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Introduction

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, a tenth of global jobs and GDP are rooted in the tourism industry (WTTC, 2018). Ecotourism specifically is one of the tourism industry's fastest growing sectors and has seen growth rates as high as 10-30% (EBSCO, 2009). Though for some, tourism may conjure up pleasant thoughts about sipping margaritas in Cancun, millions of people interact with and indeed depend upon the sector for a livelihood. As a champion of these millions and their communities, as well as of the environment, education, and economies of millions more, ecotourism and its growing popularity stand ready to improve the future of the world at large.

Ecotourism is a recent concept, the origins of its contemporary usage beginning in the 1970s (Singh, 2009). In keeping with social movements at the time, the notion of ecotourism paid attention to how to alleviate negative impacts on the environment while advocating for the empowerment of the marginalized people involved, i.e. those populating the local communities wherein tourism took place. Though the meaning of 'ecotourism' has and continues to change, many attempts have been made to define it and a rough consensus on its core principles has emerged, evidenced by The International Ecotourism Society's terse definition: "Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education." (TIES, 2015).

This paper hopes to introduce the reader to the aims of the ecotourism industry, its different actors, and some of its pitfalls and potential. In doing so, it will orient the reader to ecotourism and its theoretical contours by employing examples from across the globe, which will provide a framework for understanding ecotourism generally. The scope will then narrow to two nations that have already done much to lead the field in the Middle East, Jordan and Oman. Along with the author's personal experience with both countries, they are at the forefront of ecotourism in their region, there is a great corpus of research in English documenting their progress, they are both stable politically, and the differences between the two make them an excellent pair side-by-side study. Though the framework established earlier will not map cleanly on to these two case studies, it will inform the discussion as it moves on next to the unique successes and challenges of developing the ecotourism sector in these countries.

The paper concludes with larger lessons and recommendations that have relevance for the Middle East as a whole. It is undeniable that the region is both dependent upon and ripe for tourism development, evidenced by the fact that it witnessed international tourist arrivals grow from 24.1 million in 2000 to 58.2 million in 2010 (Ayeh, 2017). This growth coincides with a broader, more international trend, as demonstrated by the U.N. General Assembly's declaration of 2017 as the "International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development." It is

hence the author's stance that, while it faces some challenges, ecotourism has the potential to sustainably and sensitively aid the development of Middle Eastern economies. Indeed, the Middle East is not only well-positioned to participate in the global trend towards more sustainable tourism development, but can lead the drive through ecotourism efforts.

Ecotourism Overview & General Discussion

Though it may seem pedantic, defining ecotourism and its dimensions is necessary to understand how to judge the successes or failures of any ecotourist operation. Unfortunately, ecotourism as a term encompasses many different interpretations, and it thus resists easy definition. Some have simply used it to describe any form of outdoor recreation and nature-based trips, although even in its earlier usage many academics stressed its educational components (Diamantis, 1999). Others prefer to emphasize sustainability and claim that ecotourism's primary focus should be healthy practices that diminish the economic and environmental impacts of normal tourism on surrounding community (Hunter, 1995). Building off this last usage, others yet foreground the local community at the heart of ecotourism, requiring inclusion of local inhabitants in the profits and administration of the operation (Donohoe & Needham, 2006). Clearly, ecotourism is a convoluted term and unraveling its many meanings merits its own paper. Accordingly, this paper will continue to roughly abide by the aforementioned definition supplied by The International Ecotourism Society, chosen for its concision and wide recognition. This definition differentiates ecotourism from conventional tourism, which may be understood as tourism without any of the normative principles, objectives, or constraints that accompany ecotourism. The sole purpose of conventional tourism is economic profit, often expressed as high-volume mass tourism which can lead to the degradation of a place's attractiveness (Theng et al., 2015). Conversely, ecotourism strives to achieve greater conservation, responsibility, sustainability, and education.

1. Actors

In this definition, then, an ideal ecotourism model incorporates an attentiveness to the needs of the local community, a combination of cultural and environmental attractions, education about said attractions, and a minimization of ecological impact. However, even these parameters leave room for variation and many different ecotourism operations across the globe take different forms. Some are state-owned and operated while others are administered by NGOs, and some are branches of transnational companies while others are local industries. Every version of ecotourism involves, albeit to varying degrees, four main actors. As laid out by Dr. Peter Bjork, "The following groups of actors have to co-operate: the tourists, the tourism companies (the tourism industry), the authorities, and the

local people” (Bjork, 2000). For clarity, this paper will retain the terms used by Dr. Bjork with the sole alteration of naming the ‘tourism companies (tourism industry)’ the ‘private tourism industry’ to distinguish it from the ecotourism industry as a whole.

