Title: Eco-tourism or Eco-terrorism:

Do Ecotours in Hong Kong Contribute to Sustainable Development of the Natural Environment Through Education?
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1. Introduction

Ecotourism is a new booming type of tourism in Hong Kong. According to the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, there were only 203 thousand visitors to the 4 marine parks in 2006 to 2007\(^1\) and the number increased to 230 thousand in 2010 to 2011 (Figure 1).\(^2\) This indicates that ecotourism is becoming more popular in the past five years.

\[\text{Figure 1}\]

Although the number of visitors going to places with high ecological value is increasing, it does not necessarily mean that the ecotourism in Hong Kong is operant. The effectiveness of ecotours depends on whether the tours meet the definition of


\(^{2}\)Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department. Department Annual Report 2010-2011, 
“ecotourism”. The development of the natural environment is sustainable if ecotours effectively promote the idea of environmental conservation. Ecotours are regarded as “contributive to sustainable development of the natural environment” if it can promote environmental education.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines “ecotourism” as a “responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment...” and those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should “minimize the impact, build environmental and cultural awareness and respect...” Scace proposed in 1993 that ecotourism is a nature-based tourism and is product planning and management that is conducive to sustainability. Sustainable development means the development of the environment which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations that meet theirs” according to the World Commission Environment Development. We should take no more from nature than the nature can replenish.

However, I have participated in a so-called “ecotour” held by a local travel agency to Hoi Ha Wan in 2011. There was no explanation on what we saw and the guide did

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not encourage us to build environmental awareness and respect. He picked up starfish, crabs and sea cucumbers from the water and showed us how cute the animals were. He also instigated us to play with the creatures. I even witnessed people throwing starfish as Frisbees and the guide did nothing to stop them. After the trip, I doubt the effectiveness of the ecotours in educating the participants to conserve the environment. I would like to find out whether the ecotours in Hong Kong really contribute to the natural environment positively. Or is it a wolf in sheep clothing which actually destroys the natural beauty?

2. Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

a. To find out reasons for people joining ecotours.

b. To investigate the effectiveness of ecotourism in Hong Kong contributing to sustainable development of the environment.

c. To explore the impact of ecotourism to the natural environment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire

The target interviewees are the general public. The questionnaire was uploaded to a social networking website, sent out through e-mail and distributed via a youth centre. There were 109 respondents. The questionnaire asks about respondents’ reasons for joining ecotours, tours activities and their perceived value of the ecotours.

3.2 Interview

The data collection process includes an interview with an eco-activity organizer of a youth centre. She has been organizing ecotours to various ecological sites in Hong Kong for teenagers. She was asked about expectation of and reasons for holding
ecotours and whether she was satisfied with the outcomes.

3.3 Site visits

In order to study the content of ecotours in Hong Kong and the impact of ecotourism to the environment more objectively, I went to two popular ecotourist spots, Hoi Ha Wan and Tai Po Kau on 15 and 24 April, 2012 respectively. Photos of the ecotours operation and the environment were taken.

3.4 Limitation

Only 109 responses were collected from the survey and most of the respondents were aged 15-17, the sample size may not be large enough to reveal the circumstance of all the ecotours in Hong Kong.

Only one ecotour organizer was interviewed, she does not represent the whole ecotourism industry in Hong Kong.

4. **Literary Review**

The research, “Ecotourism in Hong Kong: its current status and prospects” conducted by Kwok Fun-ki of the University of Hong Kong studied the ecotourism development in Hong Kong. It discussed about the constraints, economic benefits, necessity of developing ecotourism industry as a whole and thus had a broader scope than this project. The research is still useful as it provides in-depth discussion on ecotourism.

The research defines ecotourism as tourism which “premise responsible travel and the concept of sustainable development for both enjoyment of tourists and conservation of nature.”\(^7\) Participants should leave only footprints but nothing else at

the spots and take away memories but nothing else from the environment.\textsuperscript{8}

