HOW DO NATURALIST GUIDES ADD VALUE TO AN ECOTOUR? 
INTERPRETING INTERPRETATION IN BRAZILIAN AMAZONIA.

Ester Pereira
Adjunct professor
School of Hospitality Management
Florida International University
Miami, FL 33181-3000 USA
pereirae@fiu.edu

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How do naturalist guides add value to an ecotour? Interpreting interpretation in Amazonia.

In Ecotourism, interpretation by a guide creates or shapes the experience for the tourist, differentiating one episode from another. As such, it adds value to the product – the experience. This paper examines the role of interpretation by guides in Brazilian Amazon, finding in them patterns from which lessons may be drawn. Given the intangibility of the Ecotourism product, this paper argues that it is the guide who defines the quality of the product, may draw the tourist toward or away from sustainable practices, and significantly contributes to the success or failure of an ecotouristic venture. Brazilian Amazonia already has guides, but this study shows that they lack education and training in interpretive skills, are not professionally organized and face difficult working conditions.

Introduction

In Ecotourism, interpretation by a guide creates or shapes the experience for the tourist, differentiating one episode from another. As such, it adds value to the product – the experience. The experience, an intangible aspect of the ecotour, is principally facilitated through the interpretive naturalist guide. The role of this individual has evolved over time from tour management to experience management. Through interpretation, the naturalist guide assists the visitor in connecting with the place visited, understanding and appreciating its significance both in local and global contexts, and becoming more aware of cause and effect behaviors. Given the intangibility of the ecotourism product, it is the guide who defines the quality of the product, may draw the tourist toward or away from sustainable practices, and significantly contributes to the success or failure of an ecotouristic venture. The guide, as an educator, adds value to the visitor’s experience.

Brazilian Amazonia contains part of the world’s largest rainforest and offers an attractive stage for both environmental and cultural interpretation. The region’s rich plant diversity that supports an equally diverse fauna, along with the area’s many cultural groups, make Amazonia a high-ranking place on most tourists’ “to-do” list. Development and implementation of a solid ecotourism program in Amazonia, to replace traditional industries that are incompatible with a rainforest environment, can translate into economic gains for the region and the country. Tourism brought to Brazil $24.1 billion in 1998, amounting to 3.5% of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP), (EMBRATUR, 1999). In an article about the relationship between sustainable tourism and conservation gains, Cordeiro (1999) touts ecotourism as a viable option to boost the region’s economy while curbing unsustainable practices such as logging and ranching. Tourism revenues can be increased through the development of sustainable tourism – ecotourism. One of the main players in ecotourism, but often the least appreciated one, is the naturalist guide. This individual has the potential to add considerable value to an ecotour both in economic and conservation gains. In Amazonia, the lack of a solid training program for naturalist guides, as well as a professional guide association that could organize, train, and support naturalist guides, limits the full educational and cultural experience most visitors could
expect to have. Moreover, good interpreters serve in many other capacities including that of host, public relations specialist, and good-will ambassador.

Because of the importance interpretation has in fostering sustainable tourism, this paper begins by discussing interpretation as ecotourism’s cornerstone, and presents the conservation and economic gains resulting from good interpretation. It also examines the nature of guiding in Amazonia by exploring current limitations to good interpretation such as language and interpretive skills, education and training. It also characterizes the guides’ work environment, and concludes by offering recommendations for facilitating solid interpretation in the region.

The findings are, in part, based on a feasibility study (SUDAM 1999) commissioned by the Brazilian Ministry of the Environment (MMA), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Superintendency for Amazonian Development (SUDAM) in 1998/9 to characterize the current tourism situation in the state of Amazonas, and make recommendations for true ecotourism development. Guides’ performance in the two most frequently visited and largest states of Brazilian Amazon, Amazonas and Pará, are the subject of this paper. Data were collected over four months in 1998 and 1999 using interviews and questionnaires given to guides who work for jungle lodges and riverboats, or who conduct a variety of city and forest tours. The questionnaires were designed to characterize naturalist guides and their work, while interviews allowed qualitative evaluations of a guide’s understanding of ecotourism and their feelings about various subjects. The author’s personal observations from over 17 years’ experience working in the area comprise an additional perspective on the topic.

