



Entertainment, Acclaim, and Profit: A Reading of Western Culture Through the Prism of Ecotourism

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Accepted: 31 July 2025
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Abstract

Three forces shape life and culture in Westernised societies: a craving for entertainment, a yearning for acclaim, and an obsession with profit. A trip to the Amazon rainforest I took in January 2024 showed me that these three currents also shape ecotourism. Much academic literature lauds ecotourism as an all-around positive enterprise: visitors learn about nature, rural communities are motivated to preserve their ecosystems, and being usually economically poor, locals also find a stable source of income. These studies, however, fail to consider the macro-forces in which ecotourism is embedded and which ecotourism simultaneously reinforces. Drawing on the philosophy of Indigenous intellectual Ailton Krenak in tandem with the Western sociological concepts of ontological insecurity, Disneyization, and consumerism, this article offers a deep critique of ecotourism as a sanitised, mediated, and commodified version of reality that fails to convey the essence of life and, instead, reinforces a modern, atomist, and mechanist view of nature as separate from humanity and a resource to exploit. Entertainment, acclaim, profit, and their convergence in ecotourism are destroying nature. Ecotourism is, in that sense, a prism through which we can learn about Westernised societies and their cultural landscape.

Life as a Fun Facility

The day before I flew to Leticia, the main city in Colombia's Amazon rainforest, I read William Zinsser's *Writing Places: The Life Journey of a Writer*. My interest was in Zinsser's writing practice, but unexpectedly, the author foreboded what I would experience the following day in the Amazon rainforest. Zinsser narrated how he had found inspiration in the travel section of *The New York Times* for one of his 'serious humour' pieces that looked at the absurdity of humanity. An ad in *The Times* announced that 'tourists would now be able to observe nuclear tests in Nevada' and that while 'they will not see the blinding flashes, awesome fireballs and deafening roars of early above-ground tests' there would always be

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‘the possibility of a spectacular surface cave-in and the venting of radioactive gas through unpredictable fissures in the ground.’ Zinsser found it ludicrous that ‘our nuclear arsenal had turned into a fun facility’ (Zinsser 2009, 59). His observation, however, rather than identifying an anomaly, captures the spirit of our times. Most things in life, from love to atrocities to the extinction of the ecosystems on which we depend for survival, have been turned into a commodity to entertain and be exploited. Such Disneyization of life has only intensified in the sixty years since Zinsser spotted the ad in *The New York Times*. Reality is more and more mediated by the entrepreneurial obsession with money. Businesspersons exploit consumers’ dreams and fears for profit; life is distorted and made entertaining enough to cover up deep-seated fears; experience becomes sharable enough to elicit attention, approval, and even admiration. But there is a price to pay.

This article is about that price. It is based on the immersive tourism research I conducted in the Amazon rainforest in January 2024. The article’s main argument is that three desires—for entertainment, acclaim, and profit—shape most experiences in Westernised societies, including ecotourism. The article also claims that these forces strip ecotourism of its justice potential, which instead ends up reinforcing the very forces shaping it—spiralling into more social injustice and ecological destruction. The article, structured around my trip to the rainforest from its planning to my return, is not only a deep and holistic critique of ecotourism but significantly, also a cultural analysis of Westernised societies. It is framed by the Indigenous intellectual tradition, which, in all its diversity, denounces a range of violent absurdities in Westernised life.

Ecotravel Endorsements and Critiques

When a colleague showed me pictures of her trip to the Amazon rainforest in 2023 to research wildlife trafficking, I gaped. In 2009 I had lived for a month in the same place that she, 14 years later, visited with an ecotourism company. I did not recognise the place I had visited. It seemed more ‘sanitised’ and more crowded. Most of the transformation was the result of ecotourism. Beginning in 2013, tourism in the Amazon rainforest has expanded and been professionalized. The Peruvian government, for example, reported a 46.1% increase in arrivals of national and foreign tourists (Dirección Regional de Comercio Exterior y Turismo 2024). Between 2019 and 2023, the number of commercial flights arriving at the Peruvian Chachapoyas airport increased by 12% (Viceministerio de Turismo 2023). In Leticia, the number of tourists increased from 14,000 in 2004 to 80,000 in 2015 to 90,000 in 2017—a staggering sixfold rise in 13 years (Acosta 2018). Further, according to information obtained from the Colombian Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism through a right of petition, the number of foreign tourists who flew into Leticia (usually 4% of the total number of tourists) rose from 3,953 in 2022 to 7,347 in 2023. These figures all indicate a dramatic increase in tourism to the Amazon. The economist and expert on Amazon culture, Germán Ignacio Ochoa (2018), remarked that ‘the entrance of hoteliers into the Amazon has brought about a “mass tourism” that makes it more difficult to raise awareness about conservation.’ Ochoa is one of only a few concerned with the oxymoronic nature of ecotourism.

Ecological awareness arrived in the tourist industry in the late 1980s, most notably with Héctor Ceballos-Lascurain’s article ‘The Future of Ecotourism’ (1987), written as a ‘reaction’ to mass tourism. The solution, stated Ceballos-Lascurain, was ‘alternative tourism’, a

new variety of tourism that was ethically sound (see also Large 2019). Building on Ceballos-Lascurain's imperative, the 1991 declaration of the International Ecotourism Society further promoted the industry, defining it as 'responsible travel to rural areas that conserves the environment and the welfare of local people.' This 1991 Declaration was followed by the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism, issued in 2002, identifying ecotourism's pillars: (1) minimal environmental impact, (2) promotion of environmental and cultural awareness, (3) generation of economic benefits for conservation, and (4) creation of financial benefits and empowerment for local people (Das & Chatterjee 2015).

Upon Ceballos-Lascurain's 1987 declaration, commentators were optimistic, often promoting ecotourism 'with a missionary zeal' (Goodwin 1996, 277; see also Kiper 2013). Because ecotourism is about consuming experiences instead of things, proponents labelled the industry as 'environmentally friendly' (for a critique, see Smith 2019). Likewise, assessments of the value of recreation in biodiverse-rich locations led them to believe that tourism would be a significant source of revenue for local communities as well as motivate them to preserve natural environments (Dave & Mendelsohn 1991). Promoters of ecotourism also argued that experiencing wilderness would raise ecological awareness by closing the divide between humans and nature; ecotourism would not be only about enjoyment but about greater understanding, attitude change, and responsible behaviour (Orams 1995).

