

EARLY ADOPTERS' PHILOSOPHIES, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES ON ECO-TOURISM AND ECO-CERTIFICATION: THE CASE OF ECOTOURISM IN JAMAICA

FILOSOFÍAS, PRÁCTICAS Y PERSPECTIVAS DE LOS PRIMEROS ADOPTADORES DEL ECOTURISMO Y LA ECOCERTIFICACIÓN: EL CASO DEL ECOTURISMO EN JAMAICA

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Abstract

This paper examines business philosophies, sustainable practices, and attitudes towards eco-certification of pioneering tourism operators engaged in ecotourism in the mature 'sun and beach' destination of Jamaica. We conducted a thematic analysis of the data collected from semi-structured interviews with managers and owners, and observations from on-site visits with establishments identified as ecotourism operators in Jamaica. We identified five distinct business philosophies that guided our participants' operations: presenting Jamaica in a holistic way, preserving the natural and cultural environment, community support, economic sustainability and incentivized preservation, and operational independence. The tourism operations in our study primarily engage in sustainable practices as a means of attaining operational independence. Meanwhile, participants held mixed attitudes towards eco-certification. There was significant overlap between our findings and the existing conceptual UNWTO framework for ecotourism. We found strong evidence for the role of education as the defining characteristic of ecotourism. Varying attitudes towards and awareness of sustainability and conservation of the country's cultural and natural assets limit the amount of community consultation in planning and development of these enterprises.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Jamaica, sustainable tourism, business philosophy, eco-certification.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las filosofías comerciales, las prácticas sustentables y las actitudes hacia la ecocertificación de los operadores turísticos pioneros que participan en el ecoturismo en el destino maduro de "sol y playa" de Jamaica. Realizamos un análisis temático sobre los datos recopilados de entrevistas semiestructuradas con gerentes y propietarios, y observaciones de visitas en el sitio con establecimientos identificados como operaciones de ecoturismo en Jamaica. Identificamos cinco filosofías empresariales distintas que guiaron las operaciones de nuestros participantes: presentar a Jamaica de manera holística, preservar el entorno natural y cultural, el apoyo de la comunidad, la sostenibilidad económica y la preservación incentivada, y la independencia operativa. Las operaciones turísticas en nuestro estudio se dedican principalmente a prácticas sustentables como un medio para lograr la independencia operativa. Mientras tanto, los participantes tenían diversas actitudes hacia la ecocertificación. Hubo una superposición significativa entre nuestros hallazgos y el marco conceptual existente de la Organización Mundial del Turismo (OMT) para el

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ecoturismo. Encontramos una fuerte evidencia del papel de la educación como la característica definitoria de la operación de ecoturismo. Las actitudes diversas y la conciencia de la sustentabilidad y la conservación de los bienes culturales y naturales del país limitan la cantidad de consultas comunitarias en la planificación y el desarrollo de estas empresas.

Palabras clave: ecoturismo, Jamaica, turismo sustentable, filosofía de negocios, ecocertificación.

Introduction

Ecotourism, a form of nature-based and responsible tourism, comprises a small but growing subsector of the tourism industry, offering a different product and, perhaps, attracting a different kind of visitor than other types of tourism (Wall, 1997; World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2012). Meanwhile, the academic literature on ecotourism has grown at a significant rate (10% to 30% per year) in recent years (Shasha et al., 2020). Ecotourism is closely associated with promoting environmental stewardship (Hunt & Harbor, 2019). Value-driven entrepreneurs play a critical role in creating the ecotourism product, attracting and educating tourists, and promoting community development and job-creation (Jones & Spadafora, 2016). However, there is a gap in the literature with respect to the role of entrepreneurs in shaping the nature of ecotourism (Thompson et al., 2018). Academics, institutions, and policymakers have primarily defined what constitutes ecotourism; however, ecotourism activities adapt to local conditions (Gezon, 2014) and there should be space to recognize and incorporate the interpretations, capacities and motivations of entrepreneurs (Thompson et al., 2018). Greater attention on the realities and lived experiences of small-business owners in tourism could provide profound insights into their beliefs and practices with respect to sustainability (Kornilaki et al., 2019). Furthermore, Gezon (2014) argues the need for location-specific environmental and socio-economic sustainability objectives. Our exploratory qualitative research adds much needed insight into the perspectives of tourism operators engaged in ecotourism and contributes to the literature on the emergence of ecotourism in a mature tourist destination primarily known for 'sun and beach' tourism. With the expansion of ecotourism operations globally, the need for quality control contributed to the development of eco-certification programs (Honey & Stewart, 2002). Eco-certification and eco-labels have been used as both policy tools and marketing tools. We explore the attitudes of tourism entrepreneurs towards eco-certification and certifying bodies, as well.

Our research objective is to fill the existing gap in the literature by examining the business philosophies,

sustainable practices, and attitudes towards eco-certification of ecotourism operators in a mature 'sun and beach' destination, with the aim to answer three main research questions:

1. What are the business philosophies of these tourism operators?
2. What sustainable technology, techniques and/or practices are these operators employing?
3. What are operators' attitudes towards and experiences with certification and certification bodies?

We believe Jamaica provides an interesting context in which to compare the academic ideals of ecotourism with entrepreneurial perspectives and practices. In Jamaica, tourism is a priority and trends towards mass tourism, with a high concentration of tourism activities on the Northern coastal region of the Caribbean island. While tourism contributes considerably to Jamaica's gross domestic product (GDP) (Statistical Institute of Jamaica, n.s.), the environmental costs of the industry are significant and the distribution of benefits from this growing sector has been socially and spatially uneven (Dodman, 2009; Thomas-Hope & Jardine-Comrie, 2007). Jamaica's main tourism product is centred on 'sun and beach,' making it highly sensitive to climate change and other environmental challenges (Hyman, 2014). Those engaged in the burgeoning ecotourism industry face challenges as they go against the mainstream to offer unique experiences and diverse presentations of Jamaica. While the ecotourism operations are steadily increasing on the island, research on the ecotourism landscape as well as the implementation of eco-certification standards in Jamaica is very limited.

We find diversity in the application of ecotourism ideals and some overlap between academic and entrepreneurial views of ecotourism. Specifically, education, scale, impact, shared benefits, and ethics emerge as important themes. The ecotourism industry in Jamaica appears to be fragmented with high dependency on a small number of individuals threatening its sustainability. Attitudes towards sustainable tourism and varying levels of education are among the barriers to community support and participation. Entrepreneurs must work to improve local communities' perceptions of the benefits of their operations.

In the next section, we provide a discussion of the relevant literature on ecotourism, sustainable practices and eco-certification. We then provide a brief overview of the tourism industry in Jamaica and describe our research methodology and data. Subsequently, we present our results and analysis, followed by the discussion section. We conclude with the implications and limitations of our study, and suggestions for future research.

Related Literature

Ecotourism is a concept surrounded by much confusion (Bjork, 2000; D'Ayala, 1995; Wilson et al., 2014). According to Bjork (2000), the term 'ecotourism' has been widely adopted and appropriated; Cosmescu & Cosmescu (2007, p. 66) suggest that it emerged as a "reaction against more traditional forms of mass tourism." Ecotourism is largely viewed as a way to prevent or reduce the most destructive aspects of mass tourism or as the antithesis of mass tourism. However, the boundaries between conventional tourism and ecotourism are porous (Jones & Spadafora, 2016). Figgis (2000, p. 24) expressed concern that the idea of ecotourism could be distorted as "it can cause protected areas to be regarded primarily as economic resources." The term is interchangeably used in tourism research in relation to different types of tourism such as nature-, adventure-, outdoor-, wildlife-, farm-, and/or culture-tourism in terms of its attractions and activities. At the same time, it is referred to in discussions of alternative-, responsible-, sustainable-, and/or community-tourism in terms of its principles and practices (Wilson et al., 2014). Gonzalez Fonseca (2012) refers to it as an alternative tourism, which emphasizes small numbers of tourists in authentic or cultural settings.