**Interpretation: the cornerstone of ecotourism**

The Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people. Essential to the goals implicit in this definition is the education of the traveler so that he can develop a better understanding and appreciation for natural and cultural environments. Unlike traditional tourism, and even some nature-based tourism that may use the natural environment to enhance a tour, ecotourism is based on purposeful travel. “Ecotourism is more exclusively purposeful and focused on the enhancement or maintenance of natural systems” (Farrel & Runyan, 1991 cited in Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Because of this commitment to conservation, the education of the traveler is paramount and sound interpretation can achieve some of ecotourism’ conservation goals.

Interpretation is not solely about factual information. It is not about simply identifying plants and animals during a jungle walk, naming the great Amazon explorers of yesteryear, or showing a tourist the village’s main shop. Freeman Tilden, the father of interpretation, defined interpretation as “An educational activity, which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experiences, and by illustrative media, rather than simply communicating factual information” (Tilden, 1957 cited in Ham, 1992). There is a plethora of other terms defining what interpretation is or should be. Tilden’s definition, however, is particularly apt in that it mentions the
revelation of meanings and relationships. To the traveler from afar or to the local day visitor, the meanings and relationships revealed to him through interpretation about a particular area are what enriches his visit, and imparts the intangible value of his trip — the experience itself.

While the education of the tourist may be viewed with a certain cynicism by some authors such as Wheeller (1994, cited in Orams, 1996) who said: “Education is seen by many as the way forward for nurturing a ‘better’ tourism. Dream on!”, only good interpretation can contribute to the visitor’s learning and understanding of a site. For this reason, the education of the interpreter is of utmost importance and needs to be a priority for the responsible organization because poor interpretation hinders conservation efforts, leads to misunderstandings, and inhibits ecotourism growth.

Poor interpretation hinders conservation efforts because a visitor who is given a list of facts, for example, as opposed to an explanation of the cause and effect of deforestation goes away realizing that deforestation is bad, but may not understand the broader implications of this activity such as the loss of biodiversity or its economic repercussions. When the visitor is exposed to good interpretation, he may gain not only an awareness of the environmental value of the visited site, but also may make educated decisions when voting for legislation, or may subsequently participate in preservation efforts either monetarily, or by changing to behaviors that may lead to sustainability.

Poor interpretation leads to misunderstandings and losses both in the cultural and economic arenas. When an interpreter is not fully versed in a subject area or lacks confidence, a visitor can be left with the wrong impression or misinformation about the place or people visited.

Poor interpretation inhibits ecotourism growth because an interpreter who does not understand the broader implications of sustainable development cannot contribute to the development and promotion of sustainable tourism. For example, when interpreting the challenges and achievements of an area in the context of tourism development, the guide who understands sustainable development, can be influential by sharing his understanding with a tourist. He can discuss the pros and cons of unregulated tourism and talk about the advantages of developing responsible tourism. He can explain the connection between unplanned tourism and its effects on the local economy, or even on the culture. Consequently, the visitor may go away with an enlightened perspective, that not all tourism is responsible tourism. In future travels, this individual may inquire about, and participate only in trips offered by tour operators, hotels, and other tourism venues whose business ethics are compatible with sustainable tourism. Therefore, the cornerstone of ecotourism can only hold and succeed if the educator is educated.
How can we articulate the conservation and economic value of an ecotour guide?

Ascribing a dollar value to what good interpretation brings to ecotourism is difficult. It is easy, however, to emphasize that the many roles played by the interpretative guide are central to the operation’s goals of sustainable development.

In addition to being “pathfinder and mentor”, referring to the guides dual responsibility for the group and the individual, (Cohen, 1985 cited in Black, 1999) the ecotour guide is also responsible for communicating the conservation significance of an area to the visitor. Consequently the guide can potentially contribute to the sustainable development of a region in two ways: conservation gains and economic gains.