However, upon the heels of the first ecotourism projects, more nuanced evaluations of the industry appeared. A meta-study conducted by Das and Chatterjee (2015) of articles globally published between 2000 and 2013 revealed that while ecotourism can and does generate income and employment, the economic profit is often unequally distributed, with local communities receiving only a tiny fraction of it while becoming dependent on tourism agencies. Das and Chatterjee also noted that in the implementation of ecotourism, economic interests tended to trump conservation concerns, thus leading to deleterious consequences for nature. The alleged environmental friendliness of ecotourism was contested and instead reinterpreted as part of the 'sustainability narrative' that, disguised as protecting nature, in actuality advanced the neoliberal agenda. *Environmental friendliness* and *sustainability* were thus denounced as slippery euphemisms used to greenwash tourism. In the dyad sustainable/development, the latter term, which in reality means economic growth, always wins, prioritising profit over ecological health, critics underscored (Heydon 2019). There is then, no need to use the word *development* when talking about ecotourism and other 'green' projects, not because economic interests are not present, but because market liberalisation logics are already embedded in the sustainability discourse, pushing for efficiency and profit (Irwin 2008). As Krenak (2020a 105)—from whom much more is to come later in the article—prompts, 'the very idea that anything can be sustainable in a mercantile world should be questioned.' In other words, the ecotouristic sustainable narrative was a Trojan horse opening markets in areas not yet under the control of capitalism while enabling 'the consumerist lifestyle...to continue unchecked' (Irwin 2008, 171). Finally, the assumption that ecotourism would increase awareness of environmental issues was proven to be overzealous. Studies showed that tourists remained ignorant even of the environmental harm they themselves were affecting in the act of flying to their tourist destination (Lam et al. 2023).

Green criminologists, those who research harms and crimes against nature, have also called into question the *eco* of ecotourism. Rob White (2019) describes ecotourism as a 'conformist activity' with harmful social and ecological consequences. Because capitalism shapes ecotourism, the activity becomes unavoidably harmful, says White. Entrepreneurs,

in their ceaseless search for profit, relentlessly commodify ever more activities and locations, ensuring that the distribution of profit privileges investors over communities. The expanded consumption of experience puts mounting pressure on ecosystems, not least because of tourists' carbon footprints, the building of accommodations for visitors, and the consequential use of resources and need to dispose of waste. Oliver Smith (2019) describes ecotourism as an activity that elevates tourists' perceived value and status—but does not raise awareness. The more pristine the destination and the more luxurious the visit, the higher the status gains. But ecotourism comes at the cost of altering ecosystems, killing non-human animals, and significantly increasing carbon emissions, to the point that ecotourism is paradoxically ecocidal (Smith 2023). Large (2019) describes ecotourism as nothing more than the repackaging of conventional tourism (with all its harms) under the label of a 'good' practice—another instance of capitalism co-opting transformative action. Ecotourists not only 'enjoy a new culture, location, and experience, but one can also feel good about what they have achieved' (337). In other words, ecotourism creates the same environmental and social harms as mass tourism but offers tourists the opportunity to feel they have engaged in an ethical activity. Portrayed as contributing to income creation for locals, ecotourism hides the fact that it creates more poverty and marginalisation than it alleviates. As Lam and colleagues (2023) explain, ecotourists are usually more interested in saving themselves—morally through the seeming altruism of their actions—than in saving the planet through real transformative action.

Criticism of ecotourism is not new: it began only five years after the movement's advent. However, the ecotourism industry keeps growing, and a few scholars—with a naivety only enabled by blindness—continue to promote it (e.g., Navas-Camargo & Cárdenas 2017). Ecotourism's resilience says something important and profound about Western culture. Westernised societies seem unable to challenge this destructive practice despite knowledge of the harm it inflicts. The explanation for this contradiction, I argue, is that ecotourism is not a random product of human inventiveness but a materialisation of three harmful forces shaping Westernised societies: a craving for entertainment, a yearning for acclaim, and an obsession with profit. Ecotourism is thus not only a fair target of criticism but also a useful prism that elaborates a holistic analysis of Western culture.

Never Bored: The Sociology of Ontological Insecurity and Specious Reassurance

This article owes much to Indigenous critiques of Western culture. While Indigenous intellectual activity and critique are as diverse as there are Indigenous nations in the world, a theme common to many of its strands identifies the salient traits of Western culture that cascade into social and ecological violence. Within this tradition, critiquing Westernised culture does not imply that it is a monolith nor does it ignore its positive contributions, but the focus is on the suffering and destruction resulting from its values. Barely a century into the occupation of the Americas, as documented by Graeber and Wengrow (2022), Indigenous voices were registered mocking and reproaching the invaders for their selfishness, material greed, lack of generosity and charity, hunger for the spotlight, and irrational respect for hierarchies. This early and similar Indigenous critiques inspired, centuries later, sociologists and cultural analysts in the Anglophone global North and decolonial scholars in the

global South (Quijano 1992). This historical trajectory has also inspired my thinking. The three forces I identify as driving Westernised culture (entertainment, acclaim, and profit) are my synthesis of both frameworks, Indigenous and academic, and my ethnographic observations. Lines of continuity connect my analysis with the Indigenous critique: selfishness, material greed, and lack of generosity characterise the pursuit of economic growth; hunger for the spotlight lies at the root of a desire for acclaim; and both an irrational respect for hierarchies and a ceaseless crave for entertainment entail surrendering one's intellectual capacities to external input.