1.1 Local Communities

Local people tend to be the actors with the least agency, and thus demand prioritization in any sustainable ecotourism model. In fact, to refer back to the definition of ecotourism, the well-being of the local people is a requisite characteristic. Local communities differ from place to place, including nomadic peoples, small villages, or large townships. Some communities are more family-based and others more civic-based, and thus approaches to incorporating them in the decision-making process varies too, but it is important to meet them on their own terms rather than discounting their modes of life as unfit for autonomy. There are a number of ways in which this discounting can occur, sometimes even by infringing on the prerogatives for self-determination and resource access provided them by the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, which often targets the most vulnerable demographics of “women, indigenous peoples, people living in disputed areas and children” (De Man, 2013). In addition to having a say in the initial decision-making, local communities deserve inclusion in the running of ecotourism projects in recognition that their opinions and values are not static and do change with the progress of a project. One way to accomplish this is to include them through employment, intentional purchasing, and other monetary chains. Panama, where 56% of tourism income returns to local households, has adopted this principle and sought to locally supply “products, labor, tourism services, and increasingly ‘green services’ in energy and water efficiency and waste management” (Bricker & Hunt, 2014).

1.2 Authorities

The authorities’ role is more fluid in that it can serve to reinforce the local communities’ wishes or sometimes to oppose them directly, often when taking the side of the private tourism industry. Enticed by the prospect of profit, development, and foreign investment some governments are too eager to develop a site for ecotourism before obtaining the consent of and considering the impacts on the local people. This can occur especially when the local people live more traditional lifestyles and thus remain on the fringes of conventional citizenship; for example, the high illiteracy rates among Maasai tribespeople led to the local government overseeing the conservation and management of their traditional pastoral lands on their behalf (Chepkwony, 2015). This poses the danger of excluding another key actor, the local community, in the ecotourism process. Without a voice in the process, these parties lose access to the financial benefits

of tourism development while their proximity entails enduring many of the effects, whether they be environmental degradation, elevated cost of living, or cultural intrusion.

However, authorities also provide the institutional support and assets in backing local communities' interests. Whether at a regional or national level, legislative, executive, and judicial powers all can play a critical role in advocating for local communities. The national government of Bhutan has sought a "high value, low volume" model of ecotourism that has minimized the negative impacts of tourism on the local populace, conserving their environment, culture, and livelihoods (Rinzin et al., 2008). Furthermore, in Cambodia, the endorsement of community-based organizations by the national government, particularly the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Tourism, has empowered those organizations to make their own decisions in determining the role of outside operators in local ecotourism projects (Mom, 2016). The role of governmental authorities is vital to the success of sustainable ecotourism and must be used wisely to further amplify the benefits accrued to local people, rather than losing their input in an exploitative quest to develop the economy.

1.3 Tourists

One often overlooked group is the tourists themselves. Though it is tempting to categorize this actor as reactive—a consistent demand-side force that responds to changes in the other parties—tourists themselves can influence what ecotourism looks like. Bjork has astutely considered the matter:

“A central question still unresolved is how much are tourists willing to pay for trips that are more sustainable than mass tourism? Although the environment is in focus, we have to keep in mind that even this kind of tourism must be based on profitmaking activities, and tourists must have the opportunity to enjoy their stay (D' Ayala, 1995; Giannellini, 1993). Another important unresolved question is how much comfort do ecotourists need? Are they willing to pay a higher price for a lower standard, i.e. usually a more authentic reality?”

No matter how well-designed an ecotourism system is, it only succeeds if it attracts tourists. While some, more environmentally-conscious tourists are willing to 'vote with their dollar' and pay higher prices for a more sustainable experience, far greater potential lies in attracting wider tourist audiences. Education about the cultural and ecological significance of a site, a tenet of good ecotourism, can also lose its impact if 'preaching to the choir,' or just reaching already environmentally-conscious tourists,

who currently constitute the majority of ecotourists (Sander, 2010). With these demographics in mind, we can understand how ecotourists play a part in the process today and how to envision ways in which to broaden their role in the future, by incentivizing more diverse participants.

1.4 Private Tourism Industry

As for the private tourism industry itself, it provides the foundation for the interaction of all the other actors. At a minimum, the industry must distribute benefits to the local community, abide by governmental guidelines, and attract paying tourists, coordinating between various demands and expectations. The ecotourism businesses' profits underwrite this confluence of actors, and revenues must be sufficient to both sustain the businesses themselves and to provide benefits to the other parties. To strike this balance, when the ecotourism operations are run by private-sector, international, and corporate tourism companies, it is crucial that these companies avoid extracting the tourism money spent in local economies by hiring much of their staff from outlying communities. For instance, in the Peruvian Tambopata Candamo Reserved Zone, the employment of the indigenous tribe leaves them some 60% of the profits (Nash, 2001). Some prefer to directly distribute a portion of the profits back to the community as in the 19% of all revenues in the Maasai Mara Reserve in Kenya that go straight to the community there (Chepkwony, 2015).

