for a differentiated empirical analysis with the critical and theoretical content of critical theories regarding a specific research subject: ecotourism.

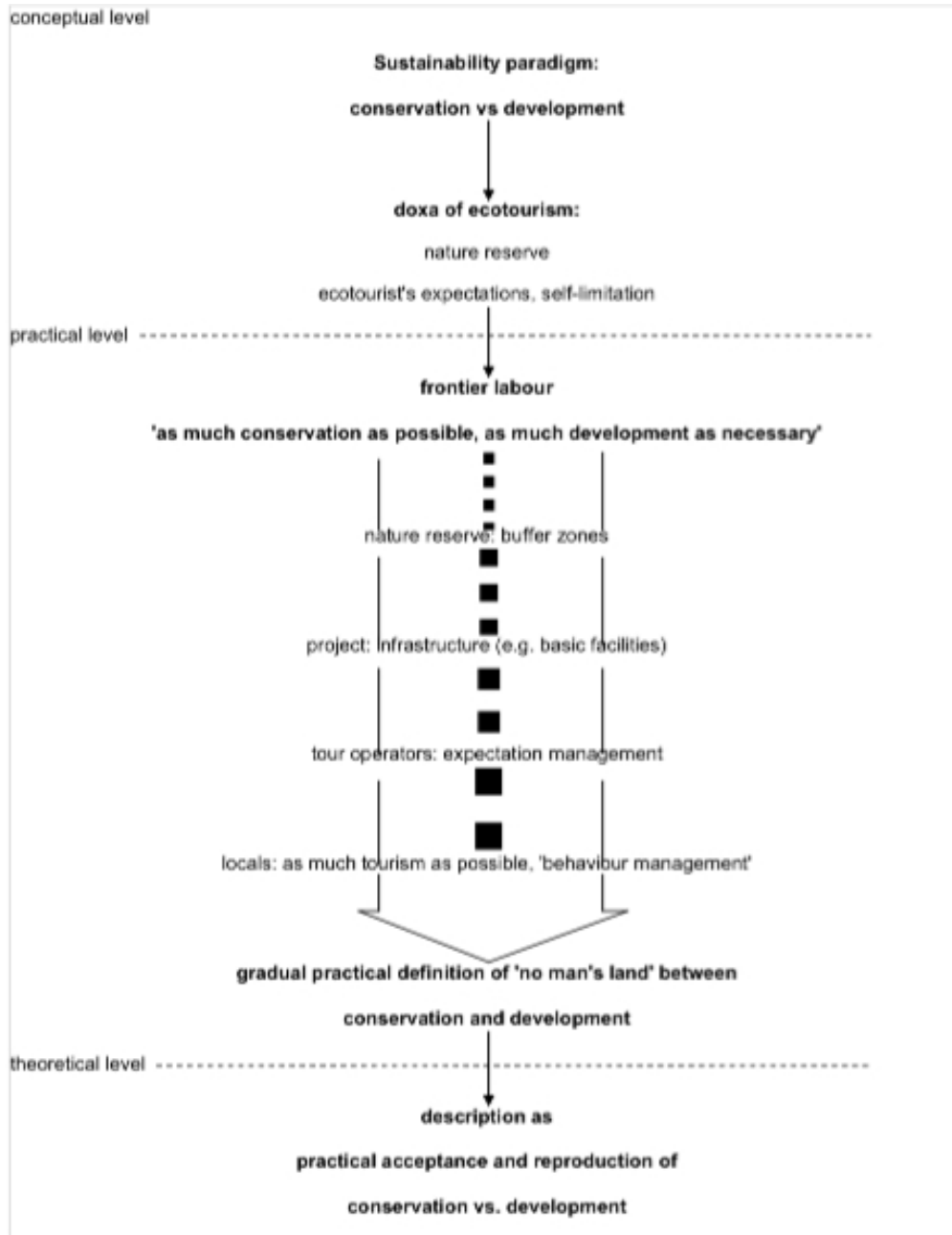


Figure 3: Course of Analysis: tracing contradictions from concept through practice

A fundamental problem remains: if the objective is an operationalisation of *critical* theories for a theory of social practice, Bourdieu's concept will have to be revised. In order not to rule out critical thinking and action among social actors themselves, Bourdieu's deterministic notion of the habitus-field dialectic is to be re-evaluated. Only the supposition that, in principle, social practice is fundamentally informed by theoretical reflections and that the individual situation can be assessed critically by the individual her-/himself and acted upon willingly (one can act contrary to one's habitus) prevents a tautological argument which merely uses empirical description as an illustration for how inequality is reproduced. Without thinking social practice itself as fundamentally open and reflexive, subversion, conflicts over the rules of the game, in short: social change is incomprehensible. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's notion of habitus, capital and field remain vital, too, in order to explain continuities and the reproduction of relations of social domination.

In the end, the framework outlined above will have to prove its effectiveness for empirical research. It is likely that, in a specific context like Laos, for example, certain presuppositions inherent but not reflected in the concepts become problematic, for instance eurocentric premises of modernisation (e.g. Rehbein 2010). Consequently, the schema will have to be assessed critically against the facts on the ground. On the other hand, however, it can also serve to make sense of such alleged 'facts' in the first place. In understanding the social, there is no ultimate starting point – only reason.

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