In continuity with the seventeenth century critique, Indigenous philosopher and activist for the rights of riverside and Amazonian communities Ailton Krenak, using his 'view from the outside' (2021, 70), provides an incisive description of Westernised societies. The Westernised world, writes Krenak (2020a, b, 2022), always wants more: more experiences, more goods, more wealth. People believe that consuming more—experiences and goods—is living life to the full, but in reality they are only following marketing scripts. Capitalist economic growth is achieved by expanding the catalogue of commodities and experiences for sale. The products might seem diverse, but they all follow a template. They are 'sanitised': the grit and dirt of life has been removed and replaced by 'clean', safe commodities and experiences. In its relentless rush for more, Western society spends more time producing 'toys for entertainment' (2020a: 60) than addressing the existential threats faced by humanity and the planet. People are transformed into consumers, some preferential, and then into spectators by having the reins of their lives taken from them. Krenak argues that Western society's unquenchable appetite for more results from its alienation from nature—humans have forgotten what is essential. Blinded by the fantasies of expansion and consumption, society insists on 'playing' nonstop instead of complying with the ethical responsibilities of caring for one another and the planet. Three harms result: the possibilities of human experience are reduced to what is defined by marketing templates, nature is destroyed by overriding its boundaries, and a segment of humanity (non-consumers) becomes sub-humans.

Krenak's sociological observations are, of course, a generalisation of the hegemonic dynamics of Western culture. Societies are not static, human behaviour and beliefs change across lifespans, and exceptions and nuances abound. But despite these caveats, the general characterisation remains valid. Three identifiable social forces are present in Krenak's theorisation: (1) a reluctance to see the non-sanitised version of life—its rawness and nakedness, (2) people's need for reassurance and entertainment to still the resultant discomfort, and (3) the relentless search for more wealth. Importantly, when Krenak and other Indigenous and decolonial intellectuals write about Western society—as I do in this paper—they refer not exclusively to Europe and North America but to Westernised social groups, which are located throughout the world and that are the product of Western ways of being superimposed on their territories, which they also embrace. The Indigenous critique, therefore, in the words of decolonial pioneer Anibal Quijano (1992), applies to all societies and cultures in which coloniality, or the preference to consider as valid that which is in line with European ways of being and knowing, functions as an axis of life. Western and Westernised societies follow the modern notion of progress as a unitary pathway (Anonymised 2025), which has significant social repercussions. As I show below, Krenak's analysis of Western culture and Westernised societies, which I argue are brought to the fore in ecotourism, is shared by several Western cultural theorists and philosophers.

French philosopher Bruno Latour, in his book *We Have Never Been Modern* (2012), argues, like Krenak, that the source of Western society's reluctance to see life in all its nakedness with its challenges, insecurities, and pains is the Humanist Enlightenment's dissociation of humanity from nature, a bifurcation at odds with reality. Humanity believed itself to be other than nature, but in daily praxis, humanity and nature are conjoined. Humanity's discomfort when faced with its interconnection with nature, threatens its sense of reality. Other scholars see disconnection as the source of the anxiety and fear prevalent in Western society, but instead of it as humanity's fracture with nature, they highlight human estrangement from one another. Ronald Laing (1960) coined the phrase *ontological anxiety* in his argument that the absence of a secure sense of self is based on unreliable parental caregiving. Christopher Lasch (1991) argued that the weakening of connections with family and other social institutions leads to a 'void-within' (see also Hayward 2024). Gabor Maté (2022) hypothesises that 'small-t trauma', a lack of emotional connection with nurturing milieus, creates widespread anxiety in confronting life. The detachment of members of society produces 'a fracturing of the self and of one's relationship to the world' (47).

Humanity's estrangement from nature, theorised by Latour (2012), has roots that go back to Descartes and even the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh (see Blom 2025). The philosophical striation of culture, that is, the human realm, and nature—the 'fracture' between humans and nature (Ferdinand 2021)—has at least two significant consequences. First, it allows collating or denying the severity of the environmental crises for humans (Sollund 2008; Wyatt & Brisman 2017). In the words of journalist David Wallace-Wells (2019, 10), human estrangement from nature means that 'we d[o]n't mind destroying the planet for others living elsewhere on it or those not yet born who would inherit it from us'. Second, the fracture between humans and nature contributes to an understanding of why a sense of discomfort and insecurity haunts people and results in their constant need for reassurance. Ontological insecurity goes beyond ontic insecurity—the denial of the *nature* of things, such as witnessed in climate change denialism and post-truth regimes—to encompass the loss of certainty about the *meaning* of things (Burns, 2023). Ontological insecurity ensures confusion, anxiety, and discomfort about humanity's place in the world and our self-identity.

Faced with fundamental ontological uncertainty, individuals in Western and Westernised societies yearn for constant approval and, in a cultural world of inflated expectations and widespread narcissism, even acclaim—a hunger for the spotlight. Sociologists, ethnographers, and criminologists alike have documented an inexorable desire 'to be seen, and esteemed or celebrated, by others' (Yar 2012, 252), and with it, an increase in individualism and a decline of 'care and concern' (South 2005, 364) that resembles the Indigenous critique of four centuries earlier. One of the basic plots marking the history of humanity—'overcoming the monster'—has conveyed for millennia the message that 'the supreme characteristic of every monster who has ever been portrayed in a story' is that it is 'ego-centric...unable to feel for others' and its only concern is 'to look after its own interests, at the expense of everyone else in the world' (Booker, 2004, 33). And yet individualism and self-interest dominate in times of ontological insecurity and disenchantment (South 2005). In such a context, heightened by the capitalist push for extreme liberal individualism, the protection of oneself and one's own wellbeing are paramount. The project of protecting the self is speciously achieved through the relentless search for personal acclaim—but also through entertainment.

Indeed, a *craving for entertainment* also results from ontological insecurity, or a void-within, as described by Latour, Laing, Lash, and Maté. Besides reassurance, people want something to mitigate their distress as they encounter the world around them. Entertainment has become an important tool to lull the insecurity. Keith Hayward (2024, 41), for example, observes that the omnipresence of earbuds and noise-cancelling headphones bears witness to the need to always be ‘sonically stimulated’. Constant auditive input leaves no space for our own (at times uncomfortable) thoughts. Fun is still sometimes fun, but the transformation of every realm of life into fun and entertainment is so extensive that it leaves little room for genuinely reflective spaces, exposing the underlying craving to avoid existential angst rather than celebrate life. Indeed, life has been transformed into the extensive ‘fun facility’ Zinsser (2009) was amazed to observe sixty years ago.

