ECOTOURISTS IN THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON

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Ecotourists in The Brazilian Amazon. Who are they? What are their motives and expectations in visiting the Amazon? This assessment will look at the role of the ecotourist in regional sustainable development and analyze the positive and negative impacts. It will also suggest ways in which their participation can further benefit communities involved and protected areas.

Introduction
Brazil is of continental proportions (17 times as large as France) and various of its regions, such as Amazonia, the Pantanal and remnants of the Atlantic rainforest, attract tourists interested in nature. Since 1985 ecotourism has been in debate in Brazil.

In 1996 the Brazilian government designated the State of Amazonas (capital Manaus) to be the model state for establishing rules for ecotourism all over the country. Twelve municipal districts with a vocation for ecotourism were grouped together to form an Ecotourism Development Zone (“Polo de Ecotourism”). Together they cover 277,000 Km², approximately equivalent to half the size of France. They receive the majority of tourists visiting the State of Amazonas.

According to the Fundação Getulio Vargas, (a Brazilian Research Institute) ecotourism is growing 6% per year in Amazonas State. It represents the most dynamic segment of the regional economy (Almanaque 2000) and the government is trying to attract more and more visitors to the State. Research was commissioned by the Brazilian Ministry for the Environment (MMA), the Organization of American States (OEA) and the Superintendency for Amazonian Development (SUDAM) with a view to promoting the orderly and integrated development of ecotourism. As first step a profile was produced of the current and potential tourist movement in the Ecotourism Development Zone. (Sudam 1999). The clients of riverboats and expedition cruise ships presented a particularly interesting profile and this is the subject of this paper. Most importantly, since rivers are the traditional means of communication in the Amazon, they offer travelers a wider spectrum of experiences than those obtained in the limited geographical surrounding a lodge. And furthermore, the clients of riverboats and expedition cruise ships showed more sensitivity to questions regarding nature preservation and communities.

This paper profiles and discuss visitors to the Amazonas State rivers and attempt to determine whether or not they are true ecotourists. This work divides tourists into two categories. The first consists of passengers on small exploration cruise ships which cruise the entire Brazilian Amazon from Belém (the estuary) to Iquitos in Peru. The second consists of passengers on local riverboats which offer tourist excursions operating out of Manaus.

The cruise ships researched are: M/S Explorer (A&K- Abercrombie & Kent) and M/S Disko (Marine Expeditions). Both ships are registered outside of Brazil.
The riverboats are: Amazon Clipper (CP Tours) e Harpy Eagle (Amazônia Expeditions). In spite of their English names, both these vessels belong to agencies in Manaus.

**Methodology**

The questionnaires used in this work were those of the study cited above. They were available in various languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>203 questionnaires were analyzed, with the following breakdown:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expedition Cruise Ship Explorer: 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expedition Cruise Ship Disko: 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Tourist Boat Amazon Clipper: 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Tourist Boat Harpy Eagle: 29</td>
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</tbody>
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Thus we have about the same number of questionnaires for the two categories (though this was fortuitous): 102 questionnaires for ships and 101 questionnaires for riverboats.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>The respective capacities of the vessels is as follows:</th>
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<tr>
<td>M/S Explorer: 95 passengers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/S Disko: 60 passengers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverboat Amazon Clipper: 16 or 20 passengers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(The company operates one or other of two vessels, depending on reservations)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverboat Harpy Eagle: 14 or 16 passengers</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>(Occasionally, if it used an alternative vessel)</em></td>
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**Profile of the products studied in this work.**

By choosing to take a cruise on a ship or riverboat the visitor has already made a significant choice. The passengers are more adventurous and want to combine discovery with the “charm” of navigation. Rivers, like the forest, are the quintessence of the Amazon region and a cruise on the rivers gives one a chance to experience these two worlds in a special way.

Boat clients, in general stay longer in the area than those who visit in lodges. For jungle lodges the stays are typically 2-3 days, whereas in boats they vary from 3 days to two weeks.

1. **The riverboats Amazon Clipper and Harpy Eagle.**

These are wooden boats of traditional aspect, about 20m long. They were both constructed at shipyards located in Novo Airão (100km NW of Manaus), a town where such boats are still produced.

The basic design was modified to make it more comfortable. Each cabin, although small, has a self-contained bathroom, air conditioning and bunk beds. Both boats have a small library of books relating to the Amazon. The
cuisine, of good standard includes local and international dishes. The guides are forest guides trained in Manaus.