- Conservation gains

The quality of the experience provided by the ecotour guide allows the visitor to establish an emotional attachment to the area visited. For example, by communicating the value of a region’s biodiversity to the visitor, or the threats thereto, the ecotour guide can enlist support for conservation efforts either locally or globally. One example set by Lindblad Special Expeditions in the Galapagos Islands demonstrates the connection that can be made with the visitor. This ecotourism travel company established a conservation fund to assist the Darwin Research Station and the National Park. Their effort is successful in part because of the guides’ high level of interpretive skills, and the conservation message they give to each visitor, the conservation fund has collected over US$500,000 since its inception in June, 1997.

- Economic gains

Because of the guide’s pivotal role in the visitor’s experience, his expertise can translate to economic development. It is often said that a guide “makes or breaks a tour” when referring to the success of a trip. Implicit in this statement is that the experience the visitor had will affect his future travel decisions, whether or not he will use the same travel organization, or visit the same region or country. Word of mouth is also very influential in peoples’ travel decisions and a good report will generate increased business. Often times, the quality of the naturalist guides a company employs is the deciding factor in choosing one company over another. Many successful travel companies are well aware that the quality and interpretive skills of their naturalist guides is directly related to their repeat business. These operators use interpretation as a value-added exercise to attract higher-yield markets (McArthur, 1998). International travel companies with expedition vessels that ply Amazon waters often feature well-known interpretive naturalists in their brochures. Although this is part of a marketing technique, it also empowers the individual and establishes him or her as a professional. The travel company gains greater credibility while increasing its sales revenues.
Many factors contribute to the success of an ecotourism enterprise, but central to success in nearly all facets of the operation is the ecotour guide. One basic reason the ecotour guide plays such an important role is that most staff of jungle lodges or Amazon river boats do not speak a second language. The visitor relies heavily on the guide to communicate and interact with most other people. Furthermore, the ecotour guide serves additional roles as host, ambassador, and facilitator, as well as educator in his primary job as an interpretive naturalist. It is clear that the greater professionalism and knowledge this individual brings to his job, the better the product.

Putting a dollar value on the contribution of the ecotour guide to an operation is difficult, but one study by Conservation International (CI), (CI, 1997) can shed some light on the question. In an attempt to understand the economics of conservation, CI compared the financial impact of deforestation versus forest preservation along the coast of southern Bahia in Brazil. Tourism revenues would decline by one-half if the forest were gone, but would increase by $52 per visitor if the forest were preserved and forest attractions or activities were added. It is not known how much of this dollar amount can be ascribed to simply the presence of the forest itself, and how much to visitor activities led by ecotour guides. It is clear, however, that the guides' work would generate revenue.

**Criteria assessing adequate interpretation**

A number of criteria were used in this study to assess guides’ skills in the states of Pará and Amazonas. Language skills, interpretative skills, formal education, understanding of ecotourism, knowledge of local culture, training programs in tourism, and working environment were all investigated in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of interpretation in the region.

**Language skills**

Possession of a second language is important in a service industry that attracts international visitors. We found that a second language is spoken by only a quarter of the guides born in Amazonia. The majority of guides operating in the area, who speak a second or third language, is originally from other parts of Brazil or even from other countries. One quarter of visitors to Amazonia consists of foreigners (EMBRATUR, 1999).

**Interpretative skills**

Because interpretation methods are not taught as part of the core course in guide training, interpretative skills are either poor or non-existent. Interpretation is limited to naming trees, birds and other wildlife that might be seen. Interpretation that makes connections between the place and the visitor, and incites him to question and discover new things, is not a technique used by local guides. Because of this, interpreting an ecosystem as large and diverse as the Amazon becomes a monumental challenge. For example, most visitors

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1 60%
2 36,000
are disappointed when they do not see as much wildlife as they anticipated, an expectation arising perhaps from nature documentaries they have watched. The local guide spends a lot of time and effort trying to spot an animal to satisfy the client, whereas the reality is that although rainforests support a large diversity of species, there are few individuals of each species. Guides need to be able to weave information into an explanation as to why the animal may not be visible, while still interpreting their habitat and ecology. This observation itself is intriguing, and an explanation would form the basis for a better understanding of rainforest ecology. Thought provocation, an effective technique in interpretation (Ham, 1992; Orams, 1996; Veverka, 1998) could be used effectively in this instance.