Commentators have, for decades, identified the transformation of society into a recreational park. In the now classic book *The Disneyization of Society*, Alan Bryman (2004) argues that significant aspects of society are thematised, sanitised, and standardised to give people a cohesive narrative and present an idealised version of reality. Employees in the service industry further engage in performative labour. Their interactions with guests are scripted and follow a template that makes them more efficient. The overarching goal of a Disneyized society is to make customers believe they are having genuine experiences and make them feel good. In actuality, however, people’s range of life possibilities is reduced and their disconnection with society is augmented, observes Bryman (2004).

The capitalist goal to amass wealth is achieved through consumerism, a phenomenon that exploits ontological insecurity and the resulting need for acclaim and entertainment. The exploitation persists even when people construct a façade of ontological security and an illusion of meaning through relentless consumption. In his pioneering work on status symbols, Veblen (2005) coined the phrase *conspicuous consumption* for the act of purchasing goods or services not to satisfy fundamental needs but to display one’s wealth, mark social status, and to be accorded a higher rank in the human hierarchy. Consumerism, in the logic of Veblen, transforms commodities into economic and cultural touchstones of status (Miles 1998), making it an ideal way of masking deep-seated discomfort. The signifying properties of what people consume denotes the social class or group to which they belong or aspire to belong (Ferrell 2020). Approval and even acclaim can come from consuming, free of the challenges and risks of forging a real identity. Consumerism, thus, provides people with the appearance of an identity without them having to face the risks associated with real life. The consumer, for example, doesn’t need to understand complex social dynamics (Sturken 2007). And yet, consumerism enables people to be admired for the status symbols they sport and to be entertained through consumption. Consumerism is a drug that dulls the void-within. Capitalism exploits the yearning for acclaim by offering not only goods but also cultural concepts in a logic in which commodity consumption becomes a project of constructing and reassuring the self (Brisman & South 2014). Capitalism also exploits the craving for entertainment by offering sanitised experiences that are entertaining and reassuring enough to make people forget, for the moment, the void-within. As Miles (1998) points out, consumerism is the religion of the twenty-first century: it is omnipresent and the most often used in response to the troubling realities of mundane life. Few social phenomena today, from love to victimisation to the planet’s destruction, remain untouched by the forces of consumerism (Franko & Goyes 2023).

The problem is that the acclaim and entertainment offered by consumerism, instead of reestablishing connections with nature and nurturing human communities, further weaken these bonds; ontological insecurity is exacerbated, and angst is increased. More anxiety spirals into more consumption and blinded by the specious belief that non-stop consumption will fill the void, society dedicates more time to playing with goods and pursuing experiences than facing existential threats. Not only individuals but whole societies are harmed by fostering the desire for acclaim, entertainment, and profit. The ideology of consumerism has long been identified as a force behind injustice and environmental degradation (Ferrell 2006; O'Brien 2008; White 2002). As part of the capitalist catalogue of commodities and experiences to consume, more and more spaces are taken over by the industry and transformed into sanitised sanctuaries for tourists. In the process, these spaces are striated: seeking enhanced safety for tourists, hoteliers and tourism agencies separate the 'inside' from the 'outside', of what they sell as wilderness. The striation of spaces is not new (see, e.g., Goyes & South 2019) but has increased since the boom in ecotourism, and, through it, ecosystems are redesigned and strained by the thousands of guests visiting them. Local populations are displaced to make way for villas and hotels.

Because ecotourism depends on, and caters to, the desire for acclaim, entertainment, and profit, it can never solve profound environmental, economic, and social problems. Ecotourism is a pantomime that makes people believe they are contributing to a solution, but in reality, they are exacerbating the problem.

Immersive Tourism

I had been in the Amazon rainforest twice before: once in 2009 when I was 21 years old, as part of a course on Amazonian ecosystems and cultures. I lived for a month in a maloka with the Magüta (broadly known as the Tikuna), an Indigenous Amazonian group. The second time was in 2013 when I gathered testimonies of war victims as part of the Colombian peace process. That visit lasted only five days. The third time was very different. Seeking to understand the cultural forces that model and fuel ecotourism, I wanted to see the world from a touristic gaze. But this came with methodological problems. How to plan fieldwork that is not fieldwork but resembles the experience of a tourist? Fieldwork is usually structured around the systematic gathering of useful data to advance knowledge; tourism is all about having a good time. The simple answer was to 'go native': lose a critical external perspective and unquestioningly adopt viewpoints shared in the field (Flick 2005, 142). But a tension remained in simultaneously wanting to be both researcher and tourist—an issue that has elicited significant debate in tourism studies (e.g., Feighery 2006). Duijnhoven and Roessingh (2006) discuss the challenge tourism researchers have when trying to shift between these roles in the field. While the logic of travelling to experience the self and the other in new settings, shared by ethnography and tourism, might reduce the divide between emic and etic perspectives, significant challenges remained. A researcher's incarnation as a tourist may be superficial, with their intellectual mark remaining on the data—a preoccupation far from a tourist's mind. The solutions offered include reflexive awareness of how the researcher's presence shapes the data (Duijnhoven & Roessingh 2006) and varied research strategies to overcome the limitations of a researcher's gaze on the tourist experience (Zahra & Ryan 2005).

I structured fieldwork as a three-day trip to the Amazon rainforest together with my girlfriend. We booked one of the most popular hotels in the region and purchased a tourist package the hotel offered. The dates corresponded to the high tourism season in the Colombian Amazon: 13–15 January 2024. Equipped with our phone cameras and I with a notebook to record observations and thoughts in real-time, we boarded the plane at 8:00 a.m. on a Saturday. In planning the trip and during our trip, my girlfriend was unaware of my research agenda and concerns, and her presence drew me closer to a tourist perspective and mentality, inhibiting me from significantly altering the experience with researcher attitudes. She was also a direct source of emic accounts. After the trip, she consented to my use of our shared experience for analysis in this article and read it to check my recollections and representations. The research design thus combined autoethnography, the exploration of one's own experiences and emotions to understand the forces that animate the lives under study (Ferrell 2018) with instant ethnography, the study of transient moments and ephemeral meanings that reveal something larger about a group (Ferrell 2009).