The research also suggested that “without formal registration system, there is lack of control and monitoring to the qualities of inbound travel agents and tour guides” \textsuperscript{7} This shows that the quality of ecotourism in Hong Kong is not guaranteed, which matches with the words of Mr Lewis Cheung Ting-on, former WWF Education Officer, “Ecotours with activities that vary greatly have flooded the market.”\textsuperscript{9} Moreover, the research found out that “the influx of tourists to the preserved areas would damage the natural environment.”\textsuperscript{7} The poorly conducted ecotours add stress to the fragile ecosystem. Ecotour participants leave rubbish and cause pollution to the ecological sites. Another article published on The Standard on 4 October, 2005, “Hoi Ha Wan Facing Tourist Threat” revealed that ecological sites, eg, Hoi Ha Wan are harmed by ecotour participants, “they pillage the marine environment of coral, seahorses and hermit crabs.”\textsuperscript{10}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{8} Footprint. What is ecotourism. \url{http://www.footprint.org.hk/edu_act.php} (last accessed on July 12, 2012)
    \item \textsuperscript{9} Lewis Cheung Ting On. 香港生態旅遊前瞻. \url{http://marketing.mingpao.com/jump-tourism/} (last accessed on November 20, 2011)
    \item \textsuperscript{10} The Standard. Hoi Ha Wan Under Tourist Threat. October 04, 2005.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
5. **Findings and Analysis**

5.1 **Trend of people joining ecotour**

This part investigates the popularity of ecotourism.

There is an increasing trend for people joining ecotourism according to the interviewee. Number of teenagers joining ecotours in her youth centre has nearly doubled from 2009 to 2011. Ecotourism has its popularity increased. Yet, the survey indicates that only 38% of respondents have participated in ecotourism before (Figure 2). The proportion is still low. Lack of promotion might be the reason for that. Most environmental groups are non-profit making. They can hardly publicize their ecotours though mass media such as televisions with their deficient capital. They take the passive role in waiting for people to click on their websites or visit their centers to collect information of ecotours.

5.2 **Intentions of people to join ecotours**

This part reviews the reasons for people joining (Figure 3) and hoping to join (Figure 4) ecotours. The reasons are arranged into three main categories, sightseeing, obtaining knowledge and others.
5.2.1 Sightseeing

Sightseeing is the main reason for people to participate in ecotours. It includes “to have fun in countryside” and “to visit places with special ecological values.” About half of the survey respondents choose these as reasons for them to participate in ecotours. This may be due to the limited chance to get in touch with the nature and
curiosity of people towards the natural environment.

5.2.2 Obtaining knowledge

The will to obtain knowledge is the second reason for people to join ecotours. Over 30% of respondents choose this as the reason. They wish to learn more about the ecology of the environment and ways of environmental protection. This shows that the participants are interested in the natural environment. However, it is notable that most respondents want to learn theoretical ecological knowledge and only very few of them (less than 10%) wish to learn practicable environmental protection skills. This shows that the environmental conservation awareness of people is low, and it is also mentioned by the interviewee. They are indifferent in protecting the environment.

5.2.3 Others

There are other reasons for people to join ecotours, such as peer influence, etc.

5.2.4 Compendium

People participate in ecotours because they want to enjoy the natural beauty and learn theoretical facts about the ecosystem. They barely want to learn about feasible skills to protect the environment.

5.3 Effectiveness of ecotourism in Hong Kong

Ecotourism in Hong Kong is multi-functional because it provides a refreshing environment for participants to enjoy and it serves the educational purpose as well. The effectiveness of ecotourism in Hong Kong in contributing to sustainable development of the environment is investigated in this part. It is deduced from the content of general ecotours in Hong Kong and the effectiveness of ecotours in environmental education.

5.3.1 Content of general ecotours in Hong Kong

The major objectives of ecotourism in Hong Kong and the activities of ecotours (Figure 5) in Hong Kong are investigated in this part.
The ecotours in Hong Kong include wildlife watching, such as birds, dolphins and fireflies and guided nature walks in ecologically-rich sites such as Hoi Ha Wan, Tai Po Kau and Mai Po.

From Clevo Wilson, “the importance of environmental education as a component of ecotourism is highlighted.” From the interview, the interviewee says that the main purpose of organizing ecotours for teenagers is to let them appreciate the nature and to try to motivate them to protect the precious nature. She always includes a debriefing section after each ecotour to encourage environmental protection. In addition, over half of the survey respondents agree that they have gained knowledge about the ecological sites and environmental conservation through ecotourism. That is, ecotours in Hong Kong aim at environmental education. Time and effort is spent on educating the participants.

Figure 5

The ecotours in Hong Kong include wildlife watching, such as birds, dolphins and fireflies and guided nature walks in ecologically-rich sites such as Hoi Ha Wan, Tai Po Kau and Mai Po.