In early iterations, the idea of ecotourism involved creating a balance between economic development and environmental conservation (Grenier et al., 1993; Shanklin, 1993). The idea expanded to include cultural preservation in order to emphasize sustainability with respect to both the environment and culture or heritage (Ayala, 1996). Miller & Kaae (1993) view the wide variety of definitions attributed to ecotourism as a continuum ranging from the view that all tourism is ecotourism to the view that pure ecotourism is impossible to achieve. Within the continuum of human responsibility, participants passively seek to minimize harm or take action to protect resources. On the passive end, Muloin (1992), Zell (1992), and Figgis (1993) require that participants in ecotourism merely be sensitive to the environment or avoid damage of the environment. On the active end of the continuum, Ziffer (1989), Valentine (1993), and Richardson (1993) state that participants are expected to

contribute to the protection and management of the natural environment.

Bjork (2000) synthesizes previous definitions of ecotourism and the relations between participants to generate a comprehensive definition of ecotourism as an activity where all stakeholders (i.e., authorities, industry players, and tourists) cooperate in order to create genuine areas for tourists to appreciate and admire, without exploitation of the resources, while contributing to sustainability. This definition contains both passive and active elements and adds the requirement that the host community must be involved in the development process, making ecotourism a more demanding form of tourism than nature tourism or adventure tourism. Newsome et al., (2002) expand on this concept by adding the learning or educational element of ecotourism that really distinguishes it from other forms of nature-based tourism.

Although a generally accepted definition of ecotourism does not exist, there is wide acceptance of certain fundamentals that distinguish ecotourism from other forms of tourism. Fennell (2015, p. 17) defines ecotourism as "travel with a primary interest in the natural history of a destination... and a form of nature-based tourism that places about nature first-hand emphasis on learning, sustainability (conservation and local participations/benefits), and ethical planning, development and management." The UNWTO (2002) defines the following five characteristics of ecotourism:

1. All nature-based forms of tourism where the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature, as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas.
2. It contains educational and interpretation features.
3. It is generally, but not exclusively, organised by specialised tour operators for small groups. Service provider partners at the destinations tend to be small locally owned businesses.
4. It minimises negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment.
5. It supports the maintenance of natural areas that are used as ecotourism attractions by generating economic benefits for host communities, organisations, and authorities managing the natural areas with conservation purposes; providing alternative employment and income opportunities for local communities, and increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among locals and tourists.

Note that the main distinction between Fennell's (2015) and the UNWTO's (2002) definitions is that the latter adds the requirement that ecotourism be generally,

but not exclusively, organized for small groups. In addition, Fennell (2015) argues that we should view ecotourism in a site-specific manner; that is, location and context matter. To guide our inquiry and inform our interview questions in this study, which compares the academic and institutional views of ecotourism with entrepreneurial perspectives and practices, we used the definitions of Fennell (2015) and the UNWTO (2002).

Jones & Spadafora (2016) detail how in the late 1970s several tourism operators with strong environmental principles and international connections spearheaded the emergence of the commercial market for ecotourism in Costa Rica and how the interests and attitudes of tourism operators were shaped by the international counterculture that emphasized authenticity and opposed materialism. Thompson et al. (2018, p. 274), challenges the “dogmatic nature of ecotourism” vaunted by scholars, institutions and policymakers, arguing that there should be room to recognize and incorporate the working experiences of entrepreneurs “who implement the concept according to their understanding, capacities, and motivations.” In their study of Malaysian tourism operators, Thompson et al. (2018) describe a situation in which entrepreneurs have varying interpretations of ecotourism accompanied with varying desires to fulfil their interpretations, while environmental sustainability comes second to the sustainability of business operations. Thompson et al. (2018) conclude that the relationship between ecotourism and entrepreneurship is evolving, and while there may be some consensus on the core principles of ecotourism in academia, it is not the case for practitioners.

Ideally, ecotourism generates additional income for local communities and contributes to the protection and conservation of natural resources. In practice, environmental sustainability does not necessarily lead to social equity, as tensions exist between environmental sustainability and social justice (Gezon, 2014). Ecotourism development is more sustainable if the local community is supportive and is actively involved in its design and development (Vincent & Thompson, 2002). The removal or reduction of the negative impact of tourism on the environmental dimension does not guarantee community support for ecotourism development. Successful development requires that the perspectives of the local community are factored into the policy and planning process (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2009, 2011a). In addition to the perceived benefits from tourism, community satisfaction is an important variable in understanding community support (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011b). Therefore, entrepreneurs in ecotourism have additional obligations to the community than those engaged in conventional tourism.

Kornilaki et al. (2019) use self-efficacy to explain gaps between the attitudes of tourism operators and their behaviours with respect to sustainable practices, while placing tourism operators into three categories – activists, eco-savers, and apathetic. Activists are proactively involved in sustainability practices, sensitive to environmental and sociocultural issues, and their behaviour is driven by altruistic values and beliefs. Eco-savers implement sustainability practices on an *ad hoc* basis, are not entirely altruistic, and are motivated by economic concerns. Finally, the apathetic do not engage in sustainability practices unless driven by economic reasons and are generally unconcerned about the impact of their business on the environment. Kornilaki et al. (2019) conclude that external factors, such as situational constraints, socio-economic conditions, and institutional factors, influence self-efficacy, which in turn influences the operators’ sustainability intentions and behaviours.

Previous research shows that entrepreneurs in the tourism sector believe that environmentally sustainable practices can contribute to an enterprise’s image and competitiveness (e.g., Fotiadis et al., 2013; Penny, 2007). Thus, tourism operators can acquire competitive advantages through the development of new products and services, the optimization of production and delivery, and marketing (Rangone, 1999). Gonzales Fonseca (2012) argues that there is a mutually beneficial relationship when ecotourism projects integrate the community. However, ecotourism operators face significant challenges when implementing and maintaining sustainable practices. Baddley & Font (2011) place the challenges to implementing sustainable practices into three categories – financial, human, and what they refer to as a ‘green gap.’ Financial challenges include real or perceived financial costs associated with the implementation and limited access to investment capital. Human challenges include resistance to change, lack of qualified staff, and the inability to plan. Finally, the ‘green gap’ reflects the dissonance between what customers claim to want and their actual purchasing behaviour. Other challenges identified in the literature include low external and internal pressure, a low-risk business attitude, and lack of awareness or knowledge (Cordiero & Vieira, 2012; Galia & Legros, 2004; Hoevenagel et al., 2007; Mazur, 2012; Pinget et al., 2015). External pressures to implement sustainable practices stem primarily from the enterprises’ business environment and include suppliers, competitors, and customers (Hoevenagel et al., 2007). Meanwhile, the sources of internal pressures are owners, managers, and employees (Hoevenagel et al., 2007). Baddley & Font (2011, p. 213) found that tourism service providers prioritize competing concerns about health and safety

and quality assurance, and that savings derived from low-cost environmental investments were “more likely to be ploughed into improvements in [health and safety] than into expensive environmental measures.” As such, we examine the sustainable technology, techniques and/or practices employed by tourism operators engaged in ecotourism in Jamaica.