Each boat tows outboard motor, wooden canoes with which landings and excursions into the smaller creeks are made. These side trips usually include fishing, swimming, canoe trips, night excursions, visits to riverside communities, walks in the forest etc.

The regular departures of Amazon Clipper usually last 3 to 4 days. Harpy Eagle’s departures usually last at least a week.

2. The Expedition Cruise Ships: Explorer and Disko
These are small, steel-hulled cruise ships about 80m long. They are not deluxe ships on which on-board entertainment is a priority. But are comfortable and catering to a client more interested in exploring the area in which they operate. They contain libraries of reference material about the Amazon, other areas visited, culture, history and especially biology. There is a lecture theatre where talks and videos are presented. The food is international class. The guides are naturalists and specialists with a university background. In general there will be someone qualified to talk about hydrology, ornithology, botany, anthropology etc. Besides accompanying the passengers on excursions, these naturalists give lectures. The naturalists include Brazilians and foreigners.

The ship is equipped with rubber boats (zodiacs) which are used for the side trips. Each day, in the early morning and in the late afternoon, the boats are put in the water and the naturalists accompany the passengers in small groups to explore tributaries, lakes, communities, etc.
A cruise in such a ship is typically between one and two weeks long.

All these tourist products are privately owned.

Passengers profile

Sex.
52.71% declared themselves women, 45.81% declared themselves men and 1.48% did not reply to the question. Wight’s 1996 finding with North American ecotourists agreed indicating 50%, 50%.

Profession.
The tourists are very diverse professionally, with a large number from liberal professions. There was a large number of retirees (33% of those surveyed) with more retirees on ships (40.90% of Disko passengers and 56.25% of Explorer passengers) than on riverboats (13.79% of Harpy Eagle passengers and 12.50% of Amazon Clipper passengers.)

Couples
Most tourists traveled with their spouse: 45.32% on average (38.89 on Amazon Clipper, 27.59% on Harpy Eagle, 31.82% on Disko and 61.25% on Explorer).
Wight’s research (1996) showed that 60% of the travelers preferred to travel as a couple, 15% with their families and 13% alone.

**Groups**
Only the passengers of Harpy Eagle traveled in significant numbers with a preformed group (48.28%), whereas on the other vessels only 1.97% on average belonged to a group. We know that Harpy Eagle works extensively with associations and societies, which explains the existence of groups in this case.

**Age**
Riverboats had younger clients than ships. Amazon Clipper had the youngest average clientele with 38.90% under fifty, in comparison with 24.15% on Harpy Eagle, 13.64% on Disko and 13.75 on Explorer.

The vessel with the greatest passenger number in the age range 50-64 years was Harpy Eagle (49.82%), followed by 40.90% on Disko, 31.94% on Amazon Clipper and 26.50% on Explorer.

For the over 65’s, the figures are 9.73% on Amazon Clipper, 17.25% on Harpy Eagle, 45.46% on Disko and 17.25% on Explorer. This last figure should be interpreted within the context that on board Explorer 32.50% of passengers omitted to state their age, in comparison to only 4.17% on Amazon Clipper.

**Passengers’ motives and expectations.**

The principal motive for passengers’ choosing the product, as shown in Graph nº1 was to learn more about Amazonia (Average 91.13% with 100% for the ship Disko).
“Contacts with local people” was an important motive to come to the Amazon for 67% of passengers on Amazonia Expeditions, 32.50% on Explorer and 25.62 on average. It was not important for passengers of Amazon Clipper (13.89%) and of Disko.

The possibility of learning about the Amazon accompanied by specialists attracted 28.08% of those researched. Amazonia Expeditions was the highest scorer in this category with 34.48%
Small deluxe comfort and service had little or no special attraction.

In Wight’s research, (1996) the two most important motivations of North American ecotourists were 1: “enjoy scenery/nature”; 2: new experiences/places.
How did tourists come to hear about and choose the product?

Graph 2 shows that travel agents were a major way in which passengers got to hear about and book cruises. The exception occurs in the case of Amazonia Expeditions, where personal recommendations are particularly important. Questionnaires were distributed in 1998 and early 1999, when internet sites of agencies was inciting, which probably explains the minor role of the Internet in establishing contacts. Today one might expect a different profile, since the products now have pages on the web.