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However, some activities in some ecotours may not be environmental friendly as participants impair the environment, for example, taking rocks and seashells home from the ecological sites as souvenirs and play with animals and plants at the ecological sites. These activities disrupt wildlife. Sometimes, the tour guides may also maximize their profits by pleasing their customers at expense of harming the environment.

5.3.2 Contribution to environmental education

5.3.1 has concluded that environmental education is the main purpose of ecotourism in Hong Kong. The Nature Conservancy defines environmental education as the increase the level of education and activism among travelers, making them more enthusiastic and effective agents of conservation.\textsuperscript{12} Hence, environmental education involves both theoretical and practicable environmental knowledge. This part is going to investigate whether ecotourism in Hong Kong can achieve the goal.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{perceived_gain_from_ecotours.png}
\caption{Perceived gain from ecotours}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{12} The Nature Conservancy. What is Ecotourism. 
\url{http://www.nature.org/greenliving/what-is-ecotourism.xml} (last accessed on July 12, 2012)
From the survey result, 35% of respondents think the most important benefit they have gained from ecotours is new knowledge (Figure 6). Over 95% of respondents agree that ecotourism has enhanced their knowledge of conserving the environment (Figure 7). The figures suggest that ecotourism enables participants to learn theoretical facts about the ecological sites and ways to conserve the environment quite effectively. Participants can acquire information about the environment through the ecotour guide and education panels set up along the nature trails (Photo 1).

Ecotourism in Hong Kong raises the level of education among participants. However, after learning how to protect the environment, participants will not necessarily apply the knowledge into daily life. Only 25% of ecotour participants think the motivation to protect the environment is the most prominent benefit from ecotourism (Figure 6). Even if there is motivation, it is not guaranteed that it lasts long. As mentioned by the interviewee, the benefits of joining ecotours are short-term. Participants may easily forget what they have learnt. They may be inspired by the beauty of nature and determine to protect the precious environment during the
ecotours. But soon, when they are back to their work and normal lives, the incitement fades. Some participants are not willing to change their usual living habits to more environmental friendly ones. The level of activism among participants cannot be raised. They may not be enthusiastic and effective agents of conservation. It is notable that from 5.1.2, only less than 10% participants join ecotours because they want to acquire ways to preserve the environment (Figures 2 and 3). This may be a reason why ecotourism in Hong Kong slight the encouragement on practicable environmental protection in daily access. The environmental awareness of people is low and ecotours in Hong Kong fail to move participants to engage in environmental conservation.

Photo 1 shows an ecotour participant reading an education panel.

5.3.3 Impact of ecotourism to the environment

Ecotourism activities are, in of itself, issues in environmental impact because they disturb fauna and flora. This part is going to discuss about the negative impacts of ecotourism on the environment.

Influx of tourists to the preserved areas would damage the natural environment. Over 55% of participants agree that the activities of ecotour damage the environment (Figure 8). As mentioned previously in 5.3.1, some ecotours are not environmentally friendly as participants can impair the environment. They take things such as rocks away from the ecological sites as souvenirs, which damages the habitats of various creatures. Some participants even take away the small creatures at the ecological sites. The article, Hoi Ha Wan Facing Tourist Threat, mentions that tourists fill water bottles with hermit crabs and take away with them. They also play with animals and plants at the sites. I have observed an ecotour participant taking away seashells at Hoi Ha Wan but the tour guided did not stop her (Photo 2). The action disturbs wildlife. Furthermore, an environmental group, Friends of Hoi Ha Wan claims that “as a government-listed ‘Site of Special Scientific Interest,’ Hoi Wa Wan suffers from busloads of tourists on busy weekends, as well as uncertified eco-tourist guides who
have no experience in ecotourism."\(^{14}\)  The lack of management of ecotourism in Hong Kong may be the cause of the irresponsible ecotour guides and detrimental activities. There is no formal registration system and travel agencies can always label their sightseeing journeys as “eco”, no matter they consider principles of ecotourism or not. 7

Moreover, participants of ecotours also bring in rubbish and noise to the ecological sites and cause pollution. From my observations in the two popular ecotourism spots, Hoi Ha Wan and Tai Po Kau, I found out that the number of participants per ecotour is around 40, which is quite large. The large number of participants may introduce serious land and noise pollution. There was rubbish left by ecotour participants at both sites (Photos 3 and 4). The interviewee also admitted that although she had tried her best to avoid participants from damaging the environment, littering might occur. “It is hard to always keep an eye on every participant,” she said.