Tourism operators use eco-certification to signal to consumers the degree to which their enterprises are functioning sustainably using it as a customer acquisition tactic. Eco-certification involves an independent agency (e.g., a governmental agency, a non-governmental organization, or an industry association), assessing or verifying that certain specific sustainable practices are followed in the production or provision of a given good or service. Buckley (2012) posits that environmental certification programs fall under the broader umbrella of voluntary corporate social responsibility reporting and that to some extent certification can substitute for sustainability reporting. Buckley (2012, p. 89) finds that current eco-certification approaches fail to deliver tangible improvements in environmental outcomes and that “most private tourism enterprises and industry associations want cheap and easy eco-certification as a minor component in marketing strategies.” Yeo & Piper (2011) argue that enterprises must weigh the uncertain benefits of increased revenue from potential consumers with preferences for certified businesses against the certain costs associated with acquiring and maintaining certification. Given the proliferation of eco-certification programs, consumers find it difficult to determine the value of a given eco-certification program (Yeo & Piper, 2011). Our final research question probes operators’ attitudes towards and experiences with certification and certification bodies.

Eco-tourism in Jamaica

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the travel and tourism sector was one of the world’s largest, generating over 10% of global GDP and supporting 1 in 10 jobs in the world (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2020). Within the travel and tourism sector, ecotourism, broadly defined as nature-related tourism, is considered as one of the fastest growing segments (World Tourism Organization, [UNWTO], 2012). In 2019, travel and tourism contributed 13.9% of GDP in the Caribbean, highlighting its relative importance in the region (WTTC, 2020). By focusing on ecotourism, countries such as Costa Rica and Kenya have positioned themselves as alternative destinations to those offering conventional ‘sun, sea, and sand’ tourism (Almeyda et al., 2010; Gonzalez Fonseca, 2012). When it comes to islands, the

relationship between tourism and environmental sustainability is additionally complex, as tourism can be confined by island sustainability and vice versa (Kelman, 2019). The island of Jamaica is a mature ‘sun and beach’ tourist destination with the industry established there from the late 19th century (McLeod et al., 2018). As Jamaica’s largest industry, travel and tourism supported a third of total employment and contributed 31.1% and 56.7% of the total GDP and total exports, respectfully (WTTC, 2020). Visitors from the US and Canada account for 82% of all arrivals to Jamaica, and international spending accounts for 79% of spending in the island’s travel and tourism sector (WTTC, 2020). All-inclusive resorts dominate the Jamaican accommodation sector, accounting for the majority of room capacity and experiencing significantly higher occupancy rates than alternative accommodations (McLeod et al., 2018).

Ecotourism was explicitly identified as a priority sector by the CARIFORUM countries, a regional organization of independent Caribbean countries of which Jamaica is a member (Wilson et al., 2014). While Jamaica has tried to recast itself as an ecotourism destination (Lopez Torregrosa, 2016), progress in the area has been slow (McLeod et al., 2018). Despite the drop in tourism movements worldwide and the tightening of travel restrictions due to the impact of COVID-19, we expect the tourism sector worldwide and in Jamaica, specifically, to rebound eventually given that the island is already taking steps on the path to post-COVID tourism (Montevago, 2020). The slowdown presents an opportunity to implement changes and to reshape the sector into one that is more inclusive, sustainable, and responsible (UNWTO, 2020b).

Methodology

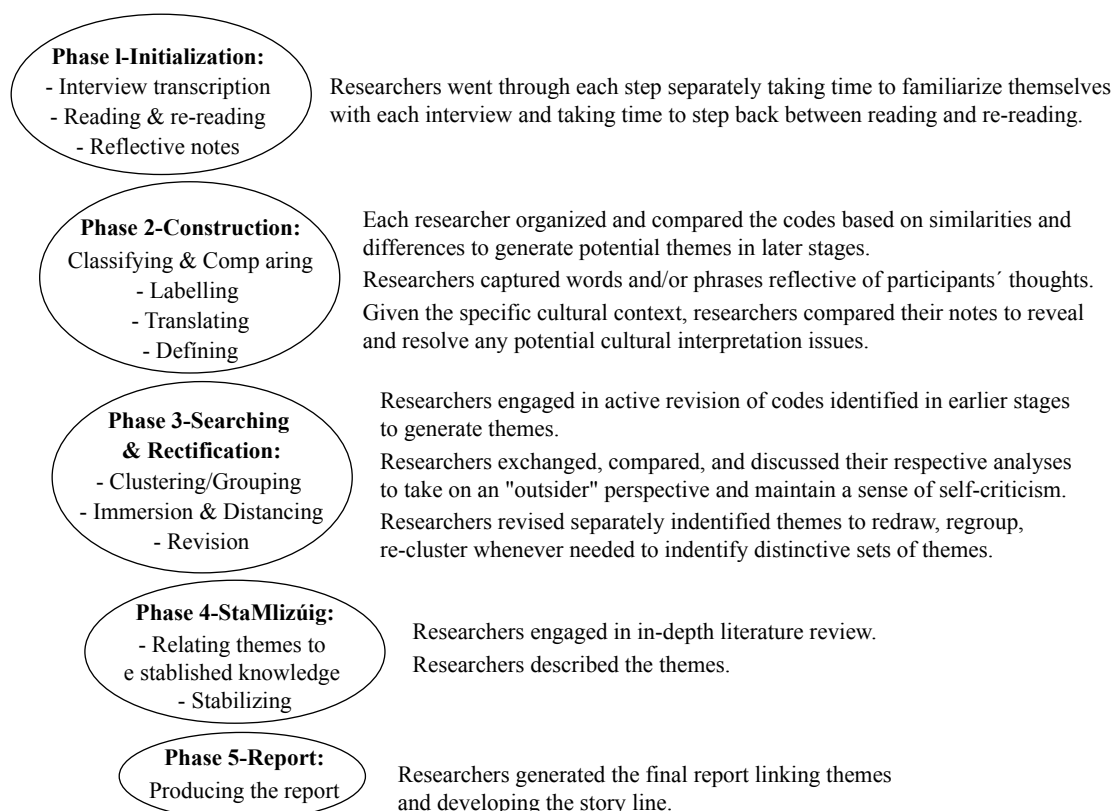
In order to answer our research questions, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with managers and owners (45-65 minutes on average) as well as undertaking on-site visits for direct observations with tourism operations in Jamaica between April 2011 and February 2014. The list of operations was identified via Google search and TripAdvisor using the following key phrases: “ecotourism in Jamaica,” “nature tourism in Jamaica,” “sustainable tourism in Jamaica,” “responsible tourism in Jamaica,” and “eco-resorts in Jamaica.” Through this search process, we compiled a list of 25 operations and contacted the management of each operation via a recruitment email, followed up with a phone call. Of the 25 operations, 14 agreed to participate in the study, with 18 managers and owners agreeing to do face-to-face interviews. We believe this number of interviews allowed us to

achieve inductive and a priori thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2018).

The tourism operations varied in product offerings, scale of operations, location, and the length of time they had been in operation. Eight of the operations offered activities such as different natural tours (e.g., hiking, birdwatching, medical plants, etc.) or adventure tours (e.g., tubing, or horseback riding), while six operations offered accommodation along with specialized tours. The smallest operation had 2-3 staff members and could accommodate a maximum of 16 visitors per day. Meanwhile, the largest operation employed 130 staff members and could accommodate 2,200 visitors/day. Five of the operations were located in the North-eastern region of Jamaica, three - off the central North coast of the island, three - in the Western region, two - off the South coast, and one - in the hilly interior of the island. The majority of the businesses in our study had been in operation for at least a decade, with four established prior to 1980. Only two of the operations started within five years of data collection. The participants ranged in age from 30 to 65 years, and included 11 men and 7 women.

