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IMPROVING QUALITY OF ECOTOURISM THROUGH ADVANCING EDUCATION & TRAINING OF GREEK ECO-TOUR GUIDES: THE ROLE OF TRAINING IN ENVIRONMENTAL INTERPRETATION

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Environmental interpretation in Greece is in its infancy as an academic field. There are no nature guides or specific conservation objectives, and there is no professional training for non formal environmental educators and/or interpreters. The aim of this paper is to reveal the necessity of integrating environmental interpretation in training of Greek Ecotour guides. The focus is on developing abilities which could enable Greek Ecotour guides to communicate and interpret the significance of the environment, promote minimal impact practices, ensure the sustainability of the natural and cultural environment, and motivate visiting tourists to evaluate the quality of life in relation to larger ecological or cultural concerns. The rationale underpinning this objective is that by providing accurate and effective interpretation of ecotourism sites as well as monitoring and modelling environmental responsible behaviour, the outcome will be to promote positive impacts of tourism and alleviate negative ones. Local community will be encouraged to participate in environmental management of ecotourism settings. Furthermore, connecting ecotourism commitment to returning benefits, particularly economic and employment ones to local communities, it stresses that training local people to be interpretive guides, helps achieving not only ecological sustainability but also economic sustainability. Once trained, guides may encourage conservation action amongst both tourists and the local community.

Keywords: *Environmental Educators' training, Environmental Interpretation, non formal Environmental Education, eco-tour guides, Greece*

JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

INTRODUCTION

Protected areas such as national parks and reserves now cover more than 12% of the world's land area (Chape et al. 2005). Natural heritage



sites or nature reserves like National Parks and Wildlife play a major role in conserving sensitive ecosystems. Irrelevant of their status are by definition lands or waters which, we presume, would be threatened now or in the future by ill-conceived human activities. Typically, the underlying goal of management is to sustainably preserve the qualities and features contained in these natural heritage areas in such a way that the benefits they provide (whether ecological, economic, scientific, scenic or cultural) can be continued indefinitely and indeed perpetuated (Ham et al. 1993). Thus, protected areas, by definition, ensure the concept of sustainable development. However, the increasing visitation of natural areas (Bushell 2003; Eagles & McCool 2002; Newsome et al. 2002) mandates an appropriate management of these areas in order to ensure its sustainability. There are a number of management tools available which endeavour to minimise environmental impacts of eco-tourists. One such management tool is environmental interpretation. Freeman Tilden was the first author who defined environmental interpretation describing it as “*an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first hand experiences and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information*” (Tilden, 1977: 8).

People who deliver interpretive programs call themselves interpreters, educators, naturalists, nature guides, docents, tour guides, or heritage interpreters. Interpretation can be personal (i.e. talks, interpreter-led hikes, campground programs, etc.) or non-personal (i.e. exhibits, waysides, films, and publications). Interpreters strive to foster a sense of care and stewardship among visitors toward the resource. Interpretive programs occur not only in government administered settings including national parks, national forests, fish and wildlife refuges, and reservoir areas, but also at state government managed parks, highways, and waterways. Private and non-profit entities employ environmental interpretation in museums, zoos, aquariums, historic buildings, and theme parks (Chen, 2003). The field of environmental interpretation has grown out of the perceived need to conserve and manage natural heritage, and to enhance the experience of visitors and tourists. An important role of environmental interpretation is to attempt to educate visitors (in informal free-choice learning settings) (Skanavis et 2005) to the complex natural resource issues, associated with national and local protected areas and sensitive ecotourism settings. Besides its educational and recreational functions, environmental interpretation can also contribute to public relations and people management (Packer, 2004). Environmental interpretation is vital to the rapidly growing ecotourism industry, as well

as other forms of sustainable tourism, because it involves educating tourists about the consequences of their actions and encourages them to engage in sustainable behaviours (Weiler and Ham 2001).

In Greece, ecotourism constitutes a small but developing part of tourism (WTO 2001; Skanavis et al. 2004; Svoronou and Holden 2005). In countries such as Greece, despite the obvious role that environmental interpretation could play, the vast majority of interpreter guides in the ecotourism industry lack formal training in environmental interpretation (Merimman and Brochu 2004). The ultimate scope of this paper is to reveal the necessity of integrating environmental interpretation in the training of Greek non formal environmental educators by assisting them in the development of abilities which could enable them to communicate and interpret the significance of the environment as well as to be engaged in sustainable management practices. The rationale underpinning these objectives is that by providing accurate and effective interpretation of ecotourism sites and by monitoring and modelling environmental responsible behaviour, positive impacts of tourism will be promoted and negative ones will be alleviated. Furthermore, it will encourage local community's participation in environmental management of ecotourism settings (Black et al. 2001).

