

# Lessons from the East: Rethinking Urban Mass Ecotourism from a Contemporary Sustainability Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Recent events, principally the pandemic, have prompted reflection on the future of sustainability in tourism. It necessitated 'proximity tourism' – effectively, staying closer to home and discovering the proximate environment, the only tourism allowed for the mass of people. A form of proximate tourism, mass urban ecotourism, can sound like contradiction in terms twice over – neither 'mass' nor 'urban' are associated with 'eco' in the western imagination and literature shaped by that outlook. This in part resides on a Western view of ecotourism (and human / nature relationships), shaped by a tradition of romanticism that seeks respite from modernity in solitude or in remote settings. Conversely, his paper argues that mass urban ecotourism deserves far higher attention in the West. The pandemic might have necessitated urban mass ecotourism, but in the aftermath, it can be viewed as an inclusive and democratic form of leisure for the masses that also renders therapeutic benefits. Drawing from Asian philosophical and practical traditions, this paper constructs a principally logical rather than empirical case for the development of a mass, urban ecotourism that addresses both sustainability and the leisure needs of the masses. In doing so it makes the case for western tourism planners and academics to take on board important perspectives derived from eastern traditions.

## KEYWORDS

Mass Urban Ecotourism, Eastern Philosophies, Proximity Tourism, Shengtai Luyou', Shinrin Yoku.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## 1. Introduction

In the recent years given increasing social and environmental challenges, sustainability has become central to academic and societal debates on the future of tourism. Such debates received further impetus during the pandemic years with calls for a post pandemic tourism with a greater emphasis on sustainability. Some have advocated an ecologically focused tourism recovery: a transformative re-set of tourism (Brouder, 2020; Hall et al., 2020). Yet discussions of this 'reset' often focus on ecotourism and green niches based in and around rural communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Sefyi & Hall, 2020; Sharpley, 2020). Such ideas clearly reflect the sense of urgency in relation to climate change and the environment and are advocated with sincere intentions. However, the degree to which they are realistic or wholly desirable in a profoundly interdependent global world featuring mass tourism, and further masses who wish to be tourists, is contested (Butcher, 2021a; Butcher, 2021b). It is mass tourism that needs to be at the centre of any meaningful reset.

It was encouraging to see the UNWTO declaring 'sustainability as the new normal', and that 'sustainability must no longer be a niche part of tourism but must be the new norm for every part of our sector' in 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). This reflected a clear but not always acknowledged reality: that sustainability has to address the mass of people and their leisure habits. To do otherwise is to neglect the central aim of sustainable development: that of taking responsibility for the future.

Therefore, in a contemporary context, it is timely to think further about bringing mass tourism and sustainability together, in a mutually reinforcing rather than antagonistic relationship. If the recent debates have afforded the opportunity for global tourism to reset and rethink, it is sustainable *mass* tourism that needs to be addressed. Discussions of degrowth, and of various niches aimed at the well healed and well-travelled, neglect this. The possibilities for mass and urban sustainable tourism have, however, been explored in number of studies (Joppe & Dodds, 1998; Higham & Luck, 2002; Som & Baum 2005; Weaver, 2005; Weaver 2007; Ballantyne & Packer, 2013; Sutherland, 2013).

A second notable element of recent discussions in tourism is its prospective therapeutic and recreational role. Various studies have observed that visitations to urban wilderness spaces by the urban masses have facilitated social interactions, improvements in overall health (psychological and physical), social cohesion and spiritual wellness, emotional therapy, reduction in suicide rates (Venter et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2020; Geng et al., 2021; Ugolini et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2021; Liu & Wang, 2021; Lu et al., 2021; Fagerholm et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2022; Sung et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Master & Sung, 2022). The pandemic years amplified existing trends towards more sedentary, less mobile, socially fragmented populations, and a consequent decline of social networks and sociability. Yet urban nature spots have experienced mass visitation due to their proximity to urban centres for therapeutic purposes (Fagerholm et al., 2021; Farkic et al., 2021).

The paper begins by re-looking into some imperative questions regarding mass tourism: the therapeutic advantages of nature and the importance of democratising tourism. Proximity tourism observed as a necessity during times of crisis (like the recent pandemic), that offers possibilities for personal well-being for mass visitors, is posited as a key concept. In turn urban ecotourism is identified as a form of proximity tourism, involving nature, for the masses, thus linking proximity tourism to important goals associated with sustainability.

The paper then proceeds to argue that the way we often think of ecotourism, and nature / environment in general, would benefit from 'lessons from the east' that conceive of these relationships in ways that affirm – philosophically, and in practice - the masses engaging with nature close to urban areas. It is argued that these perspectives provide a critical counter-position to a dominant, Romanticism-shaped view of sustainable tourism development in the western academy that focuses on the *rural* and the *few*. Specifically, the counter position comprises the Eastern philosophical perspectives of Shengtai Luyou, Shinrin Yoku, as well as Confucius and Zen Buddhist philosophies. These perspectives rationalize mass visitations and cultural intervention in *urban* wilderness spaces *for the many, not the few*. Finally, we bring sustainable tourism back into the discussion and conclude.