**Formal education**

Although nearly half of the guides participating in this study have a high school degree, and one third has either completed college or has some college education, their degrees, for the most part, were in areas outside of tourism, or in areas not directly related to sociology, history or biology. A limited background and education can further disadvantage the local guide, both intellectually and psychologically, because he is frequently interpreting for a well-educated audience. Nearly 81% of the visitors to the state of Amazonas have some college education, (SUDAM 1999). Cognizant of their own shortcomings, guides may feel inhibited and not perform well.

**Understanding of Ecotourism**

An understanding of ecotourism, its principles and goals that lead to sustainable tourism, are not well understood by the vast majority of guides³. However, despite not having a full understanding of Ecotourism, many report that they feel competent to be ecotourism guides⁴.

The appreciation of sustainability as a holistic practice, and comprehension of ecotourism tenets are important concepts for the interpreter guide to understand. He can only explain to the visitor the meanings and relationships of a site and its inhabitants if he himself has these perceptions. This insight and ability to relate through interpretation is what may empower the guide to alter human behavior, so that intolerance for other cultures may be reduced and less environmentally-friendly practices may be replaced by more sound ones. This is a compelling reason why specialized education is needed for the guide interpreter. Orams (1996) argues that a pedagogic approach is necessary to design and teach effective interpretive programs. “The intermediate steps of knowledge acquisition, attitude development, motivation and intention to act must be examined. Through understanding these processes, strategies can be designed which reflect the complexities of the human mind and the diversity of human behavior”.

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³ 93%
⁴ 81%
Knowledge of local culture

Reasons to visit local communities are not appreciated by most guides. On the contrary, guides feel that villages are of little interest to the visitor and they themselves may be embarrassed by the lifestyle of their fellow citizens. Guides prefer activities that are physically challenging, as well as those perceived as more manly such as jungle exploration and catching and releasing cayman. SUDAM study (1999) notes that community visits and other cultural encounters rank second in visitors’ preferred activities (forest exploration is first). To the guides, local culture may seem insignificant but this attitude is a great disservice to the local people who could have more interaction with visitors, and to visitors who miss a great deal by not interacting and learning directly from their hosts. The people of the Brazilian rainforest are among the most hospitable on earth. However, when a guide avoids bringing visitors to a village because he lacks confidence, or appreciation for the local culture, the visitor does not learn about this people’s way of life, and may go away with misgivings - not all Brazilians are what the media proclaim, especially when it refers to transgressions in the large cities. Amazonian residents miss out by not having contact with visitors at a social level, and economically, they could profit from selling fruits, juices, handicrafts, etc. Furthermore, a guide who understands the local culture can influence the purchase of quality handicrafts, representative of the culture, as opposed to unauthentic items, sometimes crafted out of nonrenewable materials or endangered species. He too can help the local people in choosing what to make, quality items as opposed to cheap ones, and appropriate sizes for transportation. In this fashion, he can promote traditional artisanship and the continuation of culture through its traditions while preventing cultural and environmental degradation.

Conversely, the respect and appreciation shown by naturalist guides for the local culture, who work on board some international vessels visiting the Amazon region, have helped in establishing a sound relationship between their vessels and the Ticuna Indians in the upper Amazon. Passengers come ashore prepared for a cultural exchange, they purchase quality handicrafts, and through auctions organized by the naturalist guides they contribute to an educational and medical fund established in the 1980’s. The guide’s pluralistic role can indeed add to the local well-being and economic development.