We asked the interview participants about the scale and scope of their operations, their business philosophy, sustainable techniques and practices, their relationship with the local community, and the means through which they promoted themselves and acquired customers. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. In addition, one member of the research team took observation notes while on location at each operation. We conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews and observation notes in order to identify, analyse, and report reoccurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Our research was inductive as our goal was to identify relations and patterns in the data from which theories could be developed (Hyde, 2000). We followed a process of generating codes, reviewing and revising codes, and then determining the reliability of the coders and identifying sub-themes and themes with any disagreements in the interpretations being resolved via back-and-forth discussions among researchers (Boyatzis, 1998). Figure 1 details our five-phase thematic analysis process and the roles of each researcher.

Figure 1. Phases of Thematic Analysis



Researcher 1: Interviewer, observation note-taker, native Jamaican, transcriber

Researcher 2: Non-Jamaican - intentionally "distant" from data collection

Researcher 3: Interviewer, observation note-taker, non-Jamaican, transcriber

Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) and Vaismoradi et al. (2016).

Results and Analysis

Business Philosophies

During the interviews, we asked the managers and owners of the tourism operations to describe their business philosophies and how they relate to ecotourism. Five main themes emerged as distinct business philosophies for our study participants: presenting Jamaica in a holistic way; preserving the natural and cultural environment; community support; economic sustainability and incentivized preservation; and operational independence.

“As is”: The first theme that emerged was *“presenting Jamaica in a holistic way.”* Participants felt that one of their main objectives was to present the natural environment and cultural environment of Jamaica in an authentic way. The manager of one operation described their operation as “just being really natural, trying to use what’s amazing about Jamaica, you know, like not trying to make it a western place in Jamaica” (Participant 1). While very vocal about presenting Jamaica in a holistic way, our interviewees placed emphasis on presenting the cultural dimension relative to presenting Jamaica’s natural environment, emphasizing the importance of visitors’ interaction with local people in everyday settings. Participants articulated the importance of educating both tourists and locals about Jamaica’s cultural heritage. One manager described the experience of a typical guest saying, “The whole week that they stay with us they’re immersed in the culture, going on the different tours and they’re given the history” (Participant 2). In describing his philosophy another owner said,

“You have to go and dance, have a whole street dance, and da whole vibes ... And tell you about the trees, and the herbs, and the spices, and the ingredients used for cooking... To have you learn about the country in a broader aspect... I look at what I have to offer in terms of what tourism is. It’s not so much the commercialized area no more, but rather what is that Jamaica could offer to persons visiting... I want you to walk through it as is, to say, this is Jamaica ... in its most natural form. So ‘eco’ to me ... is to present my products as is, but find a way to teach and inform about what is it that this property or Jamaica, broader aspect, would have to offer you. For you to go back and say you learned something about Jamaica, but you actually get to see nature in its normal state...” (Participant 3)

Our participants did not want to present a sanitized version of Jamaica; instead, they emphasized the island’s uniqueness in a holistic way. In the words of one manager, her operation’s mission was

“...to provide interesting, fulfilling, learning experience for the visitor without any negative, or minimizing

the negative impacts on the physical environment, and taking the social environment into consideration as well, and making sure that it was socially viable for them, which is essential. ... which is very holistic.” (Participant 4)

“Back to Basics”: The second theme that emerged was *preservation* of both the natural environment and the cultural heritage of the communities in which our participants operated. When it came to discussing preservation, the preservation of the natural environment dominated the discussion. As the manager of a large property stated, “There’s an aspect of this place that is untouchable and that’s the way it should be” (Participant 1). Another manager echoed, “It’s really just back to basics.... We just want to keep it pure and keep it basic... back to nature” (Participant 2). The manager of another operation described their environmental preservation measures:

“[The company] has gone to great lengths to acquire all the lands that are within that basin. So, and it’s like a watershed area and of course it’s basically to be preserved. Nothing is to happen there. So, they’re making sure that the integrity of that area remains... we definitely go to great lengths to preserve the canopy up there, to ensure that that is just not disturbed.” (Participant 6)

The importance of natural preservation led a number of operators to engage in active protection and lobbying activities. One owner of another large-scale operation successfully blocked the development of a hydro plant using the economic case for tourism saying “we wanted to stop a hydro power plant being built there, so you needed to do some sort of tourism.... Because, when they did the study for hydro it came out more positive for tourism than a hydro thing” (Participant 7). The same owner stated, “The goal was to preserve the place ... it’s about sustaining it. We were here so we want to hand it down to the next generation.” Another operator also expressed concern for future generations:

“But one of the main things too is that I would like to see this area being properly protected. This is the largest wetland in Jamaica. A large section of [the wetland] that is known ... But I would like to see this lower section protected and ... left as is. Because if not, in years to come, I think the younger generation might say, you know, the folks, they let this place go to ruin.” (Participant 8)

“Don’t just give a man a fish, teach him how to fish”: The third theme that emerged was *community support*. It was important to the tourism operators that they support the local community in which they operate in a variety of ways. All of our participants took steps to ensure local sourcing for key inputs such as staffing, food, building materials, and crafts. It was important to all of the

participants that their employees come from the immediate local community. As one owner said, "I would say all of my folks live within maybe six- or eight-mile radius of here" (Participant 8); while another manager explained, "we have a policy ... to employing people within 20 km of the hotel" (Participant 10). For one owner, it was important that his enterprise provide consistent long-term employment for his community. He said,

"...that also boils down to me wanting to keep everyone working too, you know? Because a lot of these guys – I mean they want to work here. Everyone who I got pretty much was unemployed before. So, they all want to work... You know, they're not lazy, they are willing. So that's what we want to do is try to find a consistency where everyone can work at least five or six days a week." (Participant 11)

Another owner spoke of their desire to offer employment to members of the community with physical or mental challenges, who would normally have difficulty finding employment,

"All our staff comes from the local community and someone recently said to us jokingly that, but perhaps with a pinch of the truth, we try to do a lot with what most large institutions call rejects. So, we have quite a few members of the staff who have some physical challenge or in some case a little mental challenge as well. And just work with them, give them the opportunity. So, we have one guy who's almost deaf, another one who stammers, and a third one... we do try and focus on supporting women.... I think our form of assisting is really fair trade, and providing employment. ... And providing people with a sustainable form of income generation ... And we try and provide some steady employment for those who work for us. So, what we have is we have a small core team, and we do whatever we can to keep them and not have to lay them off in hard times..." (Participant 4)

Two participants insisted on indigenous and sustainable crafts and souvenirs, that is, they would not purchase souvenirs or allow the selling of crafts at their establishments unless they were authentic and used sustainably sourced materials. One said, "Whenever you see carvings or art at all over the place, lots of it is authentic and you say it's nice to promote local and buy local Jamaica things" (Participant 1), while the other emphasized that the expectations from artisans to maintain sustainable practices: "we have people who come in and... sell craft items, they can't sell certain things. Coral is banned, some of the shell fish they cannot just go and get and sell" (Participant 10).