This paper focuses on 'lessons from the east' in thinking about contemporary ecotourism. However, it should be noted that there are also long-standing traditions in western societies (Nash, 2009), perspec-

tives from contemporary western thought (Low et al., 2009) and also from other traditions such as Islamic (Jodidio, 2022) that could also usefully be revisited by anyone seeking to consider an ecotourism more accessible and relevant for sustainable development in modern, mass society. For example, the urban parks movement in the United States and in Europe of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century, whilst not 'ecotourism', and long pre-dating concern with 'sustainable development', offered a model of nature based urban recreation that was sympathetic to the masses, and far from antithetical to mass society in the way that contemporary ecotourism advocacy and marketing often is. However, the discussion to follow focuses specifically on the potential in eastern perspectives to provide a basis for critical reflection on a contemporary western construction of ecotourism as rural, anti-mass and in tension with modern, urban society.

Nevertheless, the study does not dismiss or downplay the challenges of mass tourism observed by previous studies that have deemed it as the main underlying cause behind the phenomena of too many tourists degrading a destination's aesthetic, ecological and social conditions, often now termed 'overtourism'. However, studies have also challenged this view, stating that depending on the context, mass tourism may not always be the primary reason behind problems placed under the rubric 'overtourism' (and sometimes not even causing it at all) (Perkumiene & Pranskuniene, 2019; Nillson, 2020; Santos-Rojo et al., 2023).

The paper, therefore, offers an analysis based on a synthesis of some existing conceptual perspectives evident in the literature. Conceptual analyses are essential for the scientific understanding of the relationships between fields of study, and for initiating deeper thought and insight (Kirillova & Yang, 2022). Moreover, conceptual studies facilitate re-interpretations of longstanding ideas, or development of new and distinct ideas on a given discourse: 'It can add new insights to traditional problems, reveal new research tracks, or make conceptual bridges to neighbouring disciplines' (Xin et al., 2013, p. 74). Overall, the paper attempts to make a conceptual and logical, rather than empirical, case for urban, mass ecotourism as sustainable development. It does so by looking directly at the philosophical premises of 'Western' Romantic thought, which shapes conceptions of ecotourism, and by contrasting this to certain traditions from (albeit not exclusively) the 'East' more favourable to peoples' active engagement with the natural world.

Based on the above premise, the main goal of this study is to emphasize the imperative of bringing mass tourism into the discourse on sustainability. Put simply, 'urban', 'mass tourism' and 'ecotourism' are terms that should be seen more often in the same sentence. Whereas Western-centric literature all too often regards mass tourism as the antithesis of sustainability, Eastern philosophical traditions provide a progressive, humanist counterpoint.

## 2. Proximity Tourism

The pandemic years had a profound limiting impact on human mobility. As international travel was severely diminished, domestic and proximity travel during periods of low daily infection rates (leading to easing of lockdown restrictions) became more prominent in many countries. In the UK, for instance, proximity tourism (e.g., staycations) rose greatly in the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, and is continuing to be a popular trend among mass British holidaymakers due to the reasons highlighted in Table 1 in t (The Sykes Staycation Index, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). The UNWTO (2020) reported similar travel trends around the world where leisure-based mobility has been largely limited to domestic regions in the form of 'staycations' to nearby locales, particularly nature-based spots. The rise of proximity tourism has therefore become an expected outcome of the ongoing health crisis (Romagosa, 2020; Lin et al., 2025).

**Table 1.** Sykes Staycation Index -Staycation Motivations and Activities

Year	Motivations for Staycation within the UK over a Foreign Trip	Activities during Staycations
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easier to travel within the UK</li> <li>• Less stressful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staycations with pets</li> <li>• Experience led staycations Work-based staycations (from birdwatching, fishing to rock-climbing and mountaineering)</li> <li>• Luxury experiences</li> </ul>
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The range of things to do nearby</li> <li>• Ease of travel to the destination and therefore, less stressful</li> <li>• Positive recommendations from family and friends</li> <li>• The range of beautiful destinations the UK has to offer</li> <li>• Uncertainties due to Brexit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getaways with family &amp; friends</li> <li>• Short breaks with pets</li> <li>• Luxury locations and experiences</li> <li>• Sustainable staycations</li> </ul>
2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncertainty about travelling abroad due to Covid-19 pandemic</li> <li>• Ease of holidaying in the UK due to travel restrictions and health risks from Covid-19</li> <li>• More affordable holiday in the UK</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staycations with pets</li> <li>• Getaways with family &amp; friends</li> <li>• Work-based staycations</li> </ul>
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persisting uncertainty around travelling abroad due to Covid-19 in 2021-22</li> <li>• Budget pressures due to cost-of-living crisis</li> <li>• It's easier and less stressful to travel within the UK</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staycations with pets</li> <li>• Sustainable/environmentally conscious staycations</li> <li>• Work-based staycations</li> </ul>
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoyed holidaying in the UK over the past two years</li> <li>• Pandemic highlighted how much the UK has to offer</li> <li>• It's less stressful</li> <li>• It's easier to go on holiday closer to home</li> <li>• It's cheaper to travel within the UK</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Travelling to shooting locations of TV shows and films.</li> <li>• Visiting local museums, lighthouses, and ethnic/traditional style rural buildings</li> <li>• Camping (or glamping)</li> </ul>
2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easier</li> <li>• Less stressful</li> <li>• Cheaper</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking understated/offbeat staycation spots</li> <li>• Experience-based breaks</li> <li>• Travelling to shooting locations of TV shows and films</li> <li>• Camping (or glamping)</li> </ul>

Source: The Sykes Staycation Index (2018 -2024)

The discussion of the 'Staycation', which is one form of proximity tourism, is believed to have its origin in late 2000s during the global financial crisis (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). Proximity tourism is the phenomenon of visiting (and exploring) unheeded attractions located significantly close to homes/point of origin (Diaz-Soria, 2016; Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017; Lin et al., 2025). According to Bertacchini, Nuccio & Durio (2019, p. 3), proximity tourism can also be defined as a 'broad range of leisure activities and experiences that are consumed within the home region, often but not exclusively occurring through day trips and excursions from metropolitan areas to rural peripheral territories'. Proximity tourism brings along with it the advantages of shorter times of travel to easily accessible nearby destinations, that in turn enables lowering emissions and the evasion of the challenges from seasonal factors and absence of long-haul travel during crisis periods (Canavan, 2013; Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017; Bertacchini et al., 2019). It can be said to be democratic – available to the masses – as it avoids the time and resources that less proximate forms of tourism require.