Ecotourism businesses that are local, smaller-scale, or community-operated, will often bring in NGOs for additional funding and support. NGOs can assist in guide training, research, conservation area management, investment, and community planning and stakeholder meetings, all small burdens that can cripple a nascent ecotourism operation before it gets off the ground if not addressed (Wood, 2002). However, the presence of several NGOs working towards the same end can result in a "duplication of roles" leading to competition or rivalry within the private tourism industry which disrupts the collaboration with other actors (Chepkwony, 2015). One study even found, using meta-analysis of over 200 cases, that "the proportion of successful projects is greater for NGOs working individually than for those collaborating with other NGOs" (Romero-Brito, 2016). At least when partnering individually then, NGOs often complement or even fill the role of the private tourism industry in managing operations, earning profits, strengthening community, and promoting conservation, especially in developing countries where governmental oversight tends to be weaker.

2. Aims

Though each actor seeks different aims, it is easy to note shared objectives that have emerged in the prior discussion. Among these are emphases on economic development, community development and involvement, cultural sensitivity and preservation, sustainability, environmental stewardship, and education. These constitute the essence of ecotourism's ultimate telos: reduce the negative impacts of tourism and increase the positive ones. Though simple in theory, it requires a substantial amount of thought and foresight to accomplish, as well as a case-specific method of harmonizing competing goals. For example, stakeholders focused on conservation might advocate for no-use resource preservation as the priority while those concerned with commercial development might be willing to go further in exploiting natural resource use in order to bring economic prosperity to the local communities. No standard equilibrium exists, but must be negotiated in every given instance.

3. Pitfalls

Unfortunately, despite these lofty intentions, many attempts at ecotourism fall short and can suffer from a host of common sociocultural, environmental, and economic pitfalls.

3.1 Sociocultural Risks

One damning sociocultural fault strikes at the core of ecotourism, as it questions the authenticity of the ecotourism movement. While ecotourism's public intentions are desirable and even noble, the fact remains that by encouraging and enabling visitations from afar, the ecotourism industry can inadvertently exoticize the sites, the local communities, and the cultures inhabiting them. While this process elide those environmental aspects that have ecological but not commercial value, like the conservation of species unattractive to tourists, it also obfuscates the voices of local communities who may not share the same marketable goals. Much of this tendency originates in the prevailing neoliberal logic of the world which prioritizes profit and the ability to attract tourists and their money (West and Carrier, 2004).

Beyond commercialization, ecotourism at its worst evokes 'poverty tourism,' that moniker given to projects that found their appeal on the exposure to abject conditions or alien lifestyles of other people. One Kenyan woman living in a ghetto noted "that it is morally unfair that tourists keep on coming to the place she calls home" (Osman, 2018). In the same fashion, those visiting more traditional, pastoral communities to marvel at their 'backward' practices or 'inferior' quality of life may bring economic wealth to the region but at the cost of the humiliation, alienation, and degradation of the local community. Even at the Huaorani Ecolodge in Ecuador, an operation that seems to be doing many things

right, ecotourists pose with and photograph the tribespeople stricken with polio or physical disfigurements (Alpert, 2015). In addition to this zoo-like exoticization, the Huaorani have complained that the ecotourists seldom leave tips for photos or pay enough for the traditional crafts they painstakingly make (Alpert, 2015). A proper application of ecotourism would thus be one that monitors and limits this kind of belittling visitation while also ensuring fair prices or the expectation of reasonable compensation.

3.2 Environmental Dangers

Though the name ‘eco-tourism’ and its professed attentiveness to conservation intuitively absolve the industry of environmental harm, no form of tourism is without its environmental impacts. Habitat disruption, litter, trail deterioration where applicable, and light, noise, and physical pollution all contribute to environmental degradation, even when confined to designated ecotourism areas that are often just as vulnerable as the more strictly-protected sections (Narayan, 1998). In part, ecotourism’s allure promises the access to pristine, ‘hidden’ environments, but developing these untouched refuges exploits them anyway, undermining the very thing many ecotourists seek. Furthermore, much of ecotourism’s potential takes place in developing countries, and the focus of the government on more pressing issues like providing adequate nutrition, security, healthcare, education, and employment precludes them from addressing the environmental impacts brought by ecotourism (Cater, 1993).

3.3 Economic Pitfalls

The economy can foil ecotourism’s aims in other manners too. Tourism is a rather variable and vulnerable industry that depends on tourists’ willingness to participate, which fluctuates based on everything from seasonality to the global economy to international politics. Investment in the sector does not allow stakeholders to recoup much if operations go under, and this imperils the livelihoods of the local communities and the ecotourism businesses. Even when ecotourism is thriving its success can negatively affect local communities. Through the importation of foreign goods, the involvement of large international tourism companies, and other factors, “The World Bank estimated in 1988 that 55 percent of gross revenues for all tourism in the developing world eventually return to industrialized countries” (Nash, 2001). This is a distressingly high percent of profits dissipating from where it is spent and where it is supposed to bring prosperity. The presence of foreign investment, the concomitant inflation, and the influx of migrant workers drawn to the promise of employment in a lucrative industry all further detract from the economic benefits that would otherwise land squarely in the local communities (Cater, 2003). These drawbacks go to show

how crucial it is to require participation from all actors, particularly local ones, to attain ecotourism's desired sustainability and other positive attributes.

4. Potential

While these issues complicate the application of ecotourism, they do not preclude it. Ecotourism still brings several benefits to the table and, if executed properly, can meet its grand aspirations. In the same three realms, sociocultural, environmental, and economic, examples of successful ecotourism operations abound.