Connecting ecotourism commitment to returning benefits, particularly economic and employment ones to local communities, it stresses the importance of training local people to be interpretive guides. As a result this helps achieving not only ecological sustainability but also economic sustainability. Once trained, guides may encourage conservation action amongst both tourists and the local community. While there is some evidence that trained guides have become involved in conservation projects following their training long-term, a follow-up with tourists and trained guides is needed in order to identify whether this is actually occurring and what mechanisms might be needed in order to strengthen it. This paper aims to develop a training model for interpretive guide training in Greece. This will be accomplished not only by critically examining training programmes in developed and less developed ecotourism countries, where environmental interpretation is already an established science field in the management of sensitive ecotourism areas, but also by taking into consideration the special social settings and environment of Greece in which it will take place (Ham et al. 1993).

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND INTERPRETATION IN PROTECTED AREAS: SETTING THE SCENE

Throughout the past decade, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) has laid out the framework of the problems facing the global community. Sustainable development has captured people's attention and acquired the status of a global buzzword. Indeed, today nearly all political leaders, policymakers, and program administrators can speak the language of sustainable development and many are incorporating its ideas into their future policies. Sustainable development is offered by some as an alternative to past models of development that had focused primarily on economic growth and had addressed environmental, social, and health concerns on an individual and often contradictory basis. Defined as "development that meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (WCED, 1987: 43), sustainable development recognizes the interlocking and systematic nature of these concerns. In this manner, sustainable development offers a unique possibility to move beyond viewing the different crises as challenges to the current system. Sustainable development perceives these same crises and challenges as opportunities to reorient and reorganize society around a different paradigm (Qablan, 2005). To comprehend this paradigm, the concepts of sustainable development should be holistically and critically understood and contrasted to alternative approaches to the environment. As with other industrial sectors and fields of academic study tourism research has also responded to the popularization of the concept of sustainable development (Hunter, 2003). In fact, the concept of Sustainable Tourism has evolved in parallel with the related concept of sustainable development (Pridham, 1999). However, to realize the shift to sustainable development and by induction to sustainable tourism, education has to play a vital role. UNECE strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (2004) clearly states: "*it is important to support non formal and informal ESD activities, since they are an essential complement to formal education, not least for adult learning*".

Protected areas traditionally provide non formal learning opportunities. The central mission of protected areas, such as national parks and sensitive ecotourism settings is conservation education: using the motivating power of natural places and living organisms to inform, inspire and motivate people to participate in environmental protection (Nareshwar, 2006). Protected areas and other sensitive ecotourism

settings provide an important medium through which people can acquire information, develop ideas and construct new visions for themselves and society (Packer and Ballantyne, 2004). Indeed, for many people the information they encounter while being at nature parks may offer the only opportunity to learn about their bonds to the environment, or to their history and culture (Moscardo, 1998). Interpretive sites often encourage visitors to question their values, attitudes and actions regarding contentious issues and consider themselves active agents of education and change (Uzell 1998; Uzell and Ballantyne, 1998). At a more profound level effective interpretation can have a “transformative” effect by inducing among participants a deeper understanding of the nature and consequent adherence to a more ethical and environmental ethos in the attitudes and/or lifestyle of participants (Fennel and Weaver, 2005)