Four participants had assisted in or carried out infrastructure improvements (e.g., roads, parks) that would benefit the wider community; "we've made the road better" (Participant 7). Another manager indicated,

"...there's a little park you notice in the town, that's also part of the land. [Our owner] is planning on refurbishing the community centre which was damaged in the hurricane some years ago. [The] bus stop on the highway was really covered with bush. The government is actually supposed to clean it, and they didn't. So, we just adopted it, and we started cleaning it out but we're going to go put in garbage bins there ... The roads ran, are being fixed, you'll notice marl has been put on some of the ..., fill in the potholes." (Participant 2)

Generally, food and other inputs were also sourced from the local community; "we buy as much as possible from local suppliers, we support cottage industries" (Participant 4). Some saw local food supply as a way to control the quality of their own offerings,

"There's one guy, who raises his own chickens, we do that, and we purchase from him bananas, yams, a lot of vegetables he grows, we get the eggs from him as well. So, we try to partner with the local people and... we want to be able to have the organic supplement." (Participant 2)

All the participants in our study established mutually beneficial business partnerships and collaborations with local businesses. Six operations provided access to their property to local residents or businesses for free or for a nominal fee. For example, one manager described their lease agreements with local farmers saying,

"We're in partnership with the local people, that we have maybe leased them some of the land. Very little, some for nothing, in exchange for just watching the borders because you know, to keep squatters off. And they do farming there and we purchase from them." (Participant 2)

The most important form of community support, however, was through education: "Don't just give a man a fish, teach him how to fish" (Participant 4). All fourteen operations had established educational foundations or directly supported local schools or educational programs. One of the participants emphasized the 'big brother' approach for community involvement:

"So, we have a foundation set up that has money to help support and educate local school children around the area ... We do have local school programs that we support, and we had went out and we'd picked a school to, what would you call it, a big brother, you know." (Participant 9)

"Win-win all around": The fourth theme that emerged was *economic sustainability and incentivized preservation*. While most participants believed in the ethical arguments for ecotourism, the economic argument for conservation and preservation was a key factor in their decision-making. One manager described his line of thinking saying, "Is there a way to earn from nature

in its pristine form, and what are the likely things you would do and how would it benefit and be a win-win all around, both for conservation and protection” (Participant 12). There was a recognition that the success and survival of their enterprises necessitated the preservation of the natural and cultural environments. One participant indicated that they had decided to forgo a revenue generating opportunity out of concern for the negative impact,

“We’ve been approached by several of the big entertainers that want to put on a big show here, and we’ve turned it down even though it’s big money, because the impact on the environment would be... You’d make some money but, you’ll be paying for it for a long time with all the cigarette butts and bottle caps, and plastic cups, and, so we’ve actually turned down a couple of big names... I think we still made the right decision even though we turned and walked away from it.” (Participant 13)

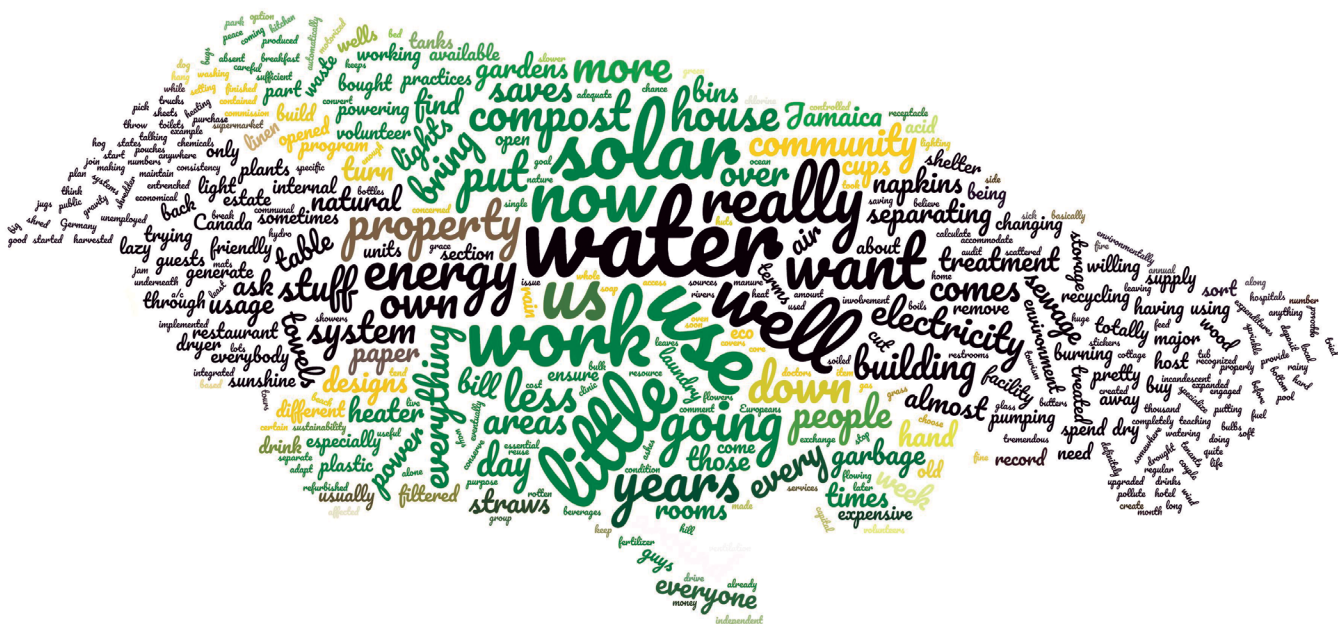
“To be completely independent”: The fifth and final theme that emerged was *operational independence*. The dominant topic in the interviews was resource independence as participants expressed the desire to maintain or gain independence from the local utility companies, whether it be energy independence by harnessing solar or wind energy or having their own independent source of water. As one manager explained,

“Our long-term goal is to be completely independent from local power sources. To generate either our own hydro-electric, or our own solar, as well as wind ... Right now we’re pretty much 97% self-sufficient because we generate our own power.” (Participant 9)

Another participant boasted, “We’re now powering, right now with this kind of sunshine we are powering almost everything right now” (Participant 4). In an effort to reduce the electricity consumed from the local power company, one participant explained, “We have upgraded the water system to run mostly off of gravity... because that alone saves pumping water all over the property” (Participant 13). In fact, this desire to reduce dependence on external sources led to a wide range of sustainable practices, which we discuss in the next subsection.

The last theme --*operational independence*-- was the most the complex of the business philosophies referred to by our participants. Various practices were described within the context of the specific nature of the operators with the use of similar terms and words. In order to reveal the most frequently used ones, a word frequency analysis was undertaken via a free online text analyzer tool. After some data cleaning (i.e., removal of articles, conjunctions, spelling corrections, etc.), 387 words mentioned 716 times were visualized with online word-cloud software (Figure 2). *Water* (21), *solar* (9), *energy* (6), *compost* (5), and *electricity* (4) were the most frequently used words, highlighting their importance for the eco-operators. Taking the central position in the cloud, these words were surrounded by other words such as *gardens* (3), *garbage* (3), *bins* (3), *sewage* (3), *napkins* (3), *air* (3) and practices such *saves* (4), *separating* (3), *treatment* (3), and *remove* (2). The visualization allowed us to notice that eco-operators *really* (7) *want* (7) to spend as *little* (9) as possible and *use* (14) as well (8) as possible the main practices that were deemed essential for the sustainability and operational independence in order to *work* (9) *now* (8) and though the *years* (6).