4.1 Sociocultural Promise

In Nepal, women often face lower literacy rates, access to resources, and decision-making powers than men, but the Langtang Ecotourism Project has sought to even this imbalance by bringing Nepalese women into the planning and management of the operation while providing them with opportunities to supplement their income via cultural performances and the sale of crafts (Wood, 2002). Although the Australian government originally administered Mutawinji National Park, the local aboriginal populations protested until they were included in the process and they now co-manage the park in conjunction with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, all while running every tour in the area through a company that provides their guides with professional training to build on their traditional knowledge of the area (Wood, 2002). Similarly, Fiji Rivers, an eponymous ecotourism company, directs a large portion of its funds to education and training the local population, capitalizing on profits and tourist philanthropy to offer classes on conservation, swift water rescue, nature guide interpretation, first-aid and CPR, and other marketable skills (Wei, 2014).

4.2 Environmental Capacity

Environmentally, achievements can be as simple as sustainable construction, like with the Crosswaters Ecolodge in China whose construction materials are almost entirely recycled, local, and renewable materials like bamboo. The designers of the lodges used a mixture of GIS mapping, feng shui principles, and input from academic and industrial ecologists to minimize its impact on the habitat (Wei, 2014). More ambitious achievements include that of Frégate Island Private in the Seychelles where plantation agriculture had depleted 90% of native flora and fauna: the eco-resort has completely rid the island of pesticides and rats to protect its endemic bird species, established a nursery reviving many near-extinct native plants, and funded a nursery that witnessed a 1300% increase in the giant tortoise population in just two decades (Wei, 2014). Communities in Cambodia were able to conserve mangrove forests despite the high start-up costs and other impediments to initiating REDD+ programs by instead harnessing their collective

might in Community Protected Areas to set up ecotourism projects that incentivized preservation while compensating the families dependent upon tree-cutting (Mom, 2016).

4.3 Economic Potential

This compensation is an integral part of the economic triumph of ecotourism. The Hidden Valley Inn Reserve in Belize hires the majority of its unskilled labor from local villages, buys fresh produce from outlying markets, and even outside of its tours runs a coffee cultivating and roasting business that supplies additional income for the company and the local economy. The Tambopata region of the Peruvian Amazon, which, as noted earlier, leaves locals with the lion's share of ecotourism profits, also poses a unique advantage. One study considered competing land uses in the area, namely ecotourism, logging, cattle-grazing, and gold mining industries, and weighed the various potential economic benefits of all. They found that, without exception, ecotourism provided the greatest net economic benefit of any alternative, without even taking into account its social benefits or positive externalities (Kirby et al., 2010).

The Twin Case Studies: Jordan & Oman

Ecotourism is clearly an expansive term, one that encompasses a diverse group of actors, various countries and cultures, and a whole host of success and failures. Keeping in mind the theoretical understanding and insight thus far gained in this paper, undergirded as it was by numerous, real-world examples, the discussion next focuses on two Middle Eastern countries, Jordan and Oman. With the previous section situating the reader in the ecotourism field, turning the attention to Jordan and Oman will shine more light on the specific challenges and triumphs of both. From this analysis will come lessons about both that bear relevance for the ecotourism endeavors of other countries, notably those also in the Middle East.

1. Jordan

Jordan enjoys a variety of different biomes and habitats, ranging from the forested north to the wetlands in the east to the rocky desert in the south. This heterogeneity has not gone unnoticed, and the monarchy founded and funded the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) to harness and conserve Jordan's great natural resources (RSCN, 2018). Though established by the state, RSCN is an independent NGO tasked with a public mandate to protect Jordan's environment, and it also spearheads many of the major ecotourism operations in the country. Other smaller businesses have filled the lacunae RSCN left, creating a patchwork of ecotourism actors that blurs the lines between the four categories outlined earlier. Nonetheless, these actors have earned Jordan the reputation of

being one of the more innovative, environmentally-conscious, and committed ecotourism leaders in the region. Altogether, while Jordan faces some difficulties in its quest to build a sustainable tourist sector, it has realized many more accomplishments, and both categories mark it out as valuable case study from which to learn ecotourism.

1.1 Challenges

As a pioneer in the ecotourism game in the Middle East, Jordan started tapping its potential relatively early. Unfortunately, its eagerness in rapid change led to some hasty, haphazard decisions that have since negatively impacted its ecotourism prospects. Notably, in and around Petra—one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and a massive tourist destination for Jordan—this development has resulted in a few longstanding issues. The construction of more permanent trails, paved roads, and other accessibility-oriented alterations ate away at much of the habitat for the local juniper trees and other flora, and the streamlined corridors now intensify the effects of the seasonal flashfloods that visit the site (Akasheh, 2012). Ironically, the government constructed a brand-new Archaeology and Tourism Faculty Building on land that not only had been considered protected, but had retained the last vestiges of greenery in the area (Akasheh, 2012). These kinds of mistakes have lasting effects but are quite preventable and require simple foresight to avoid. Although it is too late to apply this lesson in the already established ecotourism sites in Jordan, it proves valuable when approaching the creation of new projects across the country so long as thoroughness in planning is prized over haste in development.