Because I observed others (my girlfriend, fellow tourists, tour guides, and others working in the ecotourism industry) and interacted with them—even if never prompting or deceiving people to gain information—my method blended the ethics of autoethnography with those of participant observation (Flick 2005). The relevant regulations in the two jurisdictions, that of my institutional affiliation and that of the data collection site, required no prior informed consent for the type of autoethnographic, observatory research I conducted because data was completely anonymous from the start; no identifiable information was ever collected or processed (NESH 2024; Resolution 008430 of 1993; Sikt n.d). I nonetheless reported my trip to The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, which approved it and authorised me to record and analyse my observations, even when they included anonymous others. Still, even when the requirements of ‘extrinsic ethics’ (Goyes 2019) were ticked off, another aspect of the ethical equation remained. Often more important are the ‘intrinsic ethics’, or the researcher’s consideration of the desires, expectations, and needs of the participants as well as the researcher’s consciousness about structural conditions and other issues often not considered by ethics boards (Goyes 2018). Autoethnography, as Jillian Tullis (2021) explains, entails complex ethical dilemmas, including those related to the consent and autonomy of people surrounding the researcher. Is it ethically acceptable to observe and interact with people without disclosing one’s identity as a researcher, but still respect their autonomy and privacy? While there is no easy answer, but only the guideline to contextualise such ethical evaluation with considerations of beneficence, privacy, and purpose (Tullis 2021), covert methods are endorsed by most ethics committees, including The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, when they are necessary to uncover structural injustices and problematic dynamics, no personal information is collected, and no harm results from the research (NESH 2024). Because I did not intrude on, expose, or stigmatise other people, focused on social dynamics rather than specific individuals, and depended on going native to unveil destructive cultures and structures, both the ethical bodies and I considered my methodological approach to be justified.

Further considerations regarding my autoethnographic approach have to do with positionality and reflexivity. Because autoethnography relies heavily on a researcher’s personal experience and despite my plan to get as close as possible to a genuine tourist experience, my positionality of class, nationality, racialisation, academic position, and relationship to the field—what Johnny Saldaña and Matt Omasta (2022) compare to camera angles—affected

what I saw and *how* I saw it. Hailing from a working-class family that at times depended on church donations to feed ourselves, sensitised my sensibilities to conspicuous consumption. Being born in Colombia and of Indigenous Pastos descent, aligned my allegiance to those who have been victims of Western ‘civilisation’ since the colonisation of the Americas. Over a decade working as a researcher in a Nordic university made me aware of the many rationalisations privileged people develop to justify objectionable actions. My decade-long research on environmental violence, Indigenous victimisation, and North–South relations gave me conceptual tools that stemmed from the notion of unequal exchanges among cultures. This act of reflexivity shows that I, during the trip and afterwards, interpreted the touristic experience through a critical reflection of consumerism, privilege, and exploitation.

After an hour of flying, I could see the zigzagging Amazon that resembles a serpent and has inspired dozens of myths among Amazonian Indigenous peoples (see Fig. 1). I had seen the river before, and it has remained engraved in my memory since the first time, but the previous visits to the Amazon had a deeper meaning: to study Amazonian ecosystems during an extended stay and to work in a process that would lead to the Colombian Peace Accord. This time, I felt both joy and discomfort, part of an additional methodological and ethical dilemma. While I was aware of the downsides of ecotourism, particularly regarding carbon emissions, I engaged in ‘academic tourism’, a practice little more defensible than standard tourism. Yet, ecotourism seemed to be to be one of those practices ‘only accessible through observation’ (Flick 2005:,134). As I endeavoured to investigate the social dynamics behind an environmentally destructive practice, I engaged in another: academic tourism.



Fig. 1 The Amazon River, 2007. Credit: David R. Goyes

Safe Danger in the Wilderness

We landed on Saturday, 13 January at 11:09 a.m. at the newly remodelled Leticia airport. There was no time to explore it; our first tour was scheduled for midday. We hailed a cab and within 15 min we were at the hotel. The building was located on what I remembered to be the city's outskirts. Now, after 17 years of urban expansion, the area had been built up and the streets were paved. It had been fully urbanised. The hotel consisted of cabins around a central patio. The decor attempted to recreate the wilderness, but the hotel offered every comfort: air conditioning, clean water, room service, wi-fi. The surrounding streets had no fewer than three restaurants. The city had undergone a significant transformation since my last visit. It had adapted to consumers' demands: to be entertained and to offer an experience suitably acclamable. Driving the city's transformation was ecotourism's ultimate goal—profit. Within the ensuing 72 hours, I discovered that the price of these demands was ecological destruction and social injustice. The following three vignettes—each one packaged as an 'adventure ride'—illustrate how the three forces in Western society (acclamation, entertainment, and profit) harm society and nature. While the region is plagued by suffering, injustice and devastation, the unsanitised, uncomfortable truths of this reality remain hidden from the touristic gaze.

Entertainment

A woman from the travel agency, no older than twenty, in high heels and a black dress, came to pick us up at the hotel. She walked us to Leticia's riverside port, 10 minutes from the hotel. As we walked, she told us that she had studied tourism but had, so far, only been tasked to serve as a companion for foreign visitors. A motorboat waited for us at the port. We travelled for thirty minutes along the expansive river, seeing gigantic ships, naval and touristic. Our destination was the Victoria Regia reserve, advertised as an exotic location where tourists can experience rainforest wildness. We arrived at lunchtime, but by then most of the day's tourists had left for their next destination. As we ate a lunch of cassava, beans, and plantain in the big wooden house at the reserve entrance, we heard five men converse in a mixture of Portuguese and Spanish. We later learned that one of them owned the reserve: he was a Brazilian farmer who used to raise cattle on the estate. When his business went awry after the river flooded, he devised a new business strategy by turning his land into a reserve and striking a deal with the region's leading hoteliers.

When we finished eating, a guide in high rubber boots met us. Instead of the wilderness I remembered from my previous visits to the rainforest, we saw a landscape that resembled the cultivated farms in Colombia's coffee region. The place had some spectacular trees, including giant kapoks, but these were used as swings for tourists to play. Visitors could feel like Tarzan or even Jake Sully, the main character in James Cameron's 2009 *Avatar* (see Fig. 2). The only animals we saw were titi monkeys, the world's smallest monkey. Coing and exclamations of cuteness were followed by several minutes of photographing.