Figure 2. Word-cloud – Operational Independence



Sustainable Practices

As stated previously, the participants in our study engaged in many sustainable practices out of a desire for operational independence. Whether it was to avoid the high cost of the local utilities or the bureaucracy associated with the regulatory bodies or to ensure a more consistent supply of resources or services, several tourism operations invested in *renewable energy infrastructure* (such as solar and wind energy), *water catchment and conservation equipment*, and organized their own *waste management*. Two operations used *local designs and architecture* in order to simultaneously preserve cultural heritage and reduce their energy consumption. As one manager explained, by utilizing traditional Jamaican architecture they cut back on electricity costs,

“... we cut back on our electricity by designing it so that we would not have to put in air condition units. So, we created it with open ventilation air... ensure that it is preserved and it is integrated – because natural environment is very much important to us.” (Participant 5)

One manager explained, “In the bottom of our park, down there, all of our restrooms are totally water absent” (Participant 9), while another stated, “We use almost by default, almost only our harvested rain water because we get very little from the public system, so over the years, after having recognized this issue, over the years we have expanded our storage” (Participant 4). Composting was another waste reduction practice, “... all those leaves, I can shred it and turn it into manure” (Participant 14). Another manager indicated,

“We compost of course, which really cuts down on the amount of waste that we would have to get rid of. So, we compost, we separate, we do a lot of re-use.... Gardens, no chemicals in the gardens and since you have the compost of course that works very-very well, and in the kitchen, again, we have you know, bins for separating dog, hog, compost.” (Participant 4)

Other efforts to reduce waste included *avoiding single-use items*. One owner explained how they address the issue of guests asking for straws, “We don’t provide straws, and most people tend to automatically ask for straws, and when you sort of say well you drink from a cup, and that’s what the purpose of a glass is, to drink too” (Participant 4). Four tourism operations owned extensive properties and *land resting* policies meant that they only used a small portion of their property for commercial purposes. For example, one manager stated, “We encompass about a hundred acres of which we utilize about 12%, the rest is set aside to never be disturbed” (Participant 9).

Interestingly, despite strong community involvement, with the exception of one participant with a specific mandate, there was *little to no community consultation for the development and planning* of the operations. Five participants felt that such consultation was either impractical or unwarranted as attitudes and awareness in the local community towards issues of sustainability are still limited. As one owner explained,

“Not in the planning of our operation. I know this question keeps coming up and I don’t think it is realistic. But ... it can’t be realistic, and I think first of all you have to raise their awareness levels before they could even begin to participate in the decision making process .” (Participant 4)

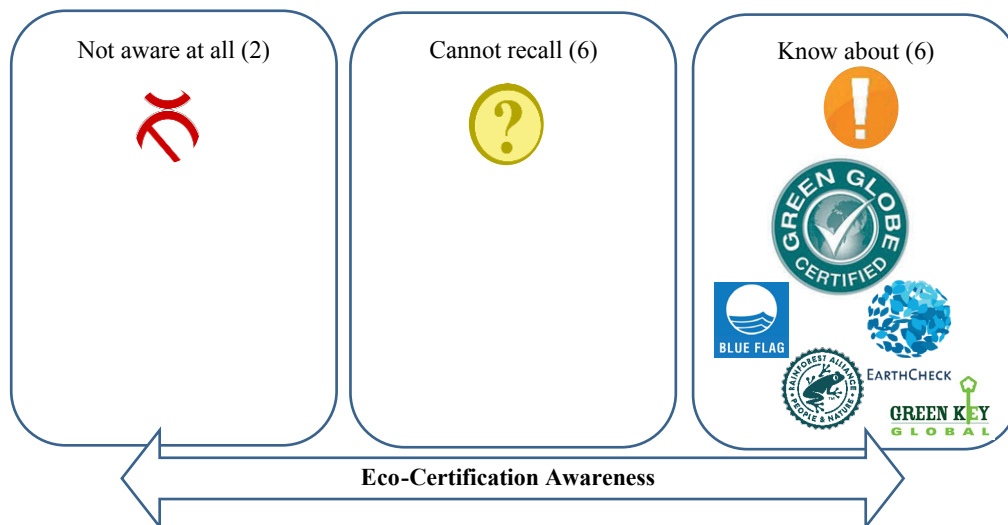
During our discussion of sustainable practices, the participants indicated a few challenges and barriers to their implementation. The most frequently mentioned challenges related to the attitudes and level of *education of staff* (particularly when it came to literacy), the *willingness of the local community to engage* in the tourism operations, high level of *staff turnover*, *bureaucracy* at industry and governmental levels, *lack of government support*, and *high import duties* the operations face when trying to make capital investments in sustainable technology (particularly solar energy). When it came to the willingness of the local community to engage with some of the participants in our study, a member of our research team observed that some operations had a “good relationship with the locals,” while others were “not very self-aware of how they might be perceived by the local community” (Researcher 1). For one participant in particular, the researcher observed that the “local community does not seem very keen on the property. [They] even seem resentful or angry.”

Eco-certification

When we asked participants about their attitudes towards eco-certification, two of the fourteen operators indicated that they are not aware of any eco-certification programs and/or labels, while the rest indicated varying degrees of awareness ranging from “heard about eco-certification” to “know a lot”. When prompted to share with us any known eco-certification labels, six operators could not recall any label, while one operator listed three. Six operators were aware of Green Globe, while Blue Flag, Free Forest Alliance, Earth Check, and Green Key were each mentioned only once. Figure 3 presents the summary infographics on eco-certifications labels.

At the time of our data collection, only one of the tourism operations was eco-certified. For this oper-

Figure 3. Jamaican Ecotourism Operators' Eco-Certification Awareness



ation, the reasons for eco-certification were *customer-driven*. As the manager explained, “I met a couple about 2 weeks ago that said they were looking for green hotels and they’re from Austria and so they group up on a whole and look for hotels that are Earth Check certified” (Participant 10). One researcher observed their “certification diploma on display near check-in” (Researcher 1).

For the remaining operations that were not eco-certified, seven were not interested at all, while six were interested or considering eco-certification. For those that were not interested, the most cited reason for disinterest was the *high cost without a clear return on investment*. Participants were concerned about the cost of annual audits and the limited marketing benefits that came with certification. Two participants indicated that they were certified in the past, but let it lapse. One of the owners explained, “It’s expensive ... even with Green Globe 21, at the time they were offering marketing opportunities, but to be listed onto their website, they were charging substantial fees.... Green Globe has no value... All it was costing us money... But none of it really has market value here” (Participant 4).

Several felt that their customers did not care about eco-certification, pointing to the fact that none had ever mentioned it. The two operations that let their certification lapse spoke of the *cumbersome documentation and reporting* required for maintaining their certification. One owner complained, “But I mean when they told me I had to go measure my garbage and the trees or whatever has fallen ... and the branches, I’m like ‘I can’t do that’. You know, I said ‘Come on.’” (Participant 7). The documentation and reporting requirements exert a heavy burden on small-size owner operated businesses. As one owner put it,

“The other challenge with certification is that most of them rely, and I understand it if you’re sitting somewhere in an office, how are you going to verify that. You rely heavy on documentation, and for a small business it is just too burdensome.” (Participant 4)

Two participants admitted to a *lack of awareness* of what eco-certification entails or of certifying organizations. One owner said, “Well I don’t even know where to get it from. I have no idea” (Participant 1). Finally, among those participants who expressed no interest in being eco-certified, a few pointed to the fact that it was *not a requirement* nor was it pushed by the Jamaica Tourist Board. One owner explained that eco-certification would represent another hurdle to overcome saying, “I’m not eco certified. We have to be licensed with TPDCO, which is Tourism Product Development of Jamaica” (Participant 3).

