“Animistic Ecotourism: how an ancient belief system can benefit from carefully-managed tourism”

Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate that ecotourism has the potential to help launch a revival of animism within indigenous societies, and that it can spread interest in this unique and most ancient of belief systems to a wide range of people. While authors such as Honey (2008), Brunet et al (2001) and Buckley (2009) have suggested that ecotourism, when done in a culturally sensitive manner, can help sustain traditional cultures – or at least assist in preserving certain elements of these cultures that might otherwise be lost in a rapidly modernizing world – current research has neglected to identify animism as the underlying cultural element among indigenous people that needs attention and support. However, based on firsthand indigenous-guided jungle treks in Cambodia, Indonesia and Taiwan, as well as information collected from ethnographic interviews in those countries, it is evident that ecotourism can act as a catalyst for revitalizing this rapidly vanishing belief system. Animism, the belief that spirits inhabit trees, mountains, waterfalls, rocks, wild animals and other natural phenomena, is also closely tied with “bioregionalism” or ecosystem-based living, a way of life that poses a direct challenge to the current prevailing globalization narrative. Likewise, animism, if its decline can be arrested, offers exciting alternative modes of living to a globalizing and homogenizing world. Animistic ecotourism, then, offers the exciting possibility of throwing a lifeline to an ancient lifeway that is being marginalized everywhere in the world where it is still practiced, as well as offering ecotourists the chance.

Key words: animism, bioregionalism, Cambodia, ecotourism, Indonesia, Taiwan, trekking, ethnography