

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION THROUGH PEDAGOGICAL TOURISM

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Received: June 28th, 2017
Approved: October 27th, 2017

ABSTRACT

Activities such as study trips and guided tours have proven effective for raising people's awareness to the problems caused by degradation of the environment. Within this context, educative tourism, integrating education and conservation of nature, appears to be a positive strategy and one that is capable of contributing to transforming people by sensitizing them to environmental issues. Considering this background, the objective of this paper is to present certain educational proposals arising from an educative tourism project designed to incorporate environmental education practices. Activities were conducted from 2014 to 2017 at the Eco-Terrenão Center for Environmental Studies, which is located in the municipal district of Glorinha, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. It was found that educative tourism can indeed support environmental education by providing opportunities for integrating people with nature, raising awareness of their surroundings and fostering environmental perceptiveness.

Keywords: Environment. Education. Tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Conservation and Environmental Education

Conservation Biology is a field that concentrates efforts and knowledge to solve problems or create solutions to achieve the objective of avoiding or minimizing biodiversity loss. It is the result of integration of concepts, practical experience, scientific and educational projects applied to conservation of species and/or natural remnants.

It is an applied field that tends to play a practical role in the environmental issues that affect biological diversity in many different ways. Its contributions are based on planning and execution of actions founded on the theoretical assumptions of Conservation Biology and, in addition to solving problems, the goal is to guide responsible and sustainable socioeconomic development (Rodrigues, 2002, 2013).

Gadotti (2000) reflects on the ethical and social responsibility that are the guiding lights of environmental conservation, establishing a relationship between sustainable development and education based on the inseparability of environmental preservation and development of ecological awareness, which in turn can only be achieved through education. From this perspective, environmental education is therefore seen as a process that is not limited to transmission of knowledge, but one that seeks to achieve rational utilization of natural resources through citizens playing a critical role in discussions of environmental issues (Reigota, 2010).

Considering education in this light, the environment is understood as transcending concepts related to the physical and biological phenomena of nature, and is revealed as the scene of historically configured socio-environmental relationships that are dynamically transformed by social tensions and conflicts (Carvalho, 2001). Attempting to understand these relationships is the concern of many educators who have dedicated themselves to

discussing and reflecting upon the ways in which human beings interact with nature and who consider construction of a new alliance to be vital.

Certain experiences, such as study trips and guided tours, founded on pedagogical principles, have proven effective for demonstrating solutions or raising people's awareness about human activities that cause environmental degradation (Gadotti, 2000). To include educational practices based on the principles of environmental conservation would also appear to be a positive strategy that could contribute to transforming people by sensitizing them to nature and bringing them into contact with it.

Educative tourism as an educational practice

Educative or educational tourism is a very useful tool for providing people with knowledge and experience, for achieving sensitization, interaction, respect and learning, and for leisure (Beni, 2002). Some authors acknowledge that educative tourism is necessary to the teaching and learning process, since in this type of trip, visits of a purely contemplative character are substituted by tours that have been designed specifically for studies (very often of an interdisciplinary nature) covering the social, cultural, and environmental features of the destinations visited (Gomes et al., 2012).

The objective is to bring the student/tourist into contact with nature and, by doing this, to foster the development of constructive values to counteract sociocultural and environmental fragilities (Ansarah, 2001). This approach makes it possible to integrate educative tourism with environmental education in an effort to sensitize the public to issues of conservation of the environment.

Considering the premises outlined so far, the objective of this paper is to present certain educational proposals that have emerged from an educative tourism project that incorporated environmental education into its activities. The project was conducted in a

rural setting, on the grounds of the Eco-Terrenão Center for Environmental Studies, in the municipal district of Glorinha, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

Study area

The Eco-Terrenão Center for Environmental Studies was set up in 2013 and began to operate in 2014. It is located in the municipal district of Glorinha and the property covers an area of 3.5 hectares. The landscape contains a mosaic of remnants of two threatened biomes typical of Rio Grande do Sul state, the Atlantic Rain Forest and the Pampas (Figure 1).

It was the presence of both biomes that justified purchase of the land and creation of a center dedicated to research into education and environmental conservation. The facilities are appropriate for hosting study groups and visitors who seek contemplative and educational experiences in a rural setting. Professional biologists and Biological Studies students work in the area. The Center for Environmental Studies' mission includes development and provision of educational, extramural, and extracurricular activities, research, and socioenvironmental integration projects, focused on professional training and curricular improvement, conducted by means of guided tours along planned routes.

Figura 1. Thematic map of the property: 1. Maria Etelvina Bueno Road; 2. Entrance to visitor's center; 3. Thick Forest; 4. Pacheco swamp; 5. Protect area; 6. Citrus grove; 7. Main entrance; 8. Bird observatory; 9. Creek; 10. Bromelias trail; 11. Main propert.



Source: the authors (2017).

The Center's activities

During the first year after the Center for Environmental Studies was established, its activities were concentrated around conducting a diagnosis of the most important agents that disturb the area and proposing appropriate solutions. Fauna and flora inventories and monitoring studies were conducted and used as a basis for defining the environmental education activities (Figure 2) that would be implemented, taking into account their respective goals and the relationship with educative tourism.