## 2.1 Urban Ecotourism?

One form of proximate tourism is urban ecotourism. The term 'urban ecotourism' was coined in 1996 by the Blackstone corporation (Wu et al., 2010). In the same year, the Green Tourism Association (GTA) of Toronto started advocating the concept of 'urban green tourism'. The GTA's goal to promote urban green tourism was to enhance appreciation for urban natural areas and cultures among residents and visitors, augmenting the ecological quality of such natural areas, and revitalising the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions of such urban natural locales (Gibson et al., 2003). Weaver (2005) put forward some potent arguments commending the concept of urban ecotourism as a form of mass sustainable tourism. Urban ecotourism regards modified spaces that support specific ecosystems adapted to urban or peri-urban environments as locations for tourism. They create the opportunity for environmental education,

specifically an understanding of the ecological conditions in urban modified spaces and the ways migrant elements of nature strive to survive in an urban context (Weaver, 2005).

Furthermore, Weaver pointed out the economies of scale and enhanced revenue generation for conservation from mass urban ecotourism, as these 'soft' ecotourists come in far larger numbers than their 'hard' ecotourist counterparts, and therefore contribute substantially in socio-economic terms (*ibid.*). Socio-economic benefits are significant. They involve investments in ecologically focused infrastructural projects on one hand, and on the other, opportunities for education and leisure proximate to the mass of people. Therefore, large scale ecotourists (or soft ecotourists) visiting urban ecotourism sites (particularly to 'extensive natural habitats', 'remnant natural habitats', and 'derelict and reclaimed sites'), carry the potential to bring positive changes in ways and on a scale that hard/traditional ecotourists in widely advocated niche, small scale forms occurring in far more fragile ecosystems in remote natural areas cannot (Weaver, 2005, p. 22).

Higham and Luck (2002) discuss a number of additional facets of urban ecotourism that may make it advantageous from the perspectives of environmental sustainability and inclusivity, especially when compared to rural ecotourism (rurality is normally assumed for ecotourism in the vast majority of western studies). They argue that the urban version of ecotourism is benign as a lot of challenges that emerge from traditional ecotourism with regards to disturbance to fragile, remote ecosystems, and social impacts on remote, distinctive local communities can be averted. Moreover, along with Weaver (2005), they suggest that urban ecotourism sites, due to their easy accessibility, can bring economies of scale, as they are far less seasonal and the high number of urban and outside visitors can generate the necessary revenue for sustainable infrastructure development, and conservation programmes (Higham & Luck, 2002). Weaver (2002 and 2007) emphasized the prospects of mass scale high concentration ecotourism in urban settings (evident particularly in Asian contexts), to qualify as a particularly sustainable form of tourism, particularly in socio-economic terms.

Notably, despite initial enthusiasm in the late 90s and early 2000s, the concept of urban ecotourism did not get due scholarly attention, with journals continuing to focus on rural rather than urban locations. One of the very few works focusing on urban ecotourism was by Wu et al. (2010), based on the Yangmingshan National Park, near the urban centre of Taipei. Notably, they suggested that urban ecotourism has a greater environmental than economic impact, as it strives to mitigate the negative effects of urban life, rather than altering remote locales as traditional rurally based ecotourism tends to do. This relative neglect in scholarly journals is reflected in popular accounts too. Ecotourism is invariably a rural phenomenon in the popular press, and most often located in destinations distant from key tourism generating regions. Ecotourism of this sort is exclusive due to expense and costly in terms of emissions.

Urban ecotourism has the potential to attract high participation from the masses, and often occurs at sites with locational proximity and easier accessibility (via affordable and efficient public transport). These attributes can be argued to endow it with a considerable degree of egalitarianism. It provides opportunities for well-being, socialisation, and education on the value of ecology, as a human right for the masses (urban residents, particularly those who are economically marginalised and mass visitors).

## 2.2 Proximity Tourism and Urban Ecotourism

Urban ecotourism is a form of mass-oriented urban nature-based experiential activity aimed at attracting both residents and visitors towards natural habitats within or in the peripheries of metropolises, for recreation, ecological education, and well-being (Weaver, 2001; Weaver, 2005). Therefore, the nature of mobility in urban ecotourism fundamentally involves travel to natural areas in proximity to major urban areas. Given the similarities in the underlying principles of proximity tourism and urban ecotourism, in terms of closeness to the destinations from the points of origin of travellers, and the environmental and accessibility advantages, they can be regarded as congruent. Hence proximity tourism - that temporarily fulfilled the recreational needs of visitors due to pandemic-related mobility restrictions - can feed into a renewed interest for urban ecotourism at a much larger scale in the present (post-pandemic period). Being close to nature is a key motivation for proximity tourists/'staycationers' to travel (UNWTO, 2020) and so urban ecotourism can benefit from proximity travel. Also, it is notable that the UNWTO (2022) predicts

travelling close to home and experiencing open-air activities primarily in the form of nature-based travels will be one of the key global tourism trends for the coming period.