A statement often attributed to Tilden, but in fact found by Tilden in a US Park Service Administrative manual (Markwell, K. 1996), is the following: “Through interpretation we reach understanding, through understanding we come to appreciation, through appreciation we accomplish protection”. The more visitors and local inhabitants understand a park’s features the more they appreciate them and the more likely they will care for them – and by caring, the chances of the park to be sustainably protected are greatly enhanced (Harmon, D. 2003). This statement is at the core of many interpretive programs operating today in protected areas and ecotourism settings. Interpreting one or more aspects of a resource involves more than presenting information about it. It involves bringing it to life in ways which actively engage those present; what Tilden referred to as “Provocation”. Therefore the central principle of interpretation is to assist resource conservation, which is the heart of sustainable tourism development (Kuo, 2002). Such activities are similar to the belief held by both the environmental education movement and by advocates for more ecologically sustainable tourism, that expose to nature. An opportunity to enhance one’s understanding of nature, leads to a greater sense of appreciation and hence commitment to its protection and conservation (Markwell, 1996). Ecotourism is generally considered as the most typical form of sustainable tourism (Soteriades and Varvaressos, 2003). Ecologically Sustainable Tourism has its primary focus on experiencing natural areas that foster environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation (NEAP, 2000 cited in Newson, 2001). Education is at the heart of ecotourism and interpretation is frequently the method by which the education message is delivered (Christie and Mason 2003)

The goals and interpretative activities in these traditional free-choice learning settings intersect with values, objectives and mainly the vision of the United Nations Decade for Sustainable: “to provide critical reflection and greater awareness and empowerment so that new visions and concepts can be explored and new methods and tools developed” (UNECE, 2004). The role of teachers and educators is crucial in helping their audience to think and act critically. Educators need to make links among ecological issues, the community, and the economy to foster audience understanding and acceptance of sustainable development (Qablan, 2005). To promote sustainability goals, specialized training programs must be developed for all walks of life including the sustainable. Chapter 36 of *Agenda 21*, ‘Promoting Education, Public Awareness, and Training’, specifically identifies four major thrusts: (1) improving the quality of and access to basic education, (2) reorienting existing education to address sustainable development, (3) developing public understanding and awareness, and (4) training. It encourages all sectors—including business, industry, universities, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and community organizations to train people for environmental management positions, in addition to training employees at all levels in sustainability issues related to their jobs (McKeown and Hopkins 2003). In these four Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) efforts, formal education systems are encouraged to work closely within their local communities, which means communicating and collaborating with both non formal and informal sectors of the educational community (McKeown and Hopkins 2003).

Nature or Interpretive Centres in nature heritage areas can unite communities and enable their neighbours to save their treasured places, manage their land with sustainability in mind and show the children how to value and nurture life. In this regard nature centres can serve the goals of ESD in protected areas. A critical factor for accomplishing nature centres ESD goals is the professional training of its personnel. UNECE strategy for ESD (2004) underlines: “*appropriate initial training and re-training of educators and opportunities for them to share experiences are extremely important for the success of ESD.*”

ECOTOUR GUIDES, ENVIRONMENTAL INTERPRETERS, NON FORMAL ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATORS: THE PROBLEM OF TERMINOLOGY

The terms non formal environmental educator, interpretive guide and eco-tour guide are often used interchangeably in literature, making reference to the same field of activities. This lack of standardization is considered a source of confusion to practitioners, the broad public and decision makers (Wohlers, 2005). This obviously is an important reason why the National Association of Interpretation has started a definitions project “to work towards a consensus on a glossary of terms in the non formal education field. (NAI, Business Plan, 2007:7, cited in Wohlers. 2005). To avoid confusion as well as identify the roles each profession has, it is necessary to clearly define each of the terms used.

While there are various definitions of a tour guide, an internationally accepted definition given by the International Association of Tour Managers and the European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (EFTGA) is that a “tour guide is a person who guides groups, individual visitors from abroad or from the home country around the monuments, sites and museums of a city or region; to interpret in an inspiring and entertaining manner, in the language of the visitor's choice, the cultural and natural heritage and environment” (Black and Ham 2005). In particular, the ecotour guide can play a vital role in the ecotourism experience in protecting the natural and cultural environment by performing a number of roles such as interpreter of the environment, motivator of environmentally responsible behaviour and conservation values, and specialist information giver (Black and Ham 2005). According to Ballantyne and Hughes (2001) an ecotour guide is someone employed on a paid or voluntarily basis that conducts paying or non-paying tourists around an area or site of natural and / or cultural importance utilizing the principles of ecotourism and interpretation. Among its roles the guide’s educational role has been regarded as the most important (Christie and Mason 2003).

Environmental Interpreter or Heritage interpreter is someone who practices the art of environmental interpretation. Since environmental interpretation is considered an aspect of non formal environmental education (Knapp 1997; 2003) and conversely education a part of the interpretational process (Luck 2003; Newsome et al 2002) an environmental interpreter is usually specified as a non formal environmental educator / outdoor educator or informal educator. Their profession title interchanges with reference to the programs they deliver.