Tourists experience a domesticated Amazon. Sold under the guise of raising visitors' awareness of the impending ecological threats and the importance of nature for human survival, ecotourism instead offers a fun, controlled adventure. Borrowing the words of Bryan's (2004) insightful description of the Disneyization of society, it is possible to say that the Amazon rainforest had been thematised, standardised, and sanitised.



Fig. 2 Luisa Hernández Izquierdo

Each of the three locations we visited was organised around a theme; each was an adventure ride connecting the network of locations into a cohesive narrative. Victoria Regia's theme is trees and plants. After having exhausted this theme, tourists move on to the next thematic park. At the end of their stay, tourists feel they have 'seen it all' in the Amazon.

These locations are also sanitised and idealised. In the words of Oliver Smith (2019, 311), ecotourism strives to maintain safety ‘alongside the perception of danger and risk’. Tourists are taken on a tour touted as a genuine jungle experience, but the place has been cleaned of ‘dirty’ elements to ensure clients’ safety. The only animals allowed on site serve the role of cute Instagramable decor instead of being treated and seen as powerful beings who desire to live and be left alone. The visit is scripted and efficient—temporal impositions colonising the lives of tourists and locals alike: no more than three hours so that tourists can consume the next experience. As described in Krenak’s (2022) sociology of Westernised culture, humans are transformed into spectators, both stripping them of their freedoms (to direct their gaze, choose their pace, and analyse their realities) and imposing ways of existing on them (what to watch, where and when to go, and how to reflect).

The entertaining, Disneyized experience, far from instilling respect for nature, becomes an idealised representation of what the Amazon *should* look like and is arranged for the convenience of visitors to make them feel good. Sanitised, tourist-proofed ecosystems are experienced as exciting, not as the complex habitat on which we depend for survival. The focus on entertainment defeats the ideal of awareness-raising and burdens ecosystems that have been redesigned to ensure a safe adventure. Owners of the land—none of whom are local communities—rather than being motivated to preserve nature are inspired to reshape it in line with the thematic and safety standards of the tourist industry.

Acclamation

On day two, 14 January, at 3:12 p.m., we took one of the rusty motorboats docked in a berth in Leticia’s port. Most of our fellow passengers were locals returning to their villages after their shift in the city’s service industry. After 40 min of navigating, during which our boat was precariously rocked in the wakes of large and luxurious tourist-filled vessels, we arrived at our destination: La Isla de los Micos, Monkey Island. We again missed most of the tourists who had already been shuttled to the next stop. The entrance was enclosed by a one-meter-high wooden fence. A guard behind it welcomed us and charged 120 dollars for two tickets. He told us to wait. Five minutes later, a local in his mid-twenties introduced himself as our guide. He immediately asked us whether we wanted our pictures taken with the monkeys. Without waiting for an answer, he gave me a banana and ordered me not to let go of it, regardless of what the monkeys did. The brown squirrel monkeys, twenty-five centimetres tall, noticing the fruit in my right hand, climbed down the trees and onto me. Eight of them jumped onto my shoulders, head, and arms (see Fig. 3). Some stretched out their hands and grabbed the banana, trying to take it from me. One bit me with his sharp teeth, but I did as I had been instructed and did not let go of the banana despite the pain caused by the bite. The guide noticed my distress, grabbed the monkey by his neck, and threw him four meters away. The guide explained that all tourists want their pictures taken with as many monkeys as possible, but that because no tourist enjoys being bitten, he needs to discipline the monkeys. Biting someone or something to get food is reasonable behaviour for animals in the wild—as Monkey Island is supposed to be. However, punishing the monkey for the sake of tourists demonstrates that, in ecotourism, animals must be in service to the paying customers.

Ecotourism is increasingly dramaturgical. An Instagram search for Isla de los Micos results in over 6,000 public posts in which people share pictures of their smiling selves



Fig. 3 Luisa Hernández Izquierdo

covered with half a dozen or more monkeys. (There is no way of knowing how many private accounts include this kind of post.) Posts are usually accompanied by exclamations of how blessed the Instagrammers are by having their dream of visiting the Amazon rainforest fulfilled. Captions include hashtags such as #grateful, #happiness, and even #godisperfect. In this spectacle, non-human animals become props, part of the scenery onto which tourists

project an image of themselves. Animal interests and their intrinsic rights are subordinated to tourists' pursuit of happiness. These projections of the self on social media have, of course, a performative function. Tourists say who they are and define their social standing by exhibiting assets (money to travel), traits (adventurous spirit), and concerns (connection with life). As Yar (2012, 253) explains, people live in an online fantasy world where the desire—or rather, need—is to be seen, esteemed, and celebrated. The consequences of their constructed fantasies are secondary; what matters is approval and acclaim.

The craving for esteem comes from a deep-seated ontological insecurity and its paradoxical companion—a deep-seated certainty that the ultimate means to achieve meaning and identity is through external validation. To prove that we are, that we exist, that others bear witness to our existence, and that some even value us, we insist on showing others how we experience life so that they can validate our reality. Connection with life is not enough. While the importance of images proving tourists 'were there' is not new—already in the late 1890s, tourists were paying professional photographers to take their photos, often stamped with the date and name of the location (Bacon Hales 1984)—the trend increased exponentially with the arrival of social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. Reliance on external validation not only deepens the dependence on audience acclaim but also dictates the construction of the self in line with what is laudable in the eyes of others. Ironically, tourists' descriptions of their visit to Monkey Island being 'an encounter with the self', as one influencer wrote on Instagram, tend to follow the script laid out by tourist companies and social media.

Building an identity around the 'traveller lifestyle' also comes at the expense of nature. As Kornel (2022) explains, maintaining the status of adventurer depends on repeatedly visiting biodiversity-rich sites. The traveller identity entails not only flying thousands of kilometres with significant CO₂ emissions but also transforming nature into the backdrop of a carefully curated image. Proof of this is that Monkey Island is built by human hands. Decameron created it to offer tourists another adventure ride with another wild theme: animals. But these animals are sacrificed on the altar of people's image creation. The rising culture of the spectacle defeats the goal of conservation.

Profit

A white van picked us up at the hotel at 5:00 p.m. on Saturday, 13 January. At the cost of 53 dollars per person, we enrolled in the Amazonian Sunset tourist plan. The van's driver was also the owner of the tourist company. Because we were the first to be picked up, I sat in the front seat and had a thirty-minute conversation with the driver. Born in Bogotá, he dreamt of financial independence. No opportunities were to be found in the city, he said, because big players monopolised the economy. So, he and his wife moved to Leticia in the early 2020s and started a company offering adventures in the Amazon. As he narrated his life story, we picked up nine more tourists at the Decameron Hotel (owned by the international Terranum Hotels corporation) and the On Vacation Hotel (part of a Colombian company that owns sixteen hotels in Colombia and seven other Latin American countries). The twelve of us arrived at our destination, the driver's house, which also served as the company's headquarters. Behind a three-meter-high gate, lay an immense property. The area included a restaurant with six large tables, a house of which we only caught glimpses, and an extensive lawn covered with canoes and kayaks. The most impressive part, however, was the back end of

the property where a path of stones led to Yahuaracaca Lake, part of the Amazon River. Here our guide, a man in his fifties, waited for us next to a twelve-meter canoe. The wooden vessel, painted in blue and orange Indigenous patterns, remained stable as the nervous tourists stepped in and found a seat.

What ensued was one of the most fantastic experiences I have ever had. We navigated the lake among *painüs* (walking trees), which rose fifty meters above the water's surface (see Fig. 4). The trees' air roots, 100 m in length as they extend sideways and downwards, resembled the limbs of giants meandering above the water. After one hour of navigation, we stopped at a lake and dove into the water, swimming only 400 metres from where pink dolphins played. We also saw the sunset colouring the water orange. As the sky darkened, we began our return, mostly in silence. The stillness was broken only by the guide who, from time to time, pointed with his torch at snakes hanging on the trees and offered commentary about them. Forty minutes later, we stopped. The guide stood up, and with the moon as his backdrop, told us his story in a loud voice: a son of a Yanomami Indigenous couple from Brazil, he had to move to Colombia with his parents when, in the 1970s, *garimpeiros* (gold diggers) assassinated most of the people in his community. In Colombia, the Magüta (Tikuna) welcomed them. Our guide then told us a foundational story of the Magüta: gods camouflaged as dolphins sometimes transformed into beautiful blond men and took the prettiest woman in the community (the famous myth of the Yacuruna, documented among others by López [2013]). As I listened intently to the story, which probably was a warning about colonisers, my fellow tourists joked and took selfies. At 22:30, five hours after our trip had begun, we returned to the entrepreneur's house. The guide received a payment equivalent to five dollars.

Ecotourism is no exception when it comes to the rules of capitalism and its relentless co-option of territories and cultures. As White (2019) warns, entrepreneurs seeking to increase profit are increasingly commodifying more activities and locations, taking over new areas and traditions, turning them into sanitised distractions for tourists' enjoyment. All the destinations in the Amazon we visited were owned by corporations or large land holders. Victoria Regia was the property of a Brazilian coloniser and former cattle rancher; Isla de los Micos belonged to Decameron. Other locations, which we did not visit, are owned by On Vacation. Canoeing on the Amazon was taken over by an investor from Bogotá. He offered tourists yet another adventure ride and another theme to consume: the river. But the approach to it was as sanitised as every other experience. The script of the experience included no reference to the river's life-sustaining functions or its sacredness for Indigenous communities. Whenever the Yanomami guide mentioned these issues, the spectator tourists diverted their attention.

From the limited financial information available about hotels and touristic agencies operating in the Amazon triple frontier, it is clear that the ones with the greatest share of the market are large corporations, which even when headquartered in Colombia, are significantly reliant on international investment, including from the Cadillac Fairview Corporation (Portafolio 2025), IDB Invest (IDB Invest n.d.), and Equity International (El Universal 2024). The financial and marketing power of these corporations, as well as their capitalist *raison d'être*, ensures that profit from ecotourism goes to the investors, not the local communities. Indigenous peoples, the non-consumers, become sub-humans, servants to the consumers, as Krenak predicted. These communities, which have historically been exploited, disenfranchised, and impoverished, serve as the labour force and earn miserly salaries. Their



Fig. 4 Luisa Hernández Izquierdo

vast knowledge is transformed into an entertaining commentary, often dismissed by excitement-hungry tourists. From co-existing with nature, Indigenous people are transformed into emotional labourers (Bryman 2004), catering to clients' expectations. Ecotourism's goal of creating a stable source of income for local populations never materialised.

Ecotourism in the Amazon rainforest is a sanitised activity that offers a safe, entertaining version of wilderness and invites acclamation from tourists' peers. A thematised and standardised fantasy version of the jungle brings in more profit to entrepreneurs. The problem, however, is that none of the promises of ecotourism are met. It fails to convey the essence of life, the unbreakable unity between nature and earth, and the power of nature on which we depend. Instead, ecotourism reinforces a modern, atomist, and mechanist view of nature as separate from humanity and a resource to exploit. By turning nature into a fun facility, the separation of humans and nature is increased. Animals and plants are part of the decor, not powerful beings. Ecotourism is a distorted rendering of life—social and natural.

Life Without Filters

On 14 January, we left the hotel early. My brother, who had been on vacation in Leticia two weeks earlier, recommended we visit Atalaia do Norte, a town on the Brazilian side of the Amazon. I asked about it at the hotel reception, but the surprised receptionist said they didn't offer tours there. Nonetheless, she gave me instructions on how to get there. We took a short taxi ride to the port of Tabatinga, the main city on the Brazilian side of the Amazonian triple frontier. A three-hour boat ride took us to Benjamin Constant, south of Leticia. From there, a one-hour taxi ride brought us to the centre of Atalaia do Norte. It was Sunday, but the hamlet seemed deserted. Besides a group of ten people drinking beer and dancing to techno music next to the river, no one else was to be seen. We cursed my brother for sending us there. 'This is boring,' I texted him. Boredom, nonetheless, is an emotional and cultural motif of great sociological significance, as the criminologists of boredom have theorised (Ferrell 2004). My boredom was a symptom of an unsatisfied craving for entertainment. I was facing the naked reality of the Amazon, and I didn't like it.