Information about the region

Passengers on all four products received documentary information about the principal items of interest in the region, during their cruise. A vast majority of passengers (81.77% on average) considered themselves to have been well informed, and even in the lowest scoring case (Amazon Clipper) the percentage was 56.94%.

Preferred Activities

The river trips offered a range of activities (fishing, river bathing, caiman spotting, city tour of Manaus, seminars, nature trips, visits to local communities, forest walk etc.) We asked passengers which activities they had enjoyed most during their cruise. The results are shown in Graph 3 where various answers were possible. It can be seen that the activities which tourists most preferred were, in order: observation of nature (84.24%), walk in the forest (72.91%) and the visits to communities (64.04%). Recreational activities, such as fishing and swimming, were considered unimportant.

In Wight’s research (1996) the most important elements of the trip for the visitors interviewed were wilderness setting, wildlife viewing and hiking/trekking.

Contacts with local communities

Visits to riverside communities formed part of the program offered by all the riverboats and ships in this study. The rural sector, referred to as the “interior”, is sparsely populated and its inhabitants live in isolated houses or small communities. Many of the people in the interior dream of moving to a city so that their children can study further there and so that they can get access to improved health service. Tourists see that life in the interior is precarious, with many local people eking out a rudimentary existence at the subsistence level.

90% of passengers had made visits to local inhabitants. Their reaction to the visit was varied. Some found the visit “exotic” and enjoyed the contact with people with a different way of life; but at the same time, they were shocked at the primitiveness of the conditions in which locals lived. Thus, 67% of passengers had a very good or good experience when visiting locals. Riverboat passengers enjoyed the visit more than ship passengers. (44.55%
“very good” for riverboats 27.45% “very good” for ships). In the category “good” the figures were 26.73% and 36.77% respectively.

17.73% of passengers had an “average” impression of the visit (20.69% on Harpy Eagle) and 2.96% had a “bad” impression (10.34% on Harpy Eagle). It appears that the considerable negative impression recorded by Harpy Eagle passengers had to do with a specific visit to a relocated Indian community. One can imagine some passengers would be disappointed not to see Indians in a more traditional setting.

The difference in rating between passengers of riverboats and those of ships probably has to do with number of visitors in comparison with the number of locals. Ship passengers, being more numerous, may tend to swamp the locals they visit. With the smaller group size on riverboats, it is probably easier to mix.

The role of tourists in regional sustainable development.

The majority of tourists like to buy souvenirs and presents. 67.56% of those questioned took the opportunity to spend money while visiting local communities. More ship passengers than riverboat passengers bought something (70% on Explorer and 77.27% on Disko). Handicrafts comprised the majority of purchases (53.20%). As previously, more ship passengers than riverboat passengers bought handicrafts. (63.64% on Disko and 67.50% on Explorer)

After observing the conditions of life in the Amazon, many tourists were moved to help somehow. They were asked if they would be prepared to pay a supplementary tax, knowing that the money was going directly to help the situation of a local community (providing a health post, school etc.).

Graph 4 shows that replies to the above question were in general positive, but many passengers did not respond to this question. (63.64% did not answer it on board Disko.) However, nobody on board the ship Disko answered “no”. In passengers’ comments noted on the forms, we noticed that many passengers were doubtful that the money they gave would really go to benefiting the community.

Leaving aside the ship Disko with only 36.36% answering “yes”, more than half of the passengers of the other vessels replied that they were prepared to pay a tax (Clipper 51.39%, Explorer 61.25%, Harpy Eagle 68.97%).

The spirit of cooperation fostered aboard the vessel is probably important. The ship Explorer, for example, has developed special relationships with certain communities which the ship visits habitually. This fact is mentioned in the documentation which passengers receive; they are encouraged to bring school material to donate to the community and they feel part of a relationship as soon as they step aboard the ship. Also, during the cruise, a raffle is organized to buy school or medical supplies. Similarly, the owner of Harpy
Eagle who comes the interior of the Amazon, is therefore in a position to catalyze a particular rapport with the communities that his riverboat visits. When passengers feel themselves part of an existing relationship, they become more involved and are prepared to pay a tax. When there is no special relationship, passengers are indifferent.

This question was analyzed in more detail, by asking those who said they would be prepared to pay a tax, how much they would be prepared to pay. 53.20% did not know or did not wish to declare how much they would be prepared to pay. The others, however, were prepared to donate sums ranging from US$5 to more than US$100. The table below shows that many people would be prepared to contribute US$25 - US$50. On board Harpy Eagle, 17.24% of passengers were prepared to give more than US$100.