In addition, the harm brought to the ecological sites has long-term adverse effect to the environment. Once the comprehensive ecosystem is damaged, it takes a long time, even millions of years to recover.

Photo 2 shows an ecotour participant taking away seashells in Hoi Ha Wan.

Photo 3 shows rubbish left by ecotour participants in Hoi Ha Wan.

Photo 4 shows rubbish found in Tai Po Kau.

5.3.4 Compendium

Ecotourism in Hong Kong effectively enhances participants’ theoretical understanding about the environment and ways to protect the environment. However, it fails to incite participants to protect the environment. Ecotourism itself has also negative impact to the environment, which can be deduced as ineffectiveness in practicable environmental education.

6 Conclusion

Firstly, from the study, it is found out that ecotourism is not popularized. The participation rate is low although an increasing trend is observed. The effect of environmental education to the public is limited. In addition, the main reason for people to join ecotours is to sightsee rather than to obtain knowledge. The willingness and passion to learn affects the outcomes of ecotours.

Secondly, the ecotours organized in Hong Kong aim at environmental education. They succeed in delivering environmental knowledge to participants. Nevertheless, they fail in inciting participants to protect the environment.

Thirdly, the quality of ecotours varies and some poorly-conducted ecotour activities harm the environment. This can be perceived as ineffectiveness in
environmental education- participants spoil the environment during the ecotours and it is probable that they will not engage in environmental protection after the tours.

To sum up, the effectiveness of ecotours in Hong Kong in contributing to sustainable development of the environment is limited because the number of participants is small, ecotours often harm the environment and they have low ability to motivate participants to conserve the environment.

Aimed to prevent ecotourism from evolving into eco-terrorism, some suggestions on further ecotourism development in Hong Kong are as follows:

First of all, the government should take the leading role to establish long-sighted ecotourism management policies. It is the only body which has the right to monitor different ecotour organizers. The quality of ecotours can be improved by setting up comprehensive licensing systems for ecotour organizers and guides. This can perhaps reduce environmental damaging behaviors. The environment can be better preserved by legislating regulations on activities of ecotours.

Secondly, the government can also promote ecotourism hand-in-hand with environmental groups. The government can subsidize more on the cost of organizing ecotours so as to minimize the operation fee of the environmental groups. More resources can be spent on promotion and advertising. Thus, more people participate in ecotourism so more participants can receive the environmental education.

Thirdly, ecotourism is only a mean of environmental education. To achieve sustainable development of the environment, promotions on environmental protection, such as television commercials, public campaigns, are required.

7 Reflection

From the study, I have gained much knowledge about ecotourism in Hong Kong, which has broadened my horizons. I tried to look into the good and bad sides of an
issue. This improves my skills of critical thinking. Moreover, since I had to collect and handle lots of data, I have obtained the skill of organizing and presenting data in a clear manner. Time management skill is another gain from the study. The study lasted through the whole academic year and I had to allot the time well so as to finish the whole study on time. I also learn to be independent since I had to solve the problems encountered by myself. It was difficult to look for an interviewee who was familiar to the issue. I tried to contact different environmental groups such as the World Wildlife Fund but to no avail. Finally, I invited a well-experienced eco-activity organizer from a youth centre for the interview.

It is surprising to find out that actually the government has no comprehensive licensing and monitoring system of ecotourism in Hong Kong. This leads to poor quality of some so-called ecotours, which have negative impact to the environment. I hope the government can look into the matter and efficiently develop ecotourism in Hong Kong.

In addition, further study can be done on the negative impact of ecotourism to the environment and the ecosystem as this study only reveals the impacts shallowly due to limited time and equipment.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my teachers for their patience and guidance. I would also like to express my gratitude towards the interviewee for her support and advice, the respondents of the survey for their time spent on completing the questionnaires. Without their generous help, the completion of this study would not be possible.

(3,382 words)
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   http://www.ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism (last accessed on July 12, 2012)


5. Sustainable Development Unit, the World Commission on Environment and Development, "Our Common Future", 1987


Newspaper:

Appendix I
Questionnaire

Eco-tourism or eco-terrorism-Do ecotours in Hong Kong contribute to sustainable development through education?

