During the 1980s a new kind of nature tourism emerged which placed a greater emphasis on the environmental aspects of places visited. Called ‘Ecotourism’ it combined ecology with tourism and like nature-based tourism, it was based in natural areas. However, it also included a number of characteristics which differentiated it from nature-based tourism. First it was described as tourism that provides an understanding of the natural environment. Second it is managed to be ecologically sustainable, and third it provides an appropriate return to the local community and long-term conservation of the region. Thus ecotourism’s essential elements were proffered as being nature-based, ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative, locally beneficial and generating tourist satisfaction. The first three characteristics are considered to be essential for a product to be considered ‘ecotourism’ while the last two characteristics are viewed as being desirable for all forms of tourism (Page and Dowling, 2002).

Ecotourism has been the focus of intense debate and discussion over the past twenty years. Around the end of the last century and at the start of the new millennium, the question was being posed whether ecotourism was to become a new form of mass tourism (Dowling 1998, 2000; Weaver 2001a, 2001b). This debate was viewed from a distance by Donohue and Needham (2006, p192) who stated that the ‘rise in the popularity of ecotourism has coincided with voluminous definitional discourse’. They argued that a number of core themes underpin an ecotourism conceptual framework which is based on the key tenets of it being nature-based, conservation-oriented, sustainable, educative, equitable and ethical.

Donohue and Needham (2006, p193) note that historically, the term ‘ecotourism’ was adopted in order to describe the nature-tourism phenomenon (Wallace and Pierce 1996) as advocated by Ceballos-Lascurain in the 1980s. However, they suggest that since that time the definitional discussion has broadened to include the other dimensions listed above. They note that ‘ecotourism is not a homogeneous phenomenon but instead, it has become accepted as a complex and synergistic collection of social, ecological and economic dimensions that reflect a common core idea’. This reflects the earlier notions by Newsome, Dowling and Moore (2002) that ecotourism incorporates five interrelated characteristics based around the tourist experience. This is that it should be nature-based, ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative, locally beneficial and (participant) satisfactory.

By the middle of last decade there was a call for greater investigation of critical components of ecotourism such as quality control, the industry, external environments or institutions (Weaver and Lawton 2007). The authors suggested that ‘This imbalance, combined with the fragmentation and lack of integration within the literature, suggest that ecotourism, as a field of academic inquiry, is still in a state of adolescence’ (Weaver and Lawton 2007, p1168).

It has also been suggested that ecotourism is being threatened by an approach that minimally fulfils the three core criteria of ecotourism – nature-based attractions, learning opportunities, ecological and socio-cultural sustainability (Fennell and Weaver 2005). They propose a new model based around the development of an international network of protected areas ecotourism which are designed to stimulate positive socioeconomic change and sound ecological health of protected areas. Themes central to the concept are research and education, ecological health, community participation and development, and partnerships (Fennell and Weaver 2005). They argue that ecotourism comprises three core criteria, namely, an emphasis on nature-based attractions, learning opportunities, and management practices that adhere to the principles of ecological, socio-cultural and economic sustainability. A similar investigation was made into the import of cultural values on the themes of Chinese ecotourism and found that ‘a rigid western model for ecotourism may not be best suited for domestic [Chinese] ecotourists’ (Donohue and Lu 2008, p370).
According to Weaver (2008, p3) ecotourism existed well before the generally accepted introduction of the term in the 1980s. He suggests that during the latter part of the 20th century ecotourism was used in the context of one of four phases or platforms that were advanced for the field of tourism since the end of World War II (Jafari, 2001). With the advent of tourist air travel, and especially the introduction of the jet aircraft which made long-haul travel more available, the modern mass tourism era began. Subsequently the study of tourism evolved through a number of phases or platforms from advocacy (tourism is all ‘good’), cautionary (tourism’s ‘good’ is tempered by it having some negative elements), adaptancy (alternative types or forms of tourism were introduced under the banner of ‘alternative (to mass) tourism’, and finally a knowledge based platform which championed a more sustainable approach to tourism development generally. Weaver (2008, p6) notes that ‘from an ecotourism perspective, a critical outcome has been the growing perception that this sector can legitimately occur as either alternative or mass tourism’. Weaver argued that this was a critical change and shifted ecotourism away from the traditional view of it being a ‘form’ or ‘type’ of tourism to it being an ‘approach’ to tourism. However, from this standpoint it seems as if ecotourism as a ‘type’ of tourism is being confused with sustainable tourism, which is usually accepted as an ‘approach’ to tourism generally. It is the latter that underpins the former and the two terms are not synonymous.

Wearing (2005a, 2008) suggests that arising from these approaches ecotourism can be further identified as either ‘minimalist’ or ‘comprehensive’. The former is more likely to be focused on a particular site or species and involves only superficial learning, whereas the latter is wider in scope and encourages greater learning opportunities. Whichever way it is viewed, ecotourism includes a number of criteria. These are its being based in nature, encompassing a learning element, and fostering sustainable principles, including the economic imperative of at least being financially viable. Wearing (2008, p17) suggests that ecotourism should include the following characteristics:

1. Ecotourism is a form of tourism (with temporal and spatial elements)
2. Attractions are primarily nature-based, but can include associated cultural resources and influences.
3. Educational and learning outcomes are fostered.
4. It is managed so that environmental and socio-cultural sustainability outcomes are more likely to be achieved.
5. The importance of an operation’s financial sustainability is recognised.

Ecotourism is a relatively young subject and is still emerging as a niche discipline within tourism. It is not a pervasive type of mass tourism nor an approach to tourism. It is still a growing form of tourism that is now accepted by the mainstream tourism industry as a significant sector whose sustainable character makes it an excellent exemplar for all other forms of tourism. Much is still being discovered about its nature, characteristics and impacts, despite the assertion that it has come of age as a legitimate area of academic inquiry (Weaver & Lawton, 2007). This brief overview of the history of ecotourism helps us to unlock the past in order to arrive at the current state of the situation, as evidenced by the individual chapters and the whole of this book, so that a better future can be planned for the contributions that ecotourism can make to the natural, cultural and economic sectors of the world. In this way ecotourism can be one of the leaders of a more responsible, sustainable tourism future (Dávid, 2011).