Figure 2. Educational activities and environmental sensitization



Source: the authors (2017).

The key themes and the activities related to them were (see Table 1) as follows:

1. welcome to the rural area, involving reception of visitors and a presentation about the Eco-Terrenão Center for Environmental Studies, putting its creation and educational objectives in context, and a presentation on the Glorinha municipal district and some socio-environmental features;
2. educational games on the fauna, flora, and biomes of Rio Grande do Sul and the principal threats to them, adapted to suit the visitors' age group, designed to contribute to the process of teaching and learning;
3. walk along an interactive trail, used as a tool to teach observation and interpretation of significant elements in the environment;
4. observation of fauna and flora at strategic points around the property, designed to bring visitors into proximity with the different species that occur in the characteristic biomes of the municipal district and state;
5. planting seedlings and saplings, to demonstrate the benefits of environments with trees and highlight the importance of native plants to the maintenance of the region's ecological integrity.

Table 1. Environmental education activities.

Proposals for Environmental education	X	Educative tourism
Welcome to the rural area		To stimulate visitors' interest in new knowledge, in the locality, and in the ways and customs of the local population (Ansarah, 2001).

Educational games	To awaken a critical analytical sense and the desire to learn more about the subjects covered (Ansarah, 2001).
Interpretation trail	To stimulate the senses and develop the ability to interpret natural phenomena.
Observation of fauna and flora	To provide an opportunity for direct contact with nature and sensitize participants to the subject of environmental conservation.
Planting native saplings and/or seedlings in the organic garden	To bring visitors into contact with the local setting through everyday regional practices (Ansarah, 2001) and to develop their critical sense with relation to the cultural and environmental situation, and the need for sustainable farming of food.

Source: the authors (2017).

RESULTS

Over the 3 years since opening, visits were conducted with students and staff from primary, secondary and higher education institutions from the metro area of Porto Alegre (the state capital of Rio Grande do Sul), involving around 400 students/tourists/visitors who were interested in practical experiences related to the subjects of rural life and environmental conservation. All of the visits and activities (Table 1) were designed on the basis of the underlying principles of environmental education, Conservation Biology, and sustainable tourism, which have the common goal of preserving the environment and natural resources in order to ensure the venture's potential and economic growth without risking impacts harmful to the environment.

The results of this experiment demonstrate that it is possible to integrate environmental education and educative tourism into a strategy capable of combining tours with activities in the field and offer students from all levels of both public and private education a unique and pleasurable experience. In addition to stimulating local development, this type of tourism also brings different communities into contact with each other, providing

opportunities for understanding concepts of identity and belonging and for discussing possible repercussions for the visitors' own lives (Perinotto, 2008). This educational practice also enables the didactic objectives to be achieved through empathy, since, as Perinotto points out (2008), the students generally appreciate this fun approach to learning.

Prospects and applicability of environmental education through educative tourism

Educative tourism is now considered an advantageous instrument for learning, in which the pedagogical resources employed are oriented towards learners' individual and collective experience (Scremin & Junqueira, 2012). Since it involves different fields of knowledge, this proposal is inherently interdisciplinary and its practical activities and perspective of interactive interconnection between the different fields can enrich them all, provoking dialogue between each one's methods and content (Araújo, 2000). Thus, this method, which combines teaching and learning with tourism, makes it possible to apply concepts and content from the formal school curriculum, since they can be observed and experienced during the practical activities offered. This form of tourism can be seen as an important element in the creation of products, as an instrument for fostering citizenship, as a tool for social inclusion, as an incentive to valuing culture and the environment and, fundamentally, as a factor that prioritizes a critical education (Bittencourt et al., 2010; Gomes et al., 2012).

Brazil's education legislation (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação, Brasil, 1996) emphasizes the importance of tourism and provides for out-of-school activities to supplement the formal education process, permitting and encouraging flexibility in curricular planning and content. Thus, making use of resources external to the school, including cultural centers such as museums, galleries, and theatres, visits dedicated to rural settings, and similar techniques, are effective tools that complement formal education. Tourism fits into this framework and can legitimately support educators when planning their out of school activities (Scremin & Junqueira, 2012).

We therefore recommend that environmental education and educative tourism programs or projects should incorporate activities that are similar to those we have developed and described in this article and which are intended to:

- teach participants about the rural culture and its value;
- encourage public and private schools to learn about the local situation and way of life in their regions;
- bring students into contact with the local context through the customs and practices of the region and develop a critical sense of the cultural and environmental situation;
- provide students with opportunities for contact with nature and stimulate development of a critical consciousness and a sense of citizenship through experiences.
- bring students into contact with the characteristic landscapes of the regions in which they live, focusing on the local biodiversity, the most significant impacts, and the need for conservation activities.

FINAL COMMENTS

Educative tourism can undoubtedly complement environmental education by providing opportunities for integrating people with nature, through recognition of their surroundings and development of environmental perceptiveness. Therefore, expansion of partnerships with primary, secondary, and higher education institutions is of fundamental importance to consolidate activities to further educative tourism, socioenvironmental integration, and environmental education.

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