Indonesia has promoted mass tourism as a means of generating foreign currency flows. In some countries tourism has become the largest source of foreign exchange, and is seen as a vital stimulant to economic development. But there is also a downside to the huge growth in the mass tourism industry over the past several decades. Critiques of mass tourism have suggested that profits mostly go to foreign investors, tour operators, and big hotels.

Ecotourism, generally and specifically

Some Indonesian organizations have worked to develop alternative forms of international tourism. They hope to generate smaller scale, culture- and ecology-oriented visits known as ecotours. Ecotourism definitions vary; in the broadest sense any activity involving appreciation of the natural environment has been included. Skiing at Colorado and sunbathing in Cancun, Mexico are forms of mass tourism, and are definitely not part of the focus of those who see ecotourism as a partial solution to environmental problems in less developed countries. Ecotourism as defined here refers to limited scale, locally managed, and ecologically benign forms of tourism. Ecotourism, in theory, provides a double benefit. The locally managed, grassroots nature of these projects is supposed to spread tourism dollars throughout local communities. One Indonesian organization, Bina Swadaya, organizes custom-designed tours using local transportation and guides, and usually arranges for travelers to stay with local families. There is a strong emphasis on cultural immersion in the ecotourism approach, with visitors often learning about and even participating in local development projects. Activities like beach
visits, snorkeling, rafting, or mountain biking may be included, but are normally not central to the overall experience. The limited tourist volumes that necessarily are generated by such schemes may also be beneficial to local ecosystems. This has been the main impetus for efforts of Yayasan Bina Sains Hayati Indonesia (YABSHI), another small nongovernmental organization, to develop ecotourism in Indonesia.

Mass tourism is not appealing to everyone, and there are many travelers who do not fit the profile of the mass tourist. At least three other tourist-types may be distinguished. An "individual mass tourist" depends on planning, hotels, and the tourist business. "Explorers" try to get closer to the host culture, but stay in comfortable quarters such as hotels. "Drifters" get farthest from tourism institutions and try to immerse themselves in the host culture; many tourists of this type are considered “hippies” by the countries they visit.

This culture-based tourist typology does not represent the perspective of the ecotourist, who is interested in environmental fact-finding visits, and may even pay to participate in research projects. Wealthy ecotourists, who have recently received considerable media attention, often behave more like mass tourists, buying expensive small group tours to remote sites. Their numbers at this time are very small. But many explorers and drifters also fit the profile of the well-educated, environmentally conscious ecotourist. Because they are already in-country and are interested in experiencing local culture, they may be ideal target groups for low-key promotional efforts of ecotourism enterprises.

Indonesia's thousands of islands provide tremendous cultural diversity and some of the world's most breathtaking scenic vistas. Sulawesi, one of the larger islands (see maps, this page and next) may be particularly attractive as a location for ecotourism. Sulawesi has been little affected by international tourism. Yet it is reasonably accessible via air connections to its heavily urbanized southwestern tip. Because of its geographical location and shape, Sulawesi is noted for its biological and cultural diversity.

**Togian Islands: Biological and cultural diversity**

The Togian Islands in Central Sulawesi, with their ecological variety, are one of several possible sites for the development of ecotourism. The archipelago has extensive undamaged coral reef ecosystems. On the islands, extensive lowland forests with sinkholes and caverns. Mangrove fringes the islands, and there are innumerable sandy beaches surrounded by steep limestone cliffs. Animals include babirusa, macaques, tarsiers, lizards, saltwater crocodiles, and the endangered coconut crab. It would be essentially accurate to describe these islands as a kind of tropical paradise of extreme interest to the dedicated nature tourist.

Cultural attractions in the archipelago are also notable. Most Togian Islanders live in small villages and consist of a surprising variety of different ethnic groups. Many different groups from around Southeast Asia have settled in parts of the islands. There are small numbers of Chinese who typically operate the market places. With an astounding level of cultural diversity, the people of the Togian Islands share one Indonesian trait that has always been an attraction for tourists--their proclivity to exhibit an outgoing, friendly, accommodating nature.
YABSHI has begun linking local communities, NGOs (non-governmental agencies), research institutions/universities, and local, regional, and national government agencies. Their goal is the creation of networks facilitating low volume flows of ecotourists. Lodging is to be provided through home-stays and small hotels, and activities are to be managed by local residents. The ultimate goal is the conservation of local ecosystems.

**Barriers to ecotourism in the Togians**

Several significant barriers stand in the way of these goals. Logging is one. Deforestation by logging companies destroys habitats that could attract ecotourists. Erosion invariably accompanies clear cutting also threatens coastal ecosystems. One logging company has rights to much of the Togian Islands but activity has not been continuous. Logging interests have long been a source of money for members of the Indonesian government, so the threat of activity is ongoing.

The ASEAN (Association for Southeast Asian Nations) Development Bank has funded studies which may advocate mass tourism for the Togian Islands. The present lack of transportation connections and hotels in the Togians is stressed by them; the construction of an airstrip at Wakai and large luxury hotels would solve these problems. While the maintenance of a marine reserve might protect some of the reef ecosystems, the large tourist flows attracted by these facilities would do considerable ecological damage.