Training

In Brazil, the public sector, which has primary responsibility for training, lacks a system that would encourage the development and implementation of solid programs in both interpretation and guide certification. The highest governing tourism entity in Brazil is the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Tourism under whose jurisdiction falls the National Tourism Agency (EMBRATUR), the agency responsible for tourism at the national level. In addition, each state has its own tourism agency. In the state of Amazonas, the agency is called the Secretariat of Tourism and Culture (SECTUR) and in Pará, Para’s Tourism Agency (PARATUR). There are numerous municipalities within each state, and many have their own tourism office that oversees local tourism development. The agencies at the national and state levels are the promoters, developers,
and implementers of tourism programs, and are, therefore, the entities responsible for overseeing training and certification of guides. The existing training programs are at regional, national and international levels, but the programs are not applied on a systematic basis. The programs, when applied, are conducted under the auspices of EMBRATUR, with the National Service for Commercial Training (SENAC), and the Support Agency to Micro Companies (SEBRAE) as collaborators. Participants in these training programs need to have a high school diploma, and speak a second language; however, the second requirement is not fully observed, especially for the regional program. Just over half of the guides interviewed or completing the questionnaire were licensed by EMBRATUR. That not all guides are licensed indicates that because of lack of systematic training, the system is rather lax.

Countries with a well-developed sustainable tourism policy, and who have invested in sound interpretative training, such as Costa Rica, are successful in part by having added that intangible value to their tourism operation, as well as sending conservation messages to the world at large. A quality training program designed for Amazonia would address areas where we found deficiencies in guide performance, while simultaneously empowering them in areas of communication, risk management and customer satisfaction. In addition, quality training increases guides' awareness of environmental and socio-economic impacts that ecotourism may cause (Black, 1999). At the writing of this paper, neither the national nor state agencies in Brazil has adopted a high quality guide/interpreter training program that would prepare and certify skilled interpreters in their fields.

Work environment

The climatic conditions in Amazonia, as well as the vast distances that need to be covered by sometimes uncomfortable and unreliable transportation, make guiding especially daunting. Although most nature walks are conducted during the cooler hours of the morning, late afternoon, or after dinner for nightlife viewing, the visitor has the opportunity to rest between activities, while the guide has other responsibilities and cannot take a break. To be constantly tending to the needs of visitors and the logistics of a tour can be exhausting.

The long hours and a straight 25-day work schedule adopted by most lodges and excursion boats negatively affect a guide’s performance and the quality of the visitor’s experience. Guides mentioned this, and that being away from their families for over three weeks at a time was particularly difficult. The rapid client turnover in jungle lodges, every three to four days, is another difficult aspect of the job. Learning new names, being with the client most of the day, accommodating a succession of personalities and resolving the inevitable conflicts and complaints is physically and mentally exhausting. When the time comes to do what his primary job should be — interpreting the natural and cultural environments — the guide is often tired, unmotivated, and unenthusiastic. This work arrangement probably also contributes to the

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5 52%
scarcity of women guides. Lack of female guides is also due in part to societal expectations of women’s role as primarily that of homemakers, and the perception that certain activities, such as leading groups on jungle walks, are masculine domains. Gurung, Simmons, and Devlin (1996) found the same low proportion of female guides in a Nepalese study, attributing it to the same reason.

Not every guide works the 25-day on, five-day off system. In fact, working hours vary between 80 and 360 hours per month, with an average of 180 hours per month. Salaries also vary greatly, ranging from US$175 to $750 per month. The discrepancy in pay and hours is due to two factors: freelance versus permanently employed guides, and the absence of a formalized pay scale for tour guides. Furthermore, most agencies are aware of what their competitors pay guides and there is an unspoken agreement not to inflate salaries too much. A fixed pay scale and social benefits, that are commensurate with the work, would go a long way in improving the work environment.

The lack of an organization to provide professional support is a limitation the guides face as well. Creation and support of an entity that can facilitate the guide’s job, by organizing with the respective governmental agencies continuing education programs to address people management, conservation issues, and hospitality topics are a must, as are incentive programs to motivate these individuals. Presently, local guides have nowhere to turn for direction. The individual must take it upon himself to develop professionally because there are no outside forces to motivate him.