Pertinent to this study, a number of studies on urban outdoor recreation, particularly during the pandemic, indicate that urban residents and visitors in East Asian cities preferred wilderness spaces located close to urban centers where they reside/originate (Lu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Easy accessibility due to favourable proximity of nature parks brought more benefits to them in terms of reducing stress levels and enhancing overall well-being. Moreover, in terms of outdoor recreation, the urban masses of Asian cities preferred nature-based areas (containing the natural settings of 'mountains, forests, and lakes') close to cities to urban parks located within the city (Lu et al., 2021, p. 9). As will be argued presently, western tourism could look east for ideas and inspiration concerning urban ecotourism.

### **3. Lessons from the East: Making Urban, Proximate Ecotourism a Part of the Discussion**

While from the Western perspective, urban ecotourism appears to be largely ignored in favour of its rural counterpart (Higham & Luck, 2002), possibly due to the 'anti-mass' sentiment of its advocates (Butcher, 2007), in East Asian contexts this is far less true. Urban ecotourism is far more attuned to recreation-oriented mobility in several East Asian urban contexts and fits with East Asian cultural and philosophical perspectives regarding people and nature. This reality has profoundly influenced planning and designing of nature-based recreational settings (Wang & Buckley, 2010), and driven scholarly output on urban ecotourism in East Asian vernacular languages.

#### **3.1 'Shengtai Luyou'**

'Shengtai Luyou', a term that originated in China in the 1990s, can be referred to as the Chinese version of ecotourism (Buckley et al., 2008). However, the cultural standpoint of Shengtai Luyou is based on such underlying principles and practices markedly distinguish it from ecotourism practiced in other parts of the world, particularly in the Western hemisphere. The key differences lie in the areas of dimension, outcome, and settings of ecotourism (Buckley et al., 2008; Shi et al., 2019; Akhoundoglu & Buckley, 2021).

In terms of dimension, under 'Shengtai Luyou' ecotourism takes place on a large-scale basis in which sizable numbers of visitors visit nature-based sites for recreation, adventure, and well-being purposes. The involvement of the masses in ecotourism visitation, therefore, becomes a pertinent consideration under 'Shengtai Luyou' (Buckley, 2007; Buckley et al., 2008). Traditional Chinese cultural philosophy of nature visitation approves 'crowding' or participation of large number of people as it is considered integral to the artistic and literary expressions of the region (Cater, 2006, p. 33; Li et al., 2019). Viewing ecotourism as a small scale, low intensity travel activity by Western scholars is in the Eastern perspective strongly perceived as a denial of the masses' liberty to engage in nature travel, and consequent encouragement of elitism (Yang, 2018).

The Marxist view, a version of which has been formally embraced in the political philosophy of the People's Republic of China (PRC), postulates that transformative and emancipating social development can only occur through the involvement of the masses (Zeng, 2015). Development of scientific, aesthetic, and spiritual thought processes that bring positive changes to society, environment and culture are affirmed as outcomes of the actions of the masses (Zeng, 2015). Therefore, the progress of ecotourism without the participation of the masses as a socio-ecological and cultural force is contrary to this thinking. The concept of 'Shengtai Luyou' appears to have embraced this praxis and hence, advocates the participation of masses. Here it seems to be in sharp disagreement with the western conception of ecotourism, generally deemed to be a small-scale activity in order to be ecologically compatible and socio-culturally responsible.

The desirable outcomes of ecotourism under 'Shengtai Luyou' are seen as based upon the individual, but also collective, well-being of visitors. Visitation to nature-based areas for ecotourism in East Asian contexts are often associated with physical and mental wellbeing associated with socialisation (among friends and family), engaging in nature-based recreational activities (bathing in the waterfalls, picnicking, camping, moderate difficulty forest hiking, and angling), as well as spiritual (temple visits and meditation,

and experiencing nature) (Buckley et al., 2008; Shi et al., 2019; Khanra et al., 2021). In contrast, the Western practice of ecotourism tends to focus on the welfare of the visited than the visitor, as well as environmental stewardship and enhancement of local socio-cultural and socio-economic vitality.

Notably, Shengtai Luyou is an environmental philosophy that seems to contrast in important ways with the Romanticism that shapes western conceptions of the human / nature relationship, and their manifestation in the advocacy and promotion of ecotourism (Li et al., 2019; Akhoundogli & Buckley, 2021). Western Romanticism, foundational in the sentiments that shape the demand for natural experiences such as ecotourism, has always drawn upon solitude and solitary contemplation (Pepper, 1996). This is in some contrast to the apparently more 'social' conception of Shengtai Luyou. The foundations of Romanticism, associated with the Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire, stress the individual – their uniqueness, their emotions – and oppose the impact of modern rationality on the human soul (Ferber, 2010). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Wordsworth's poetic Romanticism was accompanied by a desire to keep the Lake District free from the masses, to protect its sublime beauty that not all, he felt, could appreciate (Zuelow, 2015). He opposed the development of the railway to Windemere on that basis (ibid.). Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* expressed a similar North American transcendental Romanticism that saw a need for solitude, a being at one with nature, as radical respite from the rationality of modernity (Thoreau, 2017 (original 1854)). These sentiments are reflected subsequently in western culture, through to the present day: from the establishment of the US National parks such as Yosemite and Yellowstone (Demars, 2009); to Jack Kerouac's desire to live atop a mountain on his own in *Lonesome Traveller* (2000); to the modern ecotourist, seeking succour in the face of urban modernity, in nature and with peoples deemed to live closer to it (Kitheka et al., 2019).

In terms of settings of ecotourism sites, in 'Shengtai Luyou' the aesthetic conditions of nature-based locations can be augmented by human interventions like incorporation of cultural, artistic, and spiritual edifices (Buckley et al., 2008; Li et al., 2019). As a result, East Asian nature-based sites, particularly those close to urban areas, tend to have a certain degree of altered landscapes consisting of cultural structures amid nature (Wen & Ximing, 2008; Lee et al., 2012). Such cultural and spiritual enclosures within nature are believed to enhance the quality of human-nature interface from a metaphysical point of view (Wen & Ximing, 2008). This is yet another context in which the Western view of ecotourism – specifically its Romanticism – is somewhat opposed to 'Shengtai Luyou'. In the contemporary Western view of ecotourism, human interferences in nature by means of inclusion of aesthetic elements are detrimental to the fragile ecological and social conditions of the area and can stand in the way of conservation and protection of sensitive environmental and socio-cultural elements (Buckley et al., 2008; Shi et al., 2019). The Eastern view, by contrast, 'tend[s] to favour human manipulation of nature in order to enhance its appeal compared to its preservation in a pristine state' (Cater, 2006, p. 33). Eastern Asian philosophical perspectives emanating from Confucianism and Zen Buddhism are founded on the principle of harmony and unity between nature and humans (Lee et al., 2012; Pang et al., 2025). Sustainability understood in this way involves non-exclusion of both man-made (cultural, artistic, and spiritual) elements and physical environmental elements in natural settings as a part of the harmonious interrelationship between the two (Lee et al., 2012; Li et al., 2016; Christensen, 2017). As such it is more sympathetic to a conception such as 'urban ecotourism', a term that sounds contradictory from a Romantic perspective.

Differences between Eastern and Western views of ecotourism go beyond 'Shengtai Luyou'. Various studies in the past have demonstrated the contrasts between the way ecotourism has been perceived, practised, and philosophised in the East and West. For instance, the western pro-environmental view posits that local communities in ecotourism settings are often resistant to development emanating from tourism growth or are often unaware of the economic benefits of tourism (Cater, 2006). On the contrary, in many instances locals often seek economic opportunities through tourism to lift their living standards and for having access to improved facilities in the vicinity of their residences. Local communities (or indigenous communities) living in ecotourism settings are also often perceived to be leading (and contented with) very traditional and humble lifestyles. This creates the impression of a considerable degree of cultural 'exoticness', whereas on the contrary indigenous communities have been observed to be keen to embrace more convenient non-traditional lifestyles and possessing aspirations of better living standards emanating from capitalist-materialistic lifestyles (Cater, 2006). Moreover, what are sometimes deemed to be 'sustainable'

and ecologically sensitive practices in poor, rural areas – sometimes admired as ‘the environmentalism of the poor’, and desirable from the perspective of the western ecotourism advocate – may in fact be simply cultural norms and ways of living suited to survival in the context of poverty (Milton, 1996).

### 3.2 The South Korean case

In South Korea, the cultural narrative in human-nature relationship emerges from the Confucian and Zen Buddhist philosophies. Such a narrative emphasizes the unity of human and the natural environment. Essentially known as the ‘unity of man and Heaven’, the underlying principle of East Asian philosophies is to deem all constituents of earth as one body (Lee et al., 2012; Pang et al., 2025). The Confucian belief prevalent across North and East Asian cultures, considers the trinity of heaven, Earth, and humans as a collective entity in the cosmos, where humans are referred to as a progeny of heaven and earth. Based on this principle, all elements of heaven and earth or nature can be deemed as siblings of humans, and are hence, unified (Pang et al., 2025). This forms the conceptual basis of sustainable ecotourism in Korean context, that is strongly underpinned in the Confucian philosophy of ‘creative transformation’ (Lee et al., 2012, p. 523). ‘Creative transformation’, is characterized by the harmonization brought about by the alterations in human and nature-based elements; permissible by the principle that both are unified critical elements of the universe (Wen & Ximing, 2008; Lee et al., 2012).

The process of harmony between humans and nature is central to the South Korean concept of sustainability, as both are perceived to complement each other through a process of conservation and restoration. Based on this view, human actions in nature are permissible as long as the physical and aesthetic resources of the latter are not exhausted, creating disharmony.

The incorporation of cultural (and spiritual) structures within wilderness areas in South Korea, are common, as evident in Ppuri Park, a recreational forest in the outskirts of Daejeon, where structures relating to ‘Filial Piety’ have been embedded. More instances of such occurrences can be found in Gyeryongsan National Park and the Jangtaesan Recreational Forest, both located in proximity to Daejeon where spiritual/religious and recreational structures comprise a significant portion of the aesthetic features. While the Gyeryongsan National Park features the Donghaksa Buddhist temple originally built in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, the Jangtaesan recreational forest contains the spiralling recreational skywalk overlooking the thick canopy of the only metasequoia forest (ginkgo trees and bald cypress) in South Korea. Such instances ‘are viewed as the harmonious integration of the human spirit with the surrounding physical environment’ (Lee et al., 2012, p. 529). Moreover, such integrations of human structures within nature also reflect creative transformation that brings harmony and a spirit of regeneration. Visitations to such urban wilderness spots that reflect harmony via creative transformation tend to involve mass visitors who seek recreational, wellbeing and spiritual experiences in such environs, and their group sizes also tend to be large (Wen & Ximing, 2008). Visitation based on such motives and scale is regarded compatible with nature, based on the principle of harmony and unification of human and physical environment in the cultural philosophies of Confucianism and Zen Buddhism (Wen & Ximing, 2008; Lee et al., 2012).

As with Shengtai Luyou, the philosophical basis on which ecotourism (and sustainability) is understood and practised in South Korea also partially contradicts Western conceptualisations. This is in terms of: firstly, creative transformation as opposed to a conservationist approach in the West; secondly, intervention of human (spiritual and cultural) structures in nature based on the tenet of human-nature unity, as opposed to the western view that deems such interventions damaging to nature (Cater, 2006; Wen & Ximing, 2008; Lee et al., 2012); and thirdly – and most importantly in the context of this paper – the presence of masses as opposed to a greater degree of solitude.

### 3.3 Japan’s ‘Shinrin Yoku’

The Japanese concept of ‘nature/forest bathing’ or ‘Shinrin Yoku’, advocates mindfulness travels (or short trips) to forest areas or nearby nature-based areas and engaging in less challenging nature-based activities such as walking or sitting-back amidst nature (Paletto et al., 2024). Studies refer to the Japanese Shin-to faith as the origin of the belief in the therapeutic powers of wilderness areas – such powers emanate from spiritual elements residing within trees that engage with humans and unify them with nature result-

ing in a healing effect (Farkic et al., 2021). In 1982, the forest agency of the Japanese government introduced 'Shinrin Yoku' as a practice (and a concept) that involved visiting forest areas for recreational, and nature-based therapeutic tourism (Tsunetsugu Park & Miyazaki, 2010; Farkic et al., 2021; Pérez-Calderón et al., 2024). Over the years, it became incorporated as part of a widely practised health and well-being activity aimed at mitigating stress, anxiety and restore normal organ, nervous system, blood, and sensory functions (Park et al., 2009; Tsunetsugu et al., 2010). Furthermore, the practice of 'Shinrin Yoku' was also aimed at conservation and protection of forest areas and developing consciousness on the value of nature to human society (and individual human well-being in particular) (Farkic et al., 2021).

'Shinrin Yoku', more specifically refers to forest-air breathing as 'bathing' as it involves the inhalation of both volatile and non-volatile components present in the fresh air of forests that improves human health (Craig et al., 2016). Some of the outcomes of participating in Shinrin Yoku or 'nature/forest bathing', is experience healing qualities of it from stress and anxieties of urban (prosaic) life and obtaining spiritual wellbeing by connecting (and harmonising) with nature through the 5 senses (Guardini et al., 2023; Pérez-Calderón et al., 2024). The 5 senses can be referred to as 'vision (scenery), olfaction (smell of wood), audition (sound of running streams or the rustle of leaves), tactile sensation (feel of the surfaces of trees and leaves), and taste' (Tsunetsugu et al., 2010, p. 29). The connection with nature through the 5 senses aids in developing strong bondages with it and brings both psychological and physiological benefits to individual. From a physiological point of view, practice of 'Shinrin Yoku' in the form of short forestwalks has been observed to reduce stress, hyperactive behavioural responses, hypertension, and improve cardiac health (Pratiwi et al., 2020). Individuals suffering from high blood glucose levels or with a severe type of diabetes have experienced improvements in their body functions through participation in 'Shinrin Yoku' (Park et al., 2009; Pratiwi et al., 2020).

Positive behavioural responses and spiritual well-being were some of the outcomes observed in previous studies focusing on tourists' psychology. A spiritual experience in the context of 'Shinrin Yoku' can be described as healing process of the mind and body of an individual enabled by exposure to nature (Hansen & Jones, 2020; Guardini et al., 2023; Pérez-Calderón et al., 2024). Such nature-spiritual element emerges from the experiential mental impact of the wilderness environments and their scenic beauty on humans as evidenced through the expressions of romanticism and transcendence in visual art forms, literature, science, philosophies relating to naturalism, and mysticism (Hansen & Jones, 2020). The spiritual experience has also been observed to be elevated by socialisation - the collective appreciation of nature between individuals with fellow participants of 'Shinrin Yoku'. This interpersonal, as opposed to solitary, dimension strengthened both shared and individual senses of spiritual wisdom (Frederickson & Anderson, 1999).

From a behavioural perspective, the benefits of 'Shinrin Yoku' can be evidenced through improvements in emotional responses (mitigation of anger, depression, anxiety, mental fatigue, hostility, confusion, and sense of isolation) (Pratiwi et al., 2020; Hagg, 2023). Individuals who have participated in guided forest walks have shown signs of positive transformations in terms of their psychological (emotional and cognitive) health (Song et al., 2018; Pratiwi et al., 2020).

'Shinrin-yoku' is considered to be one of the most accessible ways to get in touch with the natural world and to lower excessive stress to level (Tsunetsugu et al., 2010, p. 28). This makes forest bathing in wilderness areas close to urban areas as well as green spaces within them accessible to the mass populace residing in metropolitan areas, and to visitors (and urban tourists). Therefore, mass proximity travel emerges as the praxis for 'Shinrin-yoku' in urban contexts (and urban resident well-being and recreation, as well as a therapeutic tourism offering in urban tourism).

**Table 2.** Comparative Features Between Eastern View of Ecotourism based on Asian Philosophical and Practical Traditions and Western View of Ecotourism

Eastern View of Ecotourism based on Asian Philosophical and Practical Traditions				
	Shengtai Lüyou (Chinese)	Shinrin Yoku (Japanese)	South Korean View of Ecotourism (based on Zen Buddhism and Confucianism)	Western View of Ecotourism
<b>Overarching Philosophy</b>	Ecotourism emphasizes human health, embodies a preference for enhancing nature through art and artifacts, and embraces limitless scale—ultimately nurturing both individual and collective well-being among visitors	“Forest bathing,” or Forest-air breathing involves inhaling natural compounds that soothe stress and anxiety, and also fostering spiritual well-being by reconnecting with nature through the five senses—sight, smell, sound, touch, and even taste.	“Unity of man and Heaven” or the unity of human and the natural environment. Heaven, Earth, and humanity form a cosmic trinity, with humans as the offspring of heaven and earth—making all natural elements their siblings and part of a unified whole (universe)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Western Classical Conservationist approach (shaped by 18th &amp; 19th century Western Romanticism) emphasizes eco-centrism, solitude and solitary contemplation.</li> <li>• Advocates for the welfare of the visited rather than the visitor.</li> </ul>
<b>Scale</b>	Large scale/ involvement of the masses / mass participation	When set in nearby forests, forest bathing can involve large groups of individuals seeking spiritual and physical well-being through short walks in nature	The concept of ‘creative transformation’ permits the involvement of mass visitors (large groups) seeking recreational, wellbeing and spiritual experiences in such environs	Small scale (often expensive), low intensity travel activity to be ecologically compatible and socio-culturally responsible.
<b>Nature-human Interaction</b>	Aesthetic augmentation of nature-based locations by human (cultural, artistic and spiritual) interventions	Collective appreciation of nature via socialisation with fellow participants in short forest walk experiences	‘Creative transformation’ is characterized by the harmonization brought about by the alterations in human and nature-based elements	Disapproval of human interferences in nature, and rejection of humans being integral to or in harmony with nature
<b>Experiential Aspects</b>	Enhancement of physical and mental wellbeing via <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• socialisation (among friends and family)</li> <li>• engaging in nature-based recreational activities</li> <li>• spiritual (temple visits, meditation, and experiencing nature)</li> </ul>	mindfulness travels (or short walking trips) to forest or nearby nature-based areas and engaging in simple, calm and low effort nature-based activities	Visitation to wilderness areas seeking recreational, wellbeing and spiritual experiences in such environs (consistent with the idea of ‘creative transformation’)	Low impact experiences that can often involve difficult and physically challenging activities, embraced by hard ecotourists (with deep or eco-purist tendencies).

Source: Buckley et al., 2008; Wen & Ximing, 2008; Cater, 2006; Tsunetsugu et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2012; Shi et al., 2019; Akhoundoglu & Buckley, 2021; Farkic et al., 2021; Paletto et al., 2024.

#### 4. Urban Residents, Urban Tourists, and Proximity Ecotravel to Urban and Peri-urban Wilderness Spaces

Studies have shown that urban residents often desire visitations to biodiverse (or biologically rich) wilderness spaces over simple green spaces. Such desire arises from individual aesthetic needs (Fischer et al., 2018). Urban wastelands and modified spaces converted into biodiverse green spaces, either via a natural process or urban green planning, have in some cases become preferred wilderness spots for urban residents and visitors, to connect with nature (Fischer et al., 2018).

Lake Văcărești in Bucharest, Romania, an unfinished and abandoned water infrastructure in the late 1980s, has become a naturally transformed urban wilderness space supporting a wide range of flora and fauna, particularly relating to avian life, mammals, and reptiles (Tribillon, 2016). Urban residents belonging to different demographic, and socio-cultural groups derive therapeutic and personal well-being benefits from such biologically rich urban wilderness spots as shared urban green spaces lying in close proximity to their residences (Fischer et al., 2018; Fagerholm et al., 2021). Moreover, varying levels of biodiversity richness between natural green spots within urban areas and peri-urban natural areas can also enable visitors derive comparable degrees of well-being and recreational benefits from both (Carrus et al., 2015).

The Bukit Nanas Nature Reserve in the middle of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a small tract of virgin urban rainforest with moderate level of species diversity and 5 nature trails, has drawn admiration from both urban residents and international visitors for recreation, well-being, experiential education on environment and sustainability (Faedah et al., 2013; Aziz et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2017). Bukit Nanas Forest reserve serves as an ideal sample for experiencing tropical Malaysian rainforest biodiversity, to international travellers desiring to visit the country's major rainforest-based ecotourism sites as well as those with a primary purpose of experiencing urban and cultural tourism (Aziz et al., 2017). In the same vein, Bukit Gasing Forest nestled between the cities of Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, Malaysia offers a congenial setting for tourist visitation in the form of engaging forest hiking trails in close proximity to urban tourism hubs (Foo, 2016).

Urban wilderness areas, particularly human modified natural areas, when driven by 'self-organized ecosystem processing' can result in zero carbon forestry and high adaptability to urban conditions due to the presence of a mix of indigenous and non-indigenous plant species (Kowarik, 2021, p. 95). Moreover, the combination of human relics (and cultural structures) and nature in various urban contexts make urban wilderness a *cultural* concept (Kowarik, 2013; Kowarik, 2021). Both these factors contribute towards making urban areas environmentally resilient and socially compatible to mass visitors (Shi et al., 2019).

In proximity ecotravel contexts, the visitor-visited dichotomy as established by existing literature on traditional ecotourism can be negated given that in a geographically (and spatially) proximate destination local residents *are visitors as well as tourists* (Chen & Chen, 2017; Jeuring 2018; Salmela et al., 2021). The degree of proximity urban ecotourism settings offers to urban residents generate a sense of duality in them in terms of being both visited (resident) and the visitor as they encounter the unexpected 'otherness' of a 'familiar' natural area close to home (Salmela et al., 2021, p. 54).

## 5. The Sustainability of Urban Ecotourism

Urban ecotourism fits what is often regarded as a criterion of sustainability – inclusivity. In contrast to expensive and exclusive eco destinations, it widens access, or 'democratises', enjoyment of nature. Urban forests contain psychological restorative properties, in terms of instilling positive sensations and socialising opportunities. This is important in urban environments which, despite their apparent conviviality and population density, can be lonely places (note that loneliness implies a longing for the companionship of others and to be a *part of* something, whereas solitude, associated with western ecotourism, expresses desire to be *apart from* others).

Sensory gardens in forest locations close to urban areas offer nature-based recreational opportunities for those with a range of mobility limitations (physical challenges) as well as psychological challenges (Jang & Son, 2020; Wajchman-Switalska et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2025). Furthermore, it has also been observed that visitors with physical mobility challenges also face economic challenges arising out of unaffordable costs of tours that are compatible with their disability needs (Jang & Son, 2020; Wajchman-Switalska et al., 2021). This can be overcome by accessible attributes of proximal urban green space, such as guidelines and infrastructure to overcome communicative, social, and structural barriers (Wajchman-Switalska et al., 2021). The degree of ease in accessibility and 'universal design' of urban forest-based recreational areas promote a sense of 'social inclusivity' for a large section of urban masses who are faced with challenges, which may be physical, psychological as well as economic (Wajchman-Switalska et al., 2021, pp. 11-12). Hence, the perception of mass visitors about biodiversity is shaped by their understandings of urban

natural spaces that foster social inclusivity and universalism; such understandings bring public support for conservation of urban wilderness areas (Carrus et al., 2015).

According to Kowarik 'urban wilderness areas are usually used by a range of urban people, often including marginalized groups that benefit from the 'otherness' of these informal greenspaces in terms of missing regulations and opportunities for interacting with natural elements' (2018, p. 343). Moreover, visitation to urban nature-based spots with higher levels of biodiversity also encourages socialisation (social interaction) opportunities among visitors that aids in the building of strong kinship, and sense of community, and resulting in their collective well-being (Foo, 2016; Fagerholm et al., 2021).

Therefore, it is apparent that urban nature has a significant mutually beneficial inter-relationship with mass visitors. This contrasts with the anti-mass tourism sentiments of ecotourism as often conceived of (Butcher, 2007). Sustainable urban mass tourism in the form of proximity ecotourism in urban areas, fosters such interrelationship. Often aided by mass public transit systems or other forms of low emission transport, and involvement of larger sections of the populace, particularly the economically and physically marginalised, mass urban ecotourism addresses critical environmental and social sustainability goals. On one hand, opportunities for socialisation, recreation, well-being, and therapeutic benefit, and on the other hand, appreciation of urban nature and advocacy for its conservation, as well as education and experiential learning on its ecological value, are some of the transformative and utilitarian benefits urban mass visitors can derive from socially inclusive urban wilderness spaces (Shwartz et al., 2014; Carrus et al., 2015; Foo, 2016; Kowarik, 2018; Kowarik, 2021; Fagerholm et al., 2021; Wajchman-Switalska et al., 2021). These outcomes of proximate urban wilderness spaces potentially contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) of ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, sustainably managing forests, and ensuring of sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Finally, recent studies on mass ecotourism have observed ecotourists motivated by the desire to learn about ecological elements (flora and fauna species) through nature-oriented storytelling techniques while experiencing wilderness (Shi et al., 2019). Moreover, urban communities residing in close proximity to major biodiversity spots like the Amazon, reap benefits from mass ecotourism in terms of building of 'social and cultural capital, as well as entrepreneurial skills, self-esteem, respect for nature and cultural values, motivation to pursue formal education, and collective action' (Neleman & Castro, 2016, pp. 276-77).

## 6. Conclusion

Proximity tourism has become more salient in recent years, particularly since the pandemic. Yet the therapeutic, recreational, and environmental learning opportunities brought to mass visitors (or soft ecotourists) in urban green spaces is an important and neglected area of research and practice. Scholarly enquiry has tended to disregard the importance of the behavioural, aspirational, and existential aspects of mass visitors. Some even argue that the masses on their holidays have been 'written out' of tourism analysis, or dehumanised through assumptions that they are somehow lesser than those who choose worthy sounding niches in exotic locations (Butcher, 2020). So a bringing together the reality of mass society and mass tourism on the one hand, with sustainability through ecotourism on the other, is conceptually important.

Moreover, the Asian philosophical foundations set out in this study provide, in both philosophy and in practice, a counterpoint to the western view of ecotourism based on a romantic sensibility that advocates minimal interventions in nature, smallness of scale, solitude, and the primacy of the visited community. Asian philosophical traditions emphasize that the human element in nature is constitutive and not necessarily dominative, and therefore does not put a limit on the scale of human intervention. Furthermore, the importance of the spiritual, aesthetic, and restorative elements in nature-based travel involving mass visitors is strongly reflected in the Asian traditions cited. Drawing on these traditions, the restorative, recreational, experiential and educational benefits of accessible and inclusive urban ecotourism for mass visitors, including those who are physically and economically marginalised, is clarified.

Therefore, new thinking, drawing on the Asian sensibilities outlined here or ethos from other non-Western geo-cultural regions of the world, could prompt ways of integrating the benefits of nature into mass society, rather than seeing the two as in tension. In amongst the many much vaunted 'lessons of the pan-

demic', an emphasis on urban, mass ecotourism as integral to sustainability and sociability, could be an important one.

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