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Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism by Robert Fletcher

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BOOK REVIEWS

Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism by Robert Fletcher
(Duke University Press Books; 264 pages; 2014).

Robert Fletcher's research began when he decided to undertake a mountaineering trip in Wyoming. While staring at the vast, jagged peak he was about to climb, he began to ask himself why he would voluntarily put himself through that physical hardship. Thus was beginning of the project that would years later develop into *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism*. Fletcher composed his book through hands-on research, involving multi-site ethnographic research, ecotourism trips (including white water rafting and mountaineering), participant observation and interviews.

Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural, unspoiled environments. The focus of responsible travel is minimum impact on the environment and the sustained wellbeing of local people. Fletcher begins the chapters of his book with vivid descriptions of both the highs and the lows of ecotourism activities: from spectacular views of water falls, deep gorges, and suspension bridges, to eating power bars, sleeping on the ground, and experiencing complete and utter exhaustion. In this book, Fletcher aims to analyze the cultural dimensions of ecotourism (as the title of his book very clearly discloses). He also aims to illustrate that the ideal ecotourism experience may be something that cannot actually be fulfilled, always leaving the ecotourist wanting more.

Fletcher brings some interesting new insights to the field of ecotourism through his comparison of ecotourists to literary figure Don Quixote. Fletcher likens the ecotourist to Don Quixote as a romantic, heroic daredevil, but also as reckless, irresponsible, and unable to see the world for what it really is. This analysis flows nicely and wraps the book up in an interesting and thought-provoking way. It gives a reader who may not be familiar with ecotourism a good ground for comparison.

His analysis begins by describing an ideal ecotourism experience—the idea people synonymize with adventure. In the chapters that follow, Fletcher lays out who the typical ecotourist is, why, and how this identity unfolds through ecotourism. Next, he describes the development of the ecotourism industry and addresses the idea of “wilderness” that is sought through the ecotourism experience. Lastly, Fletcher analyzes ecotourism as a strategy for conservation and what he calls the “gaze” through which ecotourists evaluate their experiences.

Fletcher artfully accomplishes his goal of analyzing the cultural dimensions of ecotourism by balancing the technical jargon necessary to illustrate his analysis with vibrant descriptions of his field research and ecotourism experiences.

This thoughtful organization makes Fletcher's analysis easy to follow. This organization is also clearly laid out at the end of the introduction to the book, allowing the reader to understand exactly where the book is going. This roadmap of the chapters to come makes it easy to see the big picture of his analysis. Furthermore, it serves as a useful guide to refer back to at any time throughout the book. By nature readers can become confused about where things fit into analysis and what they

should be getting from them. However, Fletcher lays it out about as clearly as it can be.

Fletcher's vivid descriptions and stories in *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism* flow easily into his analysis of ecotourism, illustrating his points through real life experience. Fletcher gains the reader's trust and earns credibility by being upfront about his research. He is honest about what his research did not allow him to say and in which areas it was limited. For example, he discusses the cultural implications that ecotourists have on the locals in areas where they travel. He discusses his analysis through the stories of others and through the interpretation of others in the field, acknowledging that his own research afforded him little access to viewing these dynamics.

Fletcher gains further credibility with his balanced view of ecotourism, discussing both the idealist romantic side of it and the paradoxes involved in its development. For example, he discusses the paradox involved with the supporters of the ecotourism and the way they often reach out to people. Supporters of ecotourism commonly claim that they do so because they are committed to preserving the natural environment for its inherent values. However, these supporters of ecotourism often don't feel that the locals they reach out to for support will adopt these same views, and so attempt to motivate them with economic incentives.

For the most part, Fletcher adopts an informal tone that is easy to follow for a non-expert audience. However, he does use quite a bit of terminology that a non-expert reader may have a difficult time following. Specifically, he refers to many different economic concepts with which not all readers may be familiar. For example he refers often to things like anti-modernism, fordism, capitalism, neoliberalism, and virtualism. Readers unfamiliar with the characteristics of these concepts could become confused throughout the parts of the analysis that rely on them for comparison.

Overall, this book is an enjoyable read for anyone interested in the topic of ecotourism. Those working in the field of ecotourism would probably gain the most insight from the book because it would give them a better understanding of the dynamics of their industry. Fletcher offers detailed analysis of who ecotourists tend to be and what their motivations are. This would help anyone in the industry help cater their business to the needs of these ecotourists. Those interested in the dynamics of economic systems would also find the analysis interesting and thought-provoking and could perhaps liken it to other areas.

In *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism*, Robert Fletcher meets his goal of thoroughly analyzing the industry and giving new insight into the dynamics at play in ecotourism. With its interesting insights, such as its analogy with Don Quixote, this book is a great read for both those involved in the ecotourism industry and those just curious about it.

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