1. 你曾否參加生態旅遊？
   - O 有
   - O 沒有

2. 你想參加生態旅遊團嗎？
   - O 想
   - O 不想

3. 你參加的主要原因是：（最多可選 2 項）
   - O 想學習更多生態知識
   - O 想更了解保護環境的方法
   - O 想到有特殊價值的地方遊覽
4. 你認為你參加的生態旅遊團對該生態地點造成多大程度的破壞？

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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. (4 為最大程度，1 為最小程度) *

5. 你想參加的主要原因是：（最多可選 2 項）

- [ ] 想學習更多生態知識
- [ ] 想更了解保護環境的方法
- [ ] 想到有特殊價值的地方遊覽
- [ ] 想到郊外遊玩
- [ ] 其他 ___________

6. 你在旅程中曾經：（可選擇多於 1 項）

- [ ] 把玩動物、植物
- [ ] 把原屬生態旅遊地點的東西帶回家作紀念品(如石頭、貝殼等)
- [ ] 學習關於生態旅遊地點的資料、知識（如生態系統、動植物的特點和分辨方法等）
- [ ] 學習保護環境的方法

想到郊外遊玩

受別人邀請

其他 ___________
7. 你有多大程度同意以下句子？

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>非常同意</th>
<th>同意</th>
<th>不同意</th>
<th>非常不同意</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. 「生態旅遊增加了我的保育知識。」

8. 你參加生態旅遊團後有何得著？（請選擇最貼切的一項）

- 受啟發要保護環境
- 學習到新知識
- 愉快地遊玩了一天
- 其他

9. 你在揀選生態旅遊團時會注重甚麼條件？（請選擇 4 項）

- 舉辦機構的知名度
- 舉辦機構的口碑
- 生態旅遊的活動
- 生態旅遊地點的生態價值
10. 你認為生態旅遊團應包括甚麼活動？

其他

11. 你的年齡是：

- 12 歲以下
- 12-14 歲
- 15-17 歲
- 17 歲以上
Appendix II
Interview with an eco-activity organizer of a youth centre

Date: May 15, 2012
Time: 9am-10am
Mode of interview: personal interview

Interview questions:
1) What is the content of ecotours organized?
2) What are the expectations of organized ecotours?
3) Do you think the ecotours organized can achieve the goals? Why or why not?
4) How many participants are there in each ecotour?
5) What do you think are the reasons for teenagers joining ecotours?
6) What are reasons for not joining ecotours?
7) Is ecotourism beneficial or harmful to the environment?
8) Can ecotourism effectively contribute to environmental education and sustainable development of the environment?
9) If not, how can it be improved?
### Appendix III

**Record sheet of site visit in Hoi Ha Wan**

**Venue**: Hoi Ha Wan  
**Date**: April 15, 2012  
**Time**: 2pm-4pm

<table>
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<th>Ecotour</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age of participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Duration of ecotour</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
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<tr>
<th>Ecotour guide</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Detailed</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Note : /</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environmental protection</td>
<td>Did not encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Note :</td>
<td>Did not stopped a girl from taking seashells away</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Acts</th>
<th>Littering</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Play with small creatures</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Take away stones, seashells, etc</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help clear and tidy the environment</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listen to the guide</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Others : /</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conservators</td>
<td>Unseen</td>
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### Appendix IV

**Record sheet of site visit in Tai Po Kau**

**Venue:** Tai Po Kau Nature Reserve  
**Date:** 24/4/2012  
**Time:** 3pm-5pm

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Note:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Answered lots of questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-Pictures were used for better explanation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Note:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Emphasize the harm to the nature caused by ecotourism</td>
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<td>-Participants were asked to keep silent so as to minimize disturbance to wildlife</td>
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| Exemplar 10 | Eco-tourism or Eco-terrorism | 9 | • This is an in-depth and comprehensive study of ecotourism, with a clear and detailed scope of study, research objectives and a systematic analysis of findings.  
• Various data sources such as Websites, news articles, books, were referred to.  
• The findings and analysis were presented in a clear and systematic manner. They were highly relevant to the research objectives, such as reasons for people joining tours; the effectiveness of ecotourism and the impact of ecotours on the environment. Also a multi-perspective analysis was conducted, for example, the reasons for people joining eco-tours were discussed under 3 categories: sightseeing, obtaining knowledge and others.  
• The candidate provided insightful ideas and views on assessing the values and limitations on ecotourism for different stakeholders.  
• A high level of reflection shows the value and experience that the candidate gained from this study.  
• However, more information as evidence should have been included in the discussion on the effectiveness of ecotourism. |