### Degree of Passengers' Satisfaction

The vast majority of clients were satisfied as clearly shown in Graph 05, with 81.28% of the replies, passengers affirmed that the cruise met their expectations.

### Are these Clients Ecotourists?

Real ecotourists? Green tourists? nature travelers? It is difficult to answer because only the attitude of the visitors during the trip will show whom he (she) is...

In order to attempt to answer this question, we asked the following three questions in the survey:

- Have you ever heard of the concept of ecotourism?
- Do you consider your cruise to be ecotourism?
- Do you consider yourself to be an ecotourist?

The replies to these questions are presented in graphs 6, 7 and 8. The percentage of “yes” answers is plotted for each vessel. One can see a definite trend in the sense that the vessel considered to be most ecotouristic (Amazonia Expeditions) had the passengers who declared themselves most aware of ecotourism and who most felt themselves to be ecotourists.

It is important to note that ecotourism was first an American (North and South) notion and the concept is not always understood by people from other part of the world.
Benefits and negative impacts of the tourism on the communities

The apparition of work in the state is the most important impact created by tourism in the Amazonas State. Yet the research of 1992 (Emamtur/FVA) showed the positive impact of the tourism in the regional development. Cruz (1999) also agrees with various other researches, as that developed in Marajó Island (Cruz 1999).

Today some communities are better organized than in 1992 and offer small “shop” to sell their handicraft, and a bar as in the example of Nossa Senhora do Perpetuo Socorro, inside Acajatuba Lake.

Benefits are not only economic. Community members like to receive tourists and have a positive attitude of the visit (Sudam 1999). It is an entertainment, a diversion! As tourists observe the day by day activities of local people, the local people observe the tourists and their reactions in front of something so “normal” for them. It is very good for the self-esteem of the local people.

In 1999, 60% of the community members interviewed informed that tourism had changed positively their life, this was increased since 53% in 1992.

The community of Paricatuba, 2 hours from downtown Manaus, residents indicated that they would like to see more tourists in their small village. But, today nothing is really organized to receive tourists.

Inside Acajatuba Lake, an association “Amigos de Acajatuba” (Friends of Acajatuba) was created to try to improve the local health office (a simple wood house) by way of tourists’ donations.

Until now, the negative impact is minimum. The limited number of tourists in the Amazon certainly explains part of this. In Janauary Park - an “ecological” reserve near Manaus, where the movement of tourism is higher, we noted “commercial” handicraft, some floating houses with caged animals in bad condition and garbage.

Impact of tourism on protected areas.

In spite of the number of protected areas in the Amazonas State, the studied vessels do not stop frequently, during their cruise, in a National Park or a Natural Reserve. Amazonia Expedition, and sometimes Amazon Clipper stop in the Jau National Park , the largest national park in Brazil, which requires obtaining a permit and paying an entrance fee to IBAMA - Brazilian Institute for Environment and renewable resources).

Why do vessels not enter more frequently in protected areas? Perhaps, because there is basically no difference between visiting a protected area and the forest nearest. The protected areas have no visitor’s center, no trails, nothing special that could attract an ecotourist. The situation is the same in Anavilhanas Archipelago - on the Negro River. The area is an ecological
reserve and officially the tourism is prohibited, but the archipelago is on the navigation route, and visitation on a limited basis is inevitable.

Conclusion

River ecotourism in Amazonas includes various products of different styles, which satisfy their customers.

Often with ecotourism, one thinks of a Jungle lodge which helps a local community. Although vessels do not have a fixed base near the communities they visit, the degree of contact with local people can be quite intense, generating an awareness of local people’s problems and a willingness on the part of the tourists to help, possibly through a levy which would be used to help the community visited.

Bibliography


Motives for choosing the cruise

Graph 1

More than one reply permitted

How clients heard about the cruise

Graph 2

More than one reply permitted
Graph 3

Degree of satisfaction with the activities

Activities

Graph 4

Would you agree to pay a special tax...

% replies

Vessels

Yes
No
No reply
Did the cruise meet your expectations?

Graph 5

% replies

Yes
No
No reply

Vessels

Disko
Amazon Clipper
Explorer
Amazônia Expedition
Have you heard of the concept of ecotourism?

Graph 6

Graph 7

Do you think your cruise met the criteria of ecotourism?

Graph 8

Do you consider yourself an ecotourist?