Mass tourism is seen by many governments as a source of foreign money. Revenues per tourist from explorers and especially from drifters are typically smaller than those from mass tourists. On the other hand, much of the money spent by mass tourists does not end up in the host region. Over half may go to airlines and tourist agents in the country of origin. Much of the remainder would go to the corporate operators of big hotels based outside the region. Revenues from explorers and drifters tend to be more equitably distributed among the host population.

**The greatest barrier: human population needs**

The greatest barrier to the development of ecotourism in the Togian Islands may prove to be the local population itself, particularly the rapidly-growing ethnic groups that rely on agriculture.

Agriculture in the Togians includes both subsistence and commercial activity. Increases in outside contacts have led to the substitution of rice as a food instead of root crops. Some traditional crops such as sago, cassava and other tubers, bananas, and various tree fruits are still grown. The dominant cash crop is coconuts, which are processed for export. The cultivation of sugar palm is also important, and there are some clove and cacao trees.

Rapid population growth will likely require the expansion of farmed areas, which threaten natural ecosystems. Studies indicate that few restrictions exist to prevent the clearing of forests for crop production. The act of clearing a forest automatically confers ownership rights to farmers. Farmed and planted areas do not provide habitats for species like macaques and babirusa that are likely to attract tourists. There had been huge increases in acreage devoted to fruit trees, coffee, and cacao. Farmers attempt to kill local animals to prevent raids upon their fruit crops. Thus the economic goals of a growing population and farming are in conflict with preservational goals of ecotourism development.

How feasible is ecotourism, here?

Attempts to educate villagers on the benefits of forest maintenance are likely to encounter cultural barriers. *Taman* (garden), the word used for recreational parks in Indonesia, has the safe, cozy connotation of a managed environment. *Hutan*, the word for forest, implies a dark, wet, dangerous place to be either conquered or avoided. The average Indonesian has little appreciation of the biological diversity of the tropical rain forest. Unless it can be clearly and convincingly demonstrated to local people that they will derive economic benefits from forest-oriented ecotourism, deforestation is likely to continue.

And anyway, it is not at all clear that ecotours would be financially successful. While there is the presence of a wide variety of species that would be interesting to the wildlife tourists, one cannot simply stroll into the rain forest to see them. Wildlife viewing is considerably
more difficult in forest environments than in African savannas. The topography in the Togians is extremely rugged and, because the noise would drive away animals, tourists would mostly see ants, leeches, and mosquitoes. But nature trails can be constructed; hideouts or walkways can be built through the canopy level of the trees. Both construction and use of such structures would create jobs for local residents. But the costs of these forest paths would be high for a less developed country to pay up front, and might exceed the eventual revenues generated by an intentionally limited tourist flow.

Marine resources, like fish and reefs, would be threatened by the tourists themselves. Every snorkeling tour involving careless anchor drops damages the reef system. An even bigger threat would be pollution and releases of sewage from boats. Planning is necessary to ensure that costly infrastructure improvements are built to handle this increase.

Project planners must also help develop small-scale service enterprises among the local population. Travel from the mainland and among the islands, housing for tourists, restaurants, tours, and entertainment can all be handled by small entrepreneurs. For ecotourism to ensure environmental conservation, local involvement is critical. It is essential that local people realize that ecotourism resources are important sources of income. Otherwise, natural ecosystems will not be preserved.

Can ecotourism be a sustainable option for the Togian Islands? It seems unlikely. One barrier is the large investment needed for necessary improvements. Many of the potential sites for tourist lodging also lack fresh water. The effects of increased demand on local water tables, especially during the dry season (July through September), are not yet known. Other up-front costs are required for research, development of wildlife viewing facilities, and transportation connections.

The Togian Islands are inaccessible, but modest transport-related changes would be sufficient to accommodate increased tourist flows. Our trip on a small motor boat took over seven hours; Tomini Bay is somewhat sheltered, and small boats are usually safe. Improved air connections to would be the main step needed to reduce the isolation of the islands.

A serious problem remains

There remains a problem with the idea that ecotourism can be profitable in the Togian Islands. It is true, as advocates of ecotourism state, that ecosystems will not be harmed by small numbers of environmentally aware tourists. But these would be from the explorer or drifter categories using home stays and small hotels for accommodations. They would not be big spenders. But how can expenditures on improvements be justified if revenues are limited? The economic needs of the growing local population may pose the greatest ecological threat, especially to forests. Even if infrastructure were in place, could revenues from limited flows of ecotourists provide enough economic incentive for local populations to restrict damage to local ecosystems?

The answer would seem to be no. The outlook for the marine environment of the Togian Islands is perhaps brighter, at least in the short run. Reef-damaging fishing activities are likely to be banned, with enforcement by local people. Visitors would consider vistas with beaches and coconut plantations to be visually appealing, and the tree crops will not result in excessive erosion and coastal problems. But without carefully planned investments, the area will eventually be “spoiled,” as has happened in many other Southeast Asian places exploited by the tourist dollar.

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