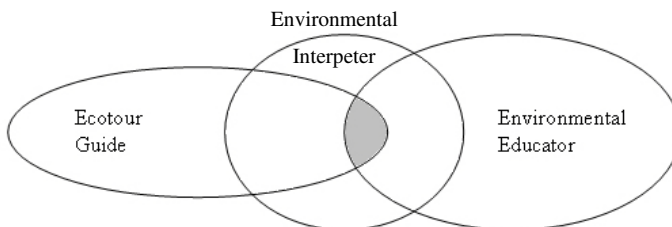
Zuefle (1997) states: “Interpreters can educate and educators can interpret. Some folks do both...” However, while interpretation can contribute to an educational program, environmental education is part of a larger system with an established curriculum, educational goals and specific learning objectives. Field trips that have pre-trip activities, post-trip activities and educational elements in the trip itself that tie into the larger environmental educational curriculum of the school are educational activities. Field trips that leave the interpreter to present whatever she or he wishes, without trying to align with a curriculum are usually considered interpretive programs. Both of these approaches can be of high quality and valuable to the children, but the latter is considered to be a recreational activity, even though the audience is a captive one. Viewing interpretive activities as “awareness” activities that lead to education experiences is reasonable but it does not make interpretive programming equivalent to environmental education programs (Brochu and Merriman 2008).

Interpreters are often the main awareness/educational source for many visitors to natural and cultural protected areas, either through personal contact or through interpretive publications, exhibits or films. Therefore they influence the reputation of the area and the organization, credibility and support of the community. Environmental/ Natural heritage Interpreters play a critical role in increasing sustainable development practices (Adams, 2004). The profession of the interpreter is to facilitate (not dictate) the individual’s personal connections to the natural resource and to develop their own unique meanings (Chen, 2000). Non formal environmental educators are agents ensuring the sustainability of the natural and cultural environment, and motivating visitors and local inhabitants to consider their own lives in relation to broader ecological or cultural concerns (Christie and Mason 2003).

In view of the previous definitions it is illustrated that environmental interpretation and people who perform it is the link between ecotour guides and environmental educators (see figure 1). The rationale underpinning this figure is that ecotour guides can influence visitors through two key strategic points: role modelling of appropriate behaviours and the education they provide to group through interpretation. Cohen (1985) states that guides generally play dual roles of “pathfinder” and “mentor”. The role of the mentor resembles the role of teacher, instructor, or advisor (Dahles, 2002).

Environmental interpreters’ principles are essential for ecotour guides. Analogical is the influence of environmental educators when practising in non formal/free-choice learning settings.

Figure 1. The link between ecotour guides environmental interpreters and environmental educators



Weiler and Ham (1999) emphasize the guide's central role of interpretation and education (Dioko and Unakul 2005; Randal and Rollins 2005). Through the non formal environmental education used in interpretation, ecotour guides have the opportunity to increase knowledge, foster positive attitudes and promote environmentally responsible behaviours (Ballantyne & Hughes 2001; Haig & McIntyre 2002). Taking into consideration the previous conceptual framework we employ for the purposes of this paper the term ecotour guide as a general term, which embraces the lineaments of environmental interpreter and/or non formal environmental educator.

BENEFITS AND NEEDS FOR ECOTOUR GUIDING TRAINING

Ecotour Guides have many responsibilities: they are expected to provide organization and management of the tour; facilitate interaction with the host community; provide leadership; and deliver interpretation. As Weiler and Ham (2001) underline "*interpretation lies at the heart and soul of what ecotourism is, and what ecotourism can and should be doing*". The use of personal interpretation as a preferential medium, means that the role of the guide becomes a critical one (Ballantyne & Hughes 2001). Personal interpretation delivered by tour guides is still considered to be the best and most effective medium (Armstrong and Weiler, 2002). Ecotour guiding represents one of the primary means by which members of the local community can partake in the benefits that ecotourism brings. More highly trained and qualified ecotour guides, allows an even more enhanced level of participation and more benefits to be drawn from the effects of tourism (Dioko and Unakul, 2005). Environmental training of tour guides (Herbereich, 1998) in the ecological sustainable tourism can help both visitors and local residents in

the conservation, preservation, and proper interpretation of the nature. Interpretative activities can adhere to the sites' originality as well as their natural and aesthetