

GGR223 Assignment #1

Excerpts from past student assignments

Note:

- These are meant to give you a sense for how a couple of students last year approached the assignment. We have not included the TA comments on wording, content or format (i.e., these are not necessarily perfect examples, but hopefully still helpful)
- These are based on questions and journal articles selected for 2017. See the Assignment #1 Guideline handout for the content and format requirements for 2020

Example #1:

Article: Gray, N. and L. Campbell (2007) "A decommodified experience? Exploring aesthetic, economic and ethical values for volunteer ecotourism in Costa Rica," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 15:5, pp. 463-482.

1) Argument of the article

This article argues that there are differences in the perceptions of volunteer ecotourism between volunteers, government officials, ANAI representatives and hosts, in terms of the Sea Turtle Conservation Project in Gandoca, Costa Rica. The authors look at the subtle disparities in the meaning that different actors attach to this project and how this relates to aesthetic, economic and ethical values, as well as to de-commodification and moralization. They find that volunteers want to have the aesthetic experience of viewing the turtles, feel as if they are needed, while hosts focus on the economic benefits for the community.

2) Context and significance the article

The authors argue against popular conceptions of volunteer ecotourism as simply an "ideal" type of tourism today, since it is de-commodified and benefits the community and the environment (Gray and Campbell, 2007, p.463). They specifically seek to question how ecotourism is different from other forms of tourism in terms of three values: aesthetic, economic and ethical. The authors expand on ideas, which see ecotourism as benevolent and focus mainly on the perspective of volunteers. The authors try to fill this methodological gap by including the perspectives of others like hosts. The primary regional focus of the article is Gandoca, a community on the east coast of Costa Rica. The project's research took place over three months, between June and August of 2002, as researchers interviewed volunteers and others who participated in the Sea Turtle Conservation Project funded by ANAI. The authors further note that this article is important beyond academic debate because it demonstrates the significance of volunteer ecotourism from the perspective of different actors. By analyzing ecotourism from these perspectives, the authors reveal that it can also be understood as a form of "green imperialism", since volunteers act as the "saviours" of the community and its sea turtles (Gray and Campbell, 2007, p.478).

3) Analysis of structure

Introduction:

In this section, the authors explain what volunteer ecotourism is, who is involved and how others have described it as a benevolent form of tourism. They state that the purpose of their research is to understand how the volunteers and hosts participating in Gandoca's Sea Turtle Conservation Project

make sense of volunteer ecotourism. They also analyze how the aesthetic, economic and ethical values fit into this de-commodified form of tourism. The introduction aims to give some background on volunteer ecotourism and the main perceptions of it as an “ideal” form of ecotourism (Gray and Campbell, 2007, p.463). This sub-section also introduces the main argument of the article and lays out what the following sections will expand upon. Specifically, Gray and Campbell (2007) note that they will be discussing how volunteers, hosts and other actors understand ecotourism with regards to its aesthetic, economic and ethical values.

Volunteer Ecotourism

This section mentions that there are debates over the definition of volunteer ecotourism, but many still agree that it is both an effort to conserve the environment and help the community. This is different from, and is often seen as “morally superior” to commodified mass tourism where visitors just observe the area, rather than have an impact (Gray and Campbell, 2007, p.465). In this section the authors also describe the three values associated with tourism, aesthetic, economic and ethical and how they relate to volunteer ecotourism and this project in Gandoca specifically. The purpose of this section is to describe the ways that volunteer ecotourism has been defined by other scholars and to give some background on how this category came to be. This fits into the overall argument because it defines what these three values of tourism mean in terms of the volunteer ecotourism project in Gandoca. This section is related to the others as it helps readers to better understand what volunteer ecotourism is and how it does or does not benefit the community.

Ecotourism in Gandoca, Costa Rica

In this section the authors explain to the reader’s specific details about Gandoca, Costa Rica, its location and population. They also explain when the ANAI’s Sea Turtle Conservation Project began, what it aims to do, and how volunteers and hosts participate. The purpose of this section is to give readers background on the Sea Turtle Conservation Program. This fits into the overall argument as it describes who the different actors are and their roles, which could shape how they perceive ecotourism as a whole. This section is more specific than the one above it, as it considers what ecotourism in Costa Rica looks like.

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Example #2:

Article: Caprotti, F., et al (2015) “‘Eco’ for whom? Envisioning eco-urbanism in the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city, China,” International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, pp. 495-517.

1) Argument of the article

Caprotti, Springer and Harmer argue that Tianjin eco-city is discursively marketed and designed to protect its residents from, rather than positively contribute to, the external environment. They illustrate the contradictions between the claims of “ecologically modernizing visions” and the material reality of Tianjin eco-city, which strains itself to foster an eco-friendly urban environment through its sanitization, filtration, fabrication, commodification and isolation. They examine the meaning of ‘eco’ (and its beneficiaries) in the context of residential space in Tianjin eco-city.

2) Context and significance of the article

The motives behind China’s sustainability goals are called into question through a case study of Tianjin eco-city. Specifically, the authors argue against an “technological-economic” approach because it creates pockets of wealth in eco-enclaves through technological forms of gating. They oppose the

strained narrative of social harmony and ecological sustainability that conceal the eco-city for what it is: just one more new-build luxury residential project whose economic bottom line benefits developers, stakeholders, and eco-apartment owners, rather than the surrounding environment or society at large. Their study builds on a recent proliferation of research on how eco-cities are discursively constructed and marketed, often through vague notions of sustainability. It expands upon the uneven development of ecological modernization, as well as the notion that cities are both the cause of, and remedy to real environmental concerns in a contemporary Chinese context. In particular, the article provides new insight into the discursive construction and design of domestic space in eco-cities.

Since 2000, eco-cities have garnered much attention, yet few have come to fruition. In this way Tianjin eco-city is exceptional, with estimated completion between 2017 and 2022. The analysis of Tianjin eco-city is linked to broader trend of increasing speculative development reshaping cities in China. Analysis here is mostly on the residential scale, including the highways, green spaces and 5,500 “eco-apartments” of Tianjin eco-city. Regional, national and “supra-scalar” scales are also used to evaluate incentives behind eco-city projects, for example, examining the SSTECS location within the Tianjin Binhai New Area Special Economic Zone. The authors’ conclusions are significant beyond academe in a few ways. Understanding the planning of Tianjin eco-city is a “window” into how China’s future plans for eco-urbanism will unfold, as the site is both a flagship project of its kind and an experimental zone for new social, economic and technological policies. More broadly, the authors object to the lack of humanity/spontaneity that is intrinsic to the growth of a city and the silences around why a new-build project like the SSTECS is required in the first place.

3) Analysis of structure

Introduction: Tianjin eco-city

Caprotti et al. explain the relevance of Tianjin eco-city in the context of a recent proliferation in large-scale, eco-city projects, dubbed an ‘eco-revolution’ seen in China and elsewhere. Key ideas, activities, scales and priorities (genuine or otherwise) of the eco-city are introduced. In particular, the tension between discourses of the eco-city as environmentally conscious versus one of “comfort, wealth and high-tech living” is raised. The research question: “eco for whom?” is followed by a roadmap of their argument. The methodology of the paper is discussed, which includes purposive, interview-based research conducted across three periods of field-based research in Tianjin during 2011 to 2013.

Constructing eco-cities

The authors conduct a literature review on eco-urbanism, highlighting a few lines of investigation that informed their research design. This includes analyses of the relation between market, corporate and state incentives and eco-city development, national planning and governance issues surrounding eco-cities, and the discursive construction of the eco-city as desirable. Three challenges are identified: how to assess the (ecological) performance of eco-cities, how economic transition strategies impact the design, construction and populating of eco-cities, and how to understand eco-cities as incubators for ‘testing’ climate change solutions. The authors locate the significance of Tianjin eco-city within a historical trajectory from traditional city-building to the utopian urban projects of today that merge social, environmental and economic goals with urban design. The reader now understands the eco-city within a global landscape of speculative development, new technologies and planning interventions.

From ecological modernization to a ‘harmonious society’

Caprotti et al. interpret the rhetoric of ‘harmony’ to mean socioeconomic homogeneity. They question the Chinese government’s imperative to construct harmonious societies through ecologically modern visions like Tianjin’s eco-city. In reality, Chinese urban centres have added to the experience of socio-

spatial exclusion through technological forms of gating and high prices. The idea that urban sustainability can be achieved solely through “economic-technological terms” (and without consideration for the social composition of a development) is challenged. In contrast to the previous section, which reviewed existing research on eco-cities, this section raises gaps in knowledge about eco-cities, namely, the flip use of ‘sustainability’ in speculative projects like Tianjin eco-city, the political economy of Chinese urbanisation, and the city as a “socio-natural construct”. These lacks all point to the overarching argument that eco-city visions are discursively produced for an economic agenda.

The Sino-Singapore Tianjin eco-city project

This section names economic actors, institutions and indicators behind the Tianjin eco-city project. We are reminded that this flagship urban project is a highly speculative one for its stakeholders; Tianjin eco-city is first and last an economic venture. As a part of the Tianjin Binhai New Area Special Economic Zone, it is both an experiment for eco-industrial reforms and a precedent for future developments. This section elaborates on the regional significance of Tianjin eco-city that was stated in the introductory section. The actors, institutions and indicators listed are related to a national vision of eco-modernization. The Key Performance Indicator index is an example of how the economic face of Tianjin eco-city is essential to the production of ‘eco’ as green.

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