Yet, Atalaia do Norte was the only real place we visited—if it is possible to differentiate between 'real' and 'Disneyized' in the modern fantasy world. Craving diversion, I Googled 'Atalaia do Norte.' The first hit, published by the US newspaper *Voice of America* (AFP 2022), ran the headline, 'In Amazon region hit by double murder, poverty fuels violence.' Dom Phillips, a British journalist, and Bruno Pereira, a Brazilian agent working for the protection of Indigenous Peoples, had been murdered at the location. The alleged instigators, the report said, were involved in illegal fishing (see Phillips 2025, a book he started writing before his murder and published posthumously). The report on *Voice of America* described Atalaia do Norte as a place 'hit by a surge of illegal fishing, logging, mining and drug trafficking—crimes that security experts say are being fuelled by poverty'. In Atalaia do Norte, locals have few sources of income available to them other than engaging in environmental crime, and organised criminals take advantage of the situation. Indigenous people are targeted for land take overs. Although it initially bored me, our visit made me more aware of the world in which we live and the problems we face: the poverty, violence, environmental crime, attacks on Indigenous people, and state abandonment of the Amazon. Atalaia, with all its seeming dullness, was the only real place we had visited. But we were the only tourists there. All others follow the script offered by hoteliers and tourist companies.

Poverty and violence are not exclusive to Atalaia. On Monday, January 15, the last day of our visit, we again deviated from the touristic script. We took a tuktuk to Tabatinga, the main Brazilian city on the triple frontier. We had to be at the airport at 11:00 a.m. to take the

flight back home, but we had two hours to spare. The driver offered to show us the city's sights. We stopped first at A Casa do Chocolate, a candy shop where the famous Brazilian chocolate *Garoto* is sold alongside Brazilian football jerseys, liquor, and tourist souvenirs. The shop was so crowded and the queues so long that we decided to leave. The second stop, at my girlfriend's request, was at the Igreja Matriz, the town's main church. The place was desolate except for some homeless people who wandered around. The atmosphere felt tense. Two tags on the fountain parapet read 'CV2' and 'PCC' (see Fig. 5)—references to two large prison gangs in control of large swaths of Brazilian territory, including the Amazon (see, e.g., Manso & Dias 2018).

The reality of the Amazon, as the examples from Atalaia do Norte and Tabatinga illustrate, is one of widespread and continuous destruction of human and non-human life, often fuelled by Western and Westernised consumers' unquenchable hunger for more commodities and experiences. Tourists, complicit in this capitalism, are mostly concerned with acclaim and entertainment and are not interested in these problems. Their memories of the Amazon are, instead, coloured by the sanitised and thematised 'reality' they experienced in the theme parks. When looking back at their trip, they will probably turn their eyes to the souvenirs they bought at A Casa do Chocolate—sweet memories of an exotic adventure. These souvenirs constrain awareness of the social and ecological violence taking place in the Amazon rainforest.

Some could say that considering the reality of Atalaia do Norte and Tabatinga, ecotourism is not a bad option. Corporations offer security and cash flow. If not ecotourism, then what? Others could claim that the Disneyization of the Amazon is preferable to the tourism of past decades, which pretended to bring the Amazon and the jungle to the global



Fig. 5 Graffiti in the square in front of Igreja Matriz in Tabatinga. Credit: David R. Goyes

North (such as Monkey Island created by Billy Butlin in the seaside Suffolk, UK, town Felixstowe [Kindred 2017]). The problem, I argue, is that ecotourism fuels the very forces that produce violence, environmental crime, poverty, and marginalisation in the Amazon. The self-centred yearning for acclaim blinds people to the injustice and suffering of some groups. As they live in the ‘reality’ of entertainment, the political action of these tourists is shaped by Disneyized perceptions and memories, far removed from justice. The craving for entertainment facilitates corporate takeover of land, further impoverishing people and relegating them to second-class status, servants catering to tourists’ every need and whim. In the process, the view of nature as a resource is reinforced.

Patches of Forest

On the final day, a tuktuk took us to the Alfredo Vásquez Cobo International Airport, renovated in 2020 to expand its capacity. Hundreds of tourists (mostly North Americans and Europeans) who had been in the rainforest were waiting to return to their real lives. Shortly after we arrived at the airport, we boarded an Airbus A320. All 170 seats were soon taken. Exhausted backpackers, exasperated parents, and smiling children were now able to tick a box on their destination bucket list. As the plane ascended, I could see from the window large patches of environmental destruction. Light green patches were evidence of recent reforestation, but black and brown patches were also evident (see Fig. 6). Tertiary vegetation, taller and a darker green, was scarce. The landscape was a testament to the environmental destruction caused by humans—not least in their pursuit of acclaim, entertainment, and profit.

Corporations increase their revenue by transforming all realms of life into money-making experiences and commodities; consumers seek to avoid the discomfort of life, curating an identity of bliss and relentlessly searching for sources of entertainment to muffle the dread of life. Experiences become more and more mediated by capitalism. In truth, however, we don’t need more travel to prevent more ecological destruction—as ecotourism promoters argue. We need a change in the cultural substratum of society of which this article offers a critique. To improve our lives and the lives of all other living beings, a cultural shift is needed: Krenak’s invitation is to slow down and reconfigure our connection to others and the planet itself.



Fig. 6 The Amazon rainforest as seen from a plane. Credit: David R. Goyes

Acknowledgements I thank Luisa Hernández, who flew with me to the Amazon, shared her experiences and reflections with me, and took some of the photos. Jeff Ferrell, Laura Gutiérrez, Yvonne Jewkes, and Nigel South read and commented on an earlier version of this text. I also thank the two anonymous peer reviewers who generously provided feedback on this manuscript.

Funding Open access funding provided by University of Oslo (incl Oslo University Hospital). No funding was received for this project.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no conflicting interests.

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