Recommendations

Both Brazilian government and private sector with interests in Amazonia need to work on a comprehensive Plan that addresses sound education and certification for naturalist guides. The highest rate of tourism growth in the Americas between 1995-2020 is predicted to be in South America (WTO, 1999). This merits special attention by the organizations responsible for tourism development. My experience with tourism in this region, studies conducted by other authors, and the more recent research by SUDAM, MMA, OAS, 1998/9, indicate that more diligence from public and private agencies is necessary to prepare professional guides. This task needs to be initiated by the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Tourism, the country’s highest governmental body in tourism development, so that States and local municipalities have legislation and guidelines to act locally. The state of Pará, well known as the “timber hub” in Amazonia, together with the state of Amazonas, need to reevaluate unsustainable practices in timber logging presently being exploited within their territories by international interests, and consider ecotourism, which has the potential to ameliorate the economic strife in these states (Veja, 1997). Next follow some steps that need to be adopted for the successful empowerment of guides and development of sustainable tourism in Brazilian Amazon:

- Design and implement a comprehensive interpretive program for guides to be offered by the local universities. Courses in interpretation, environmental

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6 11% of the working guides
7 67%
studies, and cultural geography and sociology need to be incorporated in existing travel and tourism curricula.

- Design and implement continuing education courses to keep guides current. Courses need to be affordable and attractive to present-day freelance and full time guides with many years of experience, but who may feel they have nothing new to learn.

- Design and implement certification programs. These programs could empower individuals who may not have access to a university degree, and ensure a sound education in guiding and interpretation. Community Colleges, with programs in Travel and Tourism, would be an ideal institution to offer the certification program.

- Create incentive programs to motivate guides’ performance. Both public and private sectors can join hands in this effort. Such incentives could range from a simple weekend stay for the guide’s family or friends at a jungle lodge to reduced air travel once a year.

- Create a professional Guides’ Association to:
  
  • Support guides in the field, facilitate the interchange of ideas, act upon visitor’s suggestions and complaints, and serve as a cohesive voice for guiding professionals.
  
  • Elect a committee to be the liaison between SECTUR and PARATUR, the States’ tourism agencies, so that guides can participate in discussions of future tourism development. These individuals have a vested interest, and their inclusion would empower them while affording the organization first-hand field information, and visitors’ satisfaction feedback.
  
  • Assist the states’ Tourism Agencies and private sector to develop social benefits, a more reasonable work system and pay scale for guides.
  
  • Contact both international and domestic travel organizations, with itineraries and ships on the Amazon, so that internship programs for local guides can be offered on board their vessels.

Conclusion

Tourism, the fastest growing service industry on the planet, can attract a huge segment of the world’s population, and contribute to sustainable development. Interpretation is paramount to sustainable tourism development and education of guides is paramount to interpretation.

Brazilian Amazonia already has guides, but this study has shown that they lack education and training in interpretive skills, are not professionally organized and face difficult working conditions. Both the rainforest and the local culture provide unique interpretive possibilities; but training and interpretive programs are needed. Local guides realize they
need continuing education courses to stay current, and also want a professional organization that supports their profession. These individuals are the best people to offer ideas and suggestions to both governmental bodies and the private sector. Their practical field experience and daily contact with visitors afford them valuable insights.

A visitor’s appreciation of a site and the quality of his experience are directly related to the interpretation provided. So are the visitor’s impressions of the country visited because of the guide’s multiple roles as host, good-will ambassador, and public relations specialist. Future behavioral attitudes can also be formed due to the quality of interpretation. Consequently, the value that a naturalist guide adds to a tour compensates the increased investment necessary for his education and training. Furthermore, by fully embracing ecotourism, Brazil could realize a several-fold increase in benefits to its Amazon region, both in economic profits and conservation gains. A satisfied visitor ensures repeat visits and glowing recommendations.

Perhaps Weiler et al said it best: “If environmentally responsible tourism has a goal of providing a quality tourist experience without causing intolerable ecological and social damage, then the tour guide has a very special role to play”. (Weiler et al. cited in Gurung et al.)

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