Another area in which Jordan has room for improvement lies in education. Particularly, two separate realms of education could be improved upon, and they are in the education the general populace and the education and training of a skilled workforce. First is educating the public and Jordanians about the benefits of ecotourism to raise awareness, instill a conservational ethos, and encourage further participation in and support for the ecotourism industry. The author noted during time spent in the country volunteering with RSCN in 2017 that there seemed to be a disconnect between the work the NGO was performing and the interest of average citizens (Ver Steeg, 2017). Though proud of the environmental and cultural heritage of the nature reserves RSCN administered, many of the Jordanians the author spoke with were unclear about what exactly the organization did, why habitat stewardship was crucial, or what benefits ecotourism could bring. Others have remarked on this lack of awareness, saying that "...there is a low level of awareness, both within and outside the tourism industry, of the environmental impacts of tourism and of alternative approaches like eco-tourism" (Tellawi et al. 2001). Thus, through school curricula, social media campaigns, informational materials, and events, both state and non-state

entities in Jordan could further educate the populace on the role of ecotourism in their country.

Though strides are being made in this direction, Jordan still suffers from a dearth of professional, skilled, and well-trained tourist staff (Alsarayreh, 2001). This arises in part from hiring staff members for ecotourist projects from local communities, which, although it benefits the economic development and inclusion of the local population, can result in an unskilled workforce. This is not inevitable however, and it would be wise for ecotourism companies hiring in this fashion to invest in their staff by training them and even certifying them to be guides. RSCN funded several Jordanians to acquire “nature guidance qualifications and accreditation from the Field Guide Association of Southern Africa in 2014 (El-Harami, 2014). These individuals, however, were only four in number. Jordan stands to gain from increasing this number and adding to their ranks of professional staff, since the increasing popularity of the nation’s ecotourism scene will only merit more world-class guides.

Another challenge to ecotourism in Jordan is, paradoxically, the success of the industry itself. In Wadi Rum, a desert nature reserve in the south of the country, the local Bedouin tribes live in and run ecotourism camps. Using interviews and surveys, one researcher investigated the impacts of ecotourism not on the physical environment, but on the sociocultural milieu of the Bedouin communities. He found that the allure of easy profits to be made in operating tours and the draw to provide for one’s family led to “the creation of an incentive to not finish schooling and begin working in the industry as soon as is possible” (Abuamoud, 2015). This phenomenon had taken such a hold that 100% of the study’s participants said they had dropped out of high school or had not progressed beyond high school (Abuamoud, 2015). Furthermore, the capitalist structure of the reserve and the multitude of camps from which tourists can choose has created unhealthy competition between Bedouin camps and their families, leading to the deterioration of friendly ties, kinship, reciprocity, and hospitality (Abuamoud, 2015). While these findings are confined to Wadi Rum, it is not difficult to think of parallels across the country, like in the Dana Biosphere Reserve where Bedouin communities are similarly employed.

1.2 Successes

Yet, portraying Jordan’s ecotourism scene as a network of difficulties and missed opportunities would be both unjust and inaccurate. There are numerous projects that have earned recognition for their sustainability and positive impact, and the industry has been smart in building up its potential. In 2012, 18% of Jordan’s GDP came from tourism alone (Gharaybeh, 2013). More interestingly, while the largest portion of these tourists, 27.6%, came from foreign countries, the next largest portion, 24.5%, came from other Arab countries (Gharaybeh, 2013). This

distribution of tourists is an asset for Jordan, as demonstrated during the plummet in all tourism revenues for Middle Eastern countries during the Arab Spring due to concerns about stability (Hilmi et al., 2015). The tourists from other Arab countries, especially the Gulf, prefer Jordan for its “extremely favourable price-performance ratio and its comparative liberality” (Pillmayer and Scherle, 2014). The diversity in tourist demographics allows Jordanian ecotourist operators to cater to different markets accordingly: should issues of political instability dissuade European and other Western tourists, Jordan can still rely on intra-regional visits, and should oil prices plummet and jeopardize the ability of these Gulf citizens to visit, then Jordan can turn to more global markets that conversely are more willing to pay for travel.

Another way in which Jordan can capitalize on this interplay of divergent elements is in stressing its attractive climate. Jordan shares with its neighbors that idyllic Mediterranean climate thought by some to constitute the world’s most popular tourist destination, with more than 120 million visitors each year since 2005 (Hilmi et al., 2015). As a result, Jordan does a good job of depicting itself as a winter getaway for colder, northern climes. Simultaneously, its more northern location in regards to the Gulf promises cooler climes and even the presence of snow in some parts, a rarity for Saudis, Emiratis, and others. Though, as noted above, these Gulf Arab tourists appreciate the relative liberality of Jordan, its status as a Muslim-dominant, Arab nation make it the perfect balance between an exciting getaway and a familiar friend, reinforcing its appeal. Between the differently-inclined markets to its south and north, Jordan can diversify its reliance on any one tourist demographic and thus enjoy a more robust ecotourism industry.