For the operations that expressed an interest in gaining eco-certification, all cited a *lack of clarity* of the process, requirements, or the benefits. For example, one owner stated,

“Because I don’t think there is clarity. There’s so many certification programs now all over the world, and none of them is really ... has a brand value or an acceptance with the public... None of these certification programs really market themselves, and that is the reason why we stopped going for certification, because to us certification was just the icing on the cake.... It’s very loose. I think ... it’s one of the things for example that organizations like TIES and so on should deal with is, who gets that ecotourism label and who doesn’t. I think that’s something or whether it’s UNESCO or whoever deals with these things, that whole thing, there should be

some sort of criteria that you have to meet before you can use the label.” (Participant 4)

Several of the participants stated that eco-certification was *not a priority* and pointed to other organizational goals that were more pressing. For example, one manager said,

“We started looking at [Green Globe] certification and that was earlier years. Mandate changed and finance was a problem because you have to go through a whole lot of things and I guess we’re not in big profitability so certainly the directors put a hold on it.” (Participant 5)

Discussion

There is significant diversity in our sample of tourism operations. Our sample includes operations offering activities, accommodations, or a combination of both. The operations varied in size and ownership. Nine of our operations are small in terms of the number of the clients they can serve at any given time, while the other five are able to serve a large number of tourists. All but two of the tourism operations we studied are locally owned. Of these locally owned operations, six are owned by returning residents – Jamaicans who have resided overseas for some time. Five of these operations are located

close to Jamaica’s main tourism hubs, while nine are located in less accessible locations. In her observation notes, Researcher 1 used phrases such as “difficult to find,” “difficult road to area,” and “feels isolated from everything else” to describe her trips to some of the operations. This diversity may account for the different levels of application of ecotourism ideals that we have observed. In addition, given the environmental and economic situation in Jamaica, these tourism operations have different means and challenges to meet the standards and ideals of ecotourism. External factors, similar to those studied by Kornilaki et al. (2019), such as socio-economic conditions (e.g. education and literacy) and institutional factors (e.g. industry regulations, customs duties, energy policy), significantly impact the behaviour of our participants with respect to sustainability practices.

Our qualitative analysis produced several themes when it came to business philosophies, which were contrasted against a conceptual framework for ecotourism we derived from the literature, specifically the definitions of ecotourism provided by Fennell (2015) and the UNWTO (2002) (Figure 4). In contrasting the conceptual framework with our findings, there appears to be significant congruity between the philosophies and practices of our tourism operations (Table 1) and the six dimensions in the framework.

Figure4. Conceptual Framework of Ecotourism adapted from the UNWTO (2002) and Fennell (2015)

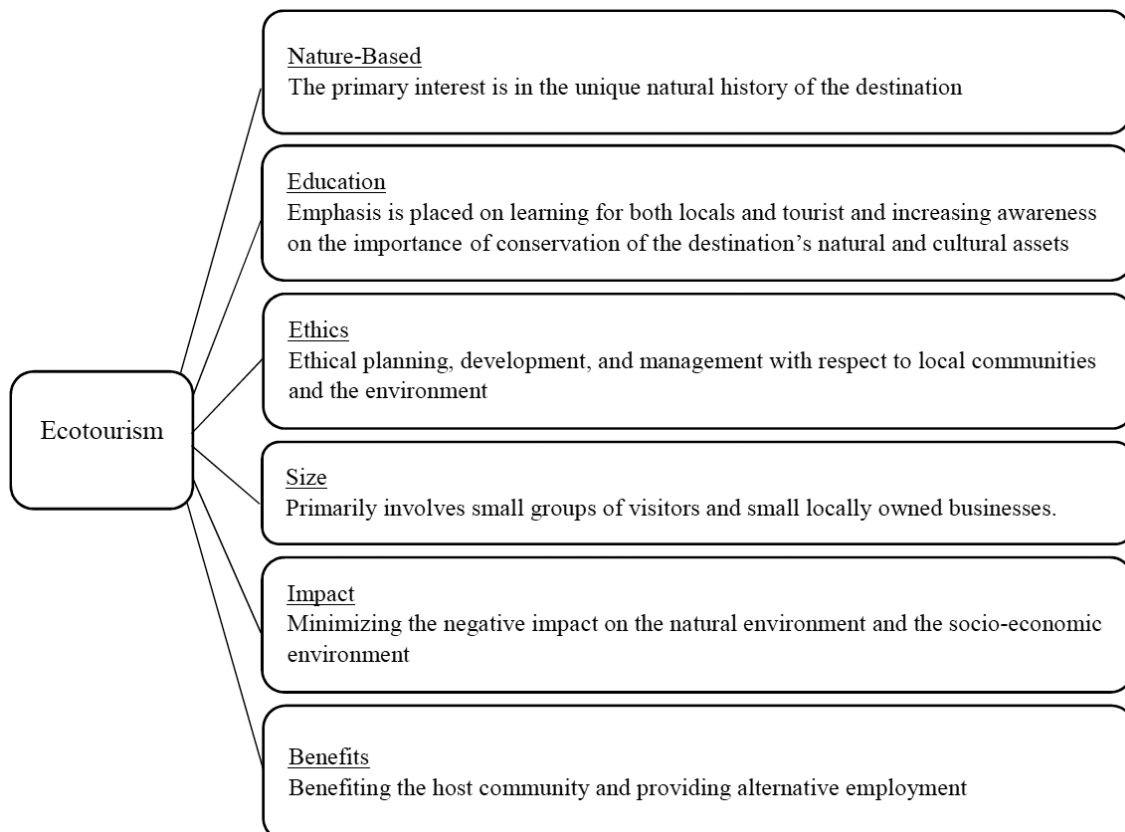


Table 1. Summary Table of Main Themes of the Current Study

Business Philosophies	Sustainable Practices	Challenges and Barriers
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “<i>As is</i>” presenting Jamaica in a holistic way 2. “<i>Back to Basics</i>” preserving the natural and cultural environment 3. “<i>Don’t just give a man a fish, teach him how to fish</i>” providing community support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - local employment - indigenous crafts/ souvenirs - infrastructure improvements - local food supply - business partnerships and collaborations - educational programs 4. “<i>Win-win all around</i>” via economic sustainability and incentivized preservation 5. “<i>To be completely independent</i>” by operational independence 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Renewable energy infrastructure (such as solar and wind energy) 2. Water catchment and conservation equipment 3. Waste management 4. Composting /Natural recycling 5. Plastic minimization/Multi-use items 6. Land resting 7. Energy saving 8. Local design and architecture 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The attitudes and level of education of staff (particularly when it came to literacy) 2. The willingness of the local community to engage with the tourism operations 3. High level of staff turnover 4. Lack of government support 5. Bureaucracy at industry and governmental levels 6. High import duties

