



Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism (New Ecologies for the Twenty-First Century)

By Robert Fletcher

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The worldwide development of ecotourism—including adventures such as mountain climbing and whitewater rafting, as well as more pedestrian pursuits such as birdwatching—has been extensively studied, but until now little attention has been paid to *why* vacationers choose to take part in what are often physically and emotionally strenuous endeavors. Drawing on ethnographic research and his own experiences working as an ecotour guide throughout the United States and Latin America, Robert Fletcher argues that participation in rigorous outdoor activities resonates with the particular cultural values of the white, upper-middle-class Westerners who are the majority of ecotourists. Navigating 13,000-foot mountain peaks or treacherous river rapids demands deferral of gratification, perseverance through suffering, and a willingness to assume risks in pursuit of continuous progress. In this way, characteristics originally cultivated for professional success have been transferred to the leisure realm at a moment when traditional avenues for achievement in the public sphere seem largely exhausted. At the same time, ecotourism provides a temporary escape from the ostensible ills of modern society by offering a transcendent "wilderness" experience that contrasts with the indoor, sedentary, mental labor characteristically performed by white-collar workers.

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Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism (New Ecologies for the Twenty-First Century) By Robert Fletcher Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1203820 in Books
- Published on: 2014-03-12
- Released on: 2014-03-12
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .65" w x 6.00" l, .80 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 264 pages

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Editorial Review

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Fletcher offers readers a serious review of ecotourism and its evolution over the past several decades. Focusing largely on the U.S. and heavily sourced, this book will be valued most by readers seeking a springboard to their own research on the topic. Fletcher writes extensively on the role of the male ego and the need to prove oneself in nature encounters and then presents the flip side of the coin by considering sexism and the lagging role of women in such leadership roles as river guide. He deconstructs the “call of the wild” and the never-ending draw of the wilderness experience, which should resonate strongly in a reality-TV era that celebrates manufactured survivor situations. Altogether, there are few aspects of the human condition as it interacts with nature that the author does not touch on, from politics to psychology to sexuality and literature (Was Don Quixote the original ecotourist?). Any reader looking for a deep understanding of ecotourism should start here. --Colleen Mondor

Review

"In *Romancing the Wild*, Robert Fletcher examines the cultural processes embedded in, and brought to light by, ecotourism practices. Through vivid ethnography and careful conceptual framing, he shows ecotourism to be an organized system of ideas, practices, and values that produces places and peoples, and structures the interface between the natural and the cultural. Fletcher reads ecotourism through critical political economy, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis and unpacks it as work, leisure, production, and consumption. With this, he gives the reader a truly anthropological view of one of the most enduring artifacts of modernity." (Paige West, author of *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea*)

"Thorough and sophisticated, *Romancing the Wild* is likely to become the key scholarly reference in contemporary studies of ecotourism. Its scope and depth mean it is a very useful resource for anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and geographers alike. It has even broader theoretical significance as a fascinating sociocultural analysis of contemporary ecotourism as a phenomenon of late-industrial society."

(Rosaleen Duffy, author of *Nature Crime: How We're Getting Conservation Wrong*)

"Fletcher forensically analyses what it is about getting active in the great outdoors that chimes with the culture of its majority attendees – white middle class westerners."

(*Wanderlust* 2014-07-01)

"Robert Fletcher, an accomplished white-water tour guide, ecotourist, and cultural anthropologist, emerges in this text as one of the rare few who possesses the skill set needed to gain ethnographic entree into this elusive, fast-moving subculture." (Sally Ann Ness *Current Anthropology*)

"Although the main topic in this substantially researched title is why people engage in ecotourism, the practical implications of this study are important. . . . The book has serious implications for those who would promote ecotourism as a primary means of saving endangered landscapes, saying it may not be the panacea we had hoped. VERDICT Recommended for academic libraries."

(*Library Journal*)

"Fletcher offers readers a serious review of ecotourism and its evolution over the past several decades.... Altogether, there are few aspects of the human condition as it interacts with nature that the author does not touch on, from politics to psychology to sexuality and literature (Was Don Quixote the original ecotourist?). Any reader looking for a deep understanding of ecotourism should start here."

(*Booklist*)

"This book makes an important contribution to tourism studies. Further, by situating the ecotourist as the quintessential postmodern subject, Fletcher offers an analysis that will be of interest to a much broader audience, linking contemporary work to leisure and contemporary production to consumption."

(Laurie Kroshus Medina *American Ethnologist*)

"In *Romancing the Wild*, Fletcher ... generally describes the contemporary ecotourist scouring the globe for the next adventure. Because anthropology is famous for getting at the humanity behind the data, works such as *Romancing the Wild* are particularly important."

(Frank Hutchins *American Anthropologist* 2015-06-01)

"[A] comprehensive and well-written discussion of the ways in which adventure seeking activities like whitewater kayaking, mountaineering, and so on, can be used to think about how and why certain kinds of dominant cultural values, norms, and discourses – such as individual autonomy, self-actualization, continual progress, and class privilege – are formulated, communicated, and experienced in identity-shaping ways."

(Luis Vivanco *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2015-11-01)

About the Author

Robert Fletcher, a cultural anthropologist, is Associate Professor in the Department of Environment and Development at the United Nations–mandated University for Peace in Costa Rica. He is the editor of *Beyond Resistance: The Future of Freedom*.

Users Review

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