More specifically, Jordan has found success in individual operations, like that of RSCN’s Feynan Ecolodge in the Dana Biosphere Reserve. This lodge is entirely solar-powered and is lit at night with candles made on-site, helping reduce light pollution in the process, while it further reduces waste via the composting of biodegradable trash and the burning of charcoal made from discarded olive pits for warmth (El-Harami, 2014; Wei, 2014). The entire staff of the lodge consists of people from the local villages, many of whom are women who otherwise seldom find work outside the home, and the camp drivers are all Bedouins who supplement their income with this part-time position (Wei, 2014). Furthermore, as is repeated in some of the camps in Wadi Rum and elsewhere in Jordan, RSCN offers chances for tourists to work alongside the Bedouins so they can do more than observe. This leads to the retention in Bedouin life and the appreciation of foreigners for activities like herding and the making of bread, candles, hair tents, and traditional eyeliner (Wei, 2014).

Additionally, while locals make and sell these crafts on site, RSCN has tapped into its nation-wide structure to move and sell these products throughout the

country. Thus, whether made by women in the Dana Biosphere Reserve, the Ajloun Forest Reserve or anywhere in between, tourists can purchase these fruit rolls, olive-oil soaps, teas, calligraphy items, silver jewelry, organic herbs, ceramics, biscuits, jams, at any of RSCN's locations, even its Wild Jordan branch in the capital city, Amman (El-Harami, 2014). In this way, RSCN is able to preserve the traditional methods and craftwork behind these products while opening up new markets and increasing profits for the communities creating them. While as a singular example the Feynan Ecolodge is exceptional in many regards, RSCN has replicated a similar model in its other reserves, demonstrated by its craft production network, and the organization's larger efforts have only boosted ecotourism's growth in Jordan.

2. Oman

Though both Jordan and Oman are Arab, predominantly-Muslim, and monarchical countries in the Middle East, they vary markedly. For one, Oman, unlike Jordan, is oil-rich, and the extraction of fossil fuels is the backbone of the economy. Nonetheless, tourism plays an increasingly important role, especially as a lauded alternative to diversify Oman's economy and reduce its dependency on oil (Mershen, 2007). Oman gravitates to ecotourism in particular as a means of sustainable development, and the country boasts a strong record for environmental stewardship, having established "more than 15 natural reserves and protected areas stretching over an approximate area of 30,000 square kilometres" (Al-Riyami et al., 2017) while also signing and abiding by the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (Busaidi et al., 2018). Both in name and actuality then Oman has taken great strides in providing the institutional and legal framework necessary for ecotourism to flourish. The Omani Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs, which together combine the roles of two ecotourism actors, the authorities and the private tourism industry, have supported much of this progress. Their collaboration and engagement with ecotourism is in recognition of the country's great array of natural resources that include world-class diving locations, beaches, oases, mountains, and unique wildlife like the Arabian Oryx and several endangered species of sea turtles. While Oman sports this great environmental diversity, the literature has not kept apace, and few studies have thoroughly covered the state of ecotourism in the country. Even so, we can witness the great success Oman has found with sea turtle conservation, its potential for further ecotourism progress with oases, and some of the impediments to this grand venture.

2.1 Challenges

Unfortunately, Oman has encountered a few challenges to ecotourism development that has prevented the industry from living up to all these

aspirations. Buerkert et al. discuss the case of the oasis village of As Sawjarah, which is somewhat similar to Misfat al-Abryeen in its continued production of traditional farming and livestock practices, though it lies in the mountain area of Jabal al Akhdar and thus utilizes a unique type of terrace-based agriculture (Buerkert et al., 2009). Noting the increasingly feeble returns on agricultural sales and residents' expressed desire to abandon the oasis, Buerkert et al. proposed a radical transformation of the village into an ecotourism project wherein residents would be trained to work as guides, leading tours and engaging visitors in traditional activities like fruit-harvesting, grain-grinding, livestock-tending, bread-baking, and making of handicrafts like baskets or walking sticks (Buerkert et al. 2009). They called for this culturally and ecologically sensitive development as an alternative to the country's otherwise large-scale, industrial, and non-educational tourist industry (Buerkert et al. 2009). Unfortunately, when the author here visited As Sawjarah in the summer of 2018, no major steps had been taken in this direction and, conversely, the exact large-scale, industrial style of tourism Buerkert et al. advised against had taken root just across the canyon (Ver Steeg, 2018). It did so in the form of Anantara Jabal al Akhdar Resort, a "fortress-style" compound sporting 115 rooms, tennis courts, a spa, biking, an Italian restaurant, and even an archery range (Oseid, 2017). A far cry from the sustainable, culturally-attuned model of ecotourism, this property goes to show that the fight for better tourism in Oman is not yet won.