First, it is clear that our tourism operations are engaged in *nature-based* tourism with the natural history of Jamaica as a primary focus. The philosophy of our participants to present the culture and natural environment of Jamaica in a holistic way and their efforts at preservation of the natural environment are evidence of this. In addition, closely tied to the presentation and preservation themes is the *education* dimension. All of our operations purposefully educate and inform both tourists and the local community about Jamaica’s natural and cultural assets, in addition to promoting awareness of the need for conservation. In regards to *size* dimension, not all of the tour operations in our sample would qualify as small-scale in terms of catering to small groups of travellers. However, even the large-scale operations exert significant effort to control the number of visitors and take great pains to minimize the negative impact of large groups. Speaking of *impact*, the philosophies of preservation and operational independence, provide evidence of efforts to minimize the negative impact on the natural environment. The focus of Jamaican eco-tourism operators on preservation and operational independences resonates with concerns raised by Kelman (2019), namely, a difficult balance between a successful sustainable business while minimising the footprint through waste management, alternative energy (solar and hydro), and sustainable practices of recycling, composting, or multiple usage. At the same time, the commitment to hiring within the immediate local community provides evidence of efforts to minimize the negative impact on the socio-economic environment. The commitment to hire employees within the immediate local community contrasts with what occurs in Jamaica’s mass tourism sector, where workers often travel a great distance or have to relocate from their home communities for employment due to the concentrated spatial distribution of the

all-inclusive resorts. This concentrated spatial distribution of the all-inclusive resorts has led to inadequate living conditions in areas on the outskirts of tourism hubs and disruptions to community and family life across the island (Dodman, 2009). The philosophy of community support aligns with the *benefits* dimension, as the tourism operations benefit their local communities beyond providing alternative employment. The operations bring visitors to the community creating positive spill-over. They provide patronage for local schools and community organizations and build or maintain key infrastructure. Local sourcing and partnerships create linkages for other small enterprises in the community. Finally, when considering the *ethics* dimension, the lack of consultation of the local community in the planning and development of their operations is concerning. However, our participants point to the varying attitudes towards sustainability and the lack of awareness in their local communities.

It was quite clear that all our participants were driven by concerns of mass-tourism impact on Jamaican natural and cultural environments influencing “their feelings of need to take control of events in order to reduce negative impacts” (Kornilaki et al., 2019, p.107). Our participants often exhibited a high level of personal responsibility that, ironically, also came across as a potential weakness as strong individuals with passion single-handedly led many of the operations with no clear successors on the horizon, raising the question of the long-term sustainability of these operations. We could not neatly place the participants in our study into the categories proposed by Kornilaki et al. (2019). With strong evidence of their sensitivity to environmental and sociocultural issues and altruistic beliefs, along with their primary motivation of operational independence, our participants probably lie somewhere in between activists and eco-savers.

Our participants came across as innovative entrepreneurs (i.e., early adopters) in their communities with strong foreign personal and professional connections, and with views informed by exposure to wider global perspectives. While recognizing the importance of community engagement as a validation of their contribution, the participants felt significant work is needed to raise the awareness in their communities before meaningful consultation can take place. Meanwhile, arguably, eco-certification could be seen as a form of external validation of the ethical actions of the operations of a business. The impact of eco-certification on the ecotourism industry is still under-investigated. According to Blackman et al. (2014), the Blue Flag certification in Costa Rica spurs new hotel investments in luxury hotels in economically advantaged communities. However, our participant tourism operations are mostly located in economically disadvantaged communities and have limited resources for eco-certification investments. Moreover, the benefits of eco-certification were not obvious to our participants, while the costs and amount of work required acted as deterrents. Thus, most of our participants did not feel the need for that type of external validation, at least not yet. This finding echoes the results reported by Margaryan & Stensland (2017) from their study of adoption of eco-certification among the nature-based tourism companies in Scandinavia.

Conclusion

The ecotourism industry in Jamaica is diverse in its offerings and is characterized by operations with distinct business philosophies that emphasize preservation, independence, and ties to local communities. Our study contributes to the understanding of the still largely under-researched Jamaican tourism and eco-tourism specifically (Shasha et al., 2020). It sheds light on the Jamaican ecotourism landscape and adds much needed insight into the philosophies that guide tourism operators' strategic decisions and approaches. All nine operations that could be characterised as 'small' were developed and managed by enthusiastic individuals with a strong desire to give back to Jamaica as a country and to invest in the community with the goal of natural and cultural preservation, while reaching their entrepreneurial goals. While such dynamic entrepreneurial spirit is critical for the success of the tourism operation, it also places high dependency on one or a few individuals which in turn may threaten the long-term sustainability of the operation. Existing research suggests that community support is essential for the success and longevity of ecotourism undertakings, particularly in smaller communities

(Ashley & Roe, 1998; Brohman, 1996; Simmons, 1994). At the same time, the degree of community participation in decision-making should be a subject of careful consideration due to the fact that full and effective participation of local communities while often sought for is rarely achieved (Garrod, 2003). Our findings indicate that, within the Jamaican context, ecotourism operations are largely seen and perceived as community sponsors and leaders in terms of employment. Meanwhile the local communities were not perceived by participants to be ready to engage in effective and equitable involvement in the decision-making due to low levels of awareness and literacy in some of these communities. Varying attitudes towards and awareness of sustainability and conservation of the country's cultural and natural assets limit the amount of community consultation in planning and development of these enterprises. Education plays a key role in explaining the level of community involvement, and the education dimension overlaps with the community support, preservation, and presentation philosophies of the tourism operations in our study.

Our participants recognized the importance of education in the success of their operations and communities and were therefore sponsoring local schools. While critical and necessary, these efforts are not enough for meaningful community involvement in decision-making. Community talks, round-tables, or any other activity that taps into local residents' knowledge base of the community's history and nature or increases their perception of contribution and participation could generate strong support for an ecotourism operation and create a sense of ownership among community members. However, such an undertaking would impose a heavy burden for an already resource-deprived small operation. The formation of an industry association able to sponsor a campaign to educate and to raise awareness of sustainability issues so that local communities can take their rightful place in the planning and development process would be an appropriate approach. Moreover, our study revealed the fragmented nature of the Jamaican ecotourism industry, suggesting a need for a united approach to face the uncertainty of tourism and the travel industry in a post-pandemic world. An industry association uniting existing ecotourism operators would allow for collaboration among Jamaican ecotourism operations to improve the quality and consistency of ecotourism offerings on the island. Such a collective would also be able to combine forces in advocating/lobbying and communicating the importance of cultural and natural preservation in Jamaica. Furthermore, given Fennel's (2015) view that ecotourism is site specific, the industry association could also develop its own quality control certifica-

tion program that is appropriate for the Jamaican context and comes with tangible marketing opportunities. There is also a need for succession planning, given the high dependency of the industry on the passion and values of a small number of key individuals, many of whom are in their late 50s. There is an opportunity for these individuals to mentor and train the next generation of ecotourism entrepreneurs.

Our research, however, is not without limitations. The main one relates to the time of data collection. In this paper, we examined and analysed information collected from fourteen tourism operators between 2011 and 2014. While information presented in this study is dated, especially in light of the worldwide pandemic that has greatly impacted the tourism industry overall (UNWTO, n.s.), it is still insightful as it shines light on the importance of the philosophies adopted by the founders, owners, and managers of tourism operations and their sustainability practices during the emergence of ecotourism on the island. Now that many countries, including Jamaica, are taking measures to develop policies for tourism recovery (e.g., wage subsidies to aid businesses in order to retain jobs, designating travel and tourism as a special sector for employment support, retraining and re-skilling tourism workers, etc.) (UNWTO, 2020a), the time is right for us to revisit our study participants to examine how they have been doing since our initial data collection, in addition to investigating the impact of the global pandemic on their operations.

One of the interesting observations that came out of this study, although not discussed, is the importance of the personalities of the tourism operations. Entrepreneurial studies have emphasized the importance of the achievement motivations, levels of ownership and cooperative relationships (Carsrud et al., 1989; Mahto & McDowell, 2018) and personality traits (Kerr et al., 2018) as essential predictors of successful businesses, especially in the tourism industry (Rodriguez-Sanchez et al., 2019; Presenza et al., 2019). Examining the personality characteristics of our participants presents another avenue for future studies. Finally, our study was focused on the Jamaican ecotourism operations. Future studies could look at other countries and/or regions in order to examine cross-cultural differences, if any, in developing ecotourism operations.

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