This occasionally anemic commitment to ecotourism has manifested itself in another lamentable fashion in Oman. The government established the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in the 1980s, creating a refuge for "Nubian ibex, caracal, Arabian gazelle, sand gazelle, sand cat, the last wild breeding population of the Houbara bustard in Arabia and a great number of other animals," as well as sites of great geological and archaeological interest (Mershen, 2007). The sanctuary even included an information center, as well as tour guides run by the local pastoral tribe, providing economic benefits and environmental education both (Mershen, 2007). Alas, the government shrank the sanctuary to one tenth its original size in 2007 after the discovery of oil in the region, spawning a decline in Oryx numbers from 450 in 1996 to 65 in 2007 (Al-Riyami et al., 2017). In this individual case, competing priorities led the Omani government to undermine the integrity of the ecotourism venture for the economy's sake. Clearly, steadfast dedication to the guiding principles behind ecotourism, behind "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education," is missing from some of these projects (TIES, 2015).

One other stumbling block Oman faces in its pursuit of ecotourism is the composition of its labor force. Migrant labor issues are common in the Gulf, and Oman is no exception. In the tourism industry alone, "expatriates represented

88.40% (112,144 out of 126,857) of the workforce in this sector, which is 7.6 times higher than the local employment” (Busaidi et al. 2018). It is difficult to engage with, deliver benefits for, and include local communities when the overwhelming majority of the staff in an ecotourism operation come from other countries. In this case, migrants predominantly from South Asia come to fill unskilled labor roles and typically lack the interpretive training and lingual skills to be adequate ecotourism guides. Indeed, many ecotourism sites, especially those run without support from or coordination with the public sector, suffer from a paucity of qualified guides trained in general tourism issues, conservation principles, and context-specific sociocultural understanding (Mershen, 2007). It is unlikely Oman will witness a sudden surge of Omanis desiring to work in the ecotourism sector unless action is taken to either decrease the flow of migrant labor or to incentivize this work for citizens. Efforts made towards the latter also help combat the attitudes of farmers and villagers like those in As Sawjarah, where incomes come mostly from non-agricultural activities, familial remittances, and government subsidies, encouraging movement to urban centers in lieu of ecotourism development (Buerkert et al., 2009).

2.2 Successes

Despite these setbacks, Oman has done a great many things right in establishing its ecotourism sector. The country is home to substantial populations of multiple sea turtle species, including loggerheads, green turtles, hawksbills, and olive ridleys (Busaidi et al. 2018). By both establishing the Ras al Jinz Turtle Reserve around the coasts where the animals nest and building a resort there that sources tours to view the laying and hatching of eggs, the Omani government has promoted a popular and profitable activity; even in its early stages in 1997, the reserve grossed over \$100,000 USD in revenue and visitors have continued to increase since, with an average annual growth rate of 21.53% between 2010 and 2015 (Busaidi et al. 2018). During the author’s stay at the reserve in the summer of 2018, tourists came from everywhere from China to Scotland to the U.S. to view the hatching of the eggs, although many too were Arabs from other Gulf states. Moreover, the government has incorporated education into the resort, supplying an information center as well as knowledgeable guides (Al-Riyami et al., 2017). The author’s own experience attests to the efficacy of these programs, observing the great detail and accessibility of the multimedia information in the resort’s museum-esque sea turtle center (Ver Steeg, 2018). The guides that conducted the tours to see the turtles laying eggs at dawn and dusk were incredibly proficient, alternating instructions on how to avoid disturbing the turtles with interesting facts about their reproduction habits, lifecycles, migration patterns, and more.

Even beyond this realized success, Oman offers much more potential for ecotourism growth. Mountain oases, hotspots of agriculture, biodiversity, culture, and beauty, are a promising avenue. One such oasis, Misfat al-Abryeen, is devoted to agricultural production on a small scale, using the traditional Omani *aflaj* irrigation system (Zekri et al., 2011). Although no ecotourism operation currently exists, many tourists, the author included, have visited the oasis to observe and enjoy this intersection of picturesque surroundings and living history. In fact, Zekri et al. argue that the positive externalities generated by the farms exceed \$360,000 USD annually, and that if a simple, minimal entrance fee were charged, that farmers could achieve between 6-21% higher profits, even with the accompanying loss of some tourists unwilling to pay. In this case the local communities, i.e. farmers, are already doing what an ecotourism project would anyway by maintaining a cultural and ecological heritage, and all that remains is to capture the economic benefits of this activity. In tapping this ecotourism potential and others across the country, Oman also has the luxury of providing strong, state-backed investment. The oil wealth of the country will not last forever, but so long as it does, it can be directed to fund longer-term, more sustainable ventures precisely like those in the sector of ecotourism.

Conclusion & Recommendations

There is no doubt that Oman and Jordan both face their own set of ecotourism challenges and successes, and each is uniquely defined by its physical, economic, and cultural context. While issues remain with labor, luxury development, and the balance of competing priorities in Oman, the realized achievements and further prospects for environmental protection and diverse and sustainable economic growth are staggering. For Jordan, though progress could be made in educating the public, investing in guide-training and other ecotourism infrastructure, and cautioning the easy growth of capitalist ecotourism, the country's marketing to a diversity of tourists, capitalization on its natural climate, comprehensive ecotourism model, and innovative commercialization of crafts are accomplishments worthy of both praise and replication. As nations that have devoted considerable resources to developing an ecotourism industry, both can impart lessons to other countries in the Middle East.

Nascent ecotourism sectors have begun to arise in Tunisia, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, and Turkey (Hilmi et al., 2015). Few, however, can match the ecotourism efforts, environmental diversity, and political stability of Oman and Jordan, all contributing factors in their preeminence in the region. Oman's tourism industry remained relatively unaffected after the events of the Arab Spring, with arrivals growing 8% in 2013, and although Jordan saw a decrease of 5% in the same year likely due to its

proximity to Syria, it still outpaced Egypt, Lebanon, and the averages for the Middle East and North Africa regions (Himli et al., 2015). Meanwhile, critics have found fault with Iran, Turkey, and the UAE for over-exploitation and unsustainable development of their ecotourism industries. More specifically, Iran remains a small player in the global scene while some of Turkey's forest are quite mismanaged (Riasi & Pourmiri, 2015; Asadi, 2012; Gunes & Henes, 2007).

So, what exact lessons can be learned from Jordan and Oman? Both enjoy a strict set of regulations that provide a legislative and institutional backbone to conservation efforts and ecotourism development. The Omani government ratified the Convention of Biological Diversity in 1994, while in 1995 Jordan passed The Law of Environment Protection no. 12 to fortify possible weakness in other legislation pertaining to environmental conduct (Al-Riyami et al., 2017; Tellawi et al., 2001). In the same vein, both countries have a string of nature reserves that sport unique tourist opportunities, whether its hiking in Jordan's Ajloun Forest Reserve or watching loggerheads lay eggs in Oman's Ras al Jinz Turtle Preserve. These reserves ensure the conservation of the physical constituents of ecotourism, allotting greater resources and attention to the involvement of local communities, the perfection of sustainable operations, and the maximization of healthy economic growth. While Jordan has been on occasion too eager to develop quickly, sometimes not giving sufficient thought to future side-effects as mentioned earlier in the case of Petra, it appears to have kept a sustainable pace of development overall. So has Oman, despite its relatively late entry into the world of ecotourism (Mershen, 2007). This would be a good standard by which other Middle Eastern countries in an incipient stage of ecotourism can abide so they do not develop too quickly and find themselves confronted by issues that could have been avoided with prior planning or moderation.

Though unfortunate, it is likely that future political unrest of some sort or another will erupt again in the Middle East and that it will inevitably impact other nations in the region, if only by virtue of their proximity, like during the Arab Spring. Hence, it is wise for countries to seek, as Jordan and Oman have done, to diversify their markets and attract tourists from within the region or other areas of the globe. This way, if tourist arrivals from one collection of nations, like the 'West,' suddenly plummet, the industry is not crippled. Again using Jordan as a template, incentivizing traditional craftwork and arts among local communities by selling their goods on a national level without impacting the production processes would work well anywhere such craftwork, a staple of Middle Eastern merchandise, is prevalent. Both Oman and Jordan also emphasized the importance of education in their ecotourism projects. They did this in structured ways like through Oman's information centers at its sea turtle resort and elsewhere, but also more experientially like through Jordan's chances to work alongside Bedouins in performing their daily tasks. Both could still stand to further professionalize and

train their ecotourism guides and staff, and this poses an exciting realm of unexplored opportunity for other Middle Eastern nations looking to improve on their models as well.

More recommendations can be drawn from additional study of the examples provided here, and it is the author's hope that this paper inspires some to think critically about approaching new ecotourism developments in the Middle East. Ideally, the great number of parameters by which to define ecotourism, its actors, aims, pitfalls, and potential adequately prefaced the nuances of this analysis for a lay reader. Given these parameters, the difference of experience between examples, even between two good examples like Jordan and Oman, goes to show that there is no one right way to approach ecotourism. Indeed, it goes to show that the field remains heterogenous and ripe for innovation. Countless ways to improve upon conventional tourism in the Middle East exist: hopefully, the above discussion has given some idea as to just what they may look like.

Though at times it seems like attempts at ecotourism face similar criticisms as those leveled at conventional tourism, they are few and far between, and the successes of said attempts, however problematized, still helps push the field in the right direction. Ecotourism presents a far more sustainable model of tourism development by paying mind to its community, environmental, economic, and social impacts. These are all imperative, as the U.N.'s advocates, in the larger quest for tourism to promote "1. Inclusive and sustainable economic growth 2. Social inclusiveness, employment and poverty reduction 3. Resource efficiency, environmental protection and the fight against climate change 4. Cultural values, diversity and heritage 5. Mutual understanding, peace and security" (U.N. General Assembly). These aims, linked to the U.N.'s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, span beyond ecotourism and possess great importance for both the world at large and for future generations. They are, at their core, goals for humanity. Despite this grandeur, ecotourism, and particularly ecotourism in the Middle East, has the capacity to help realize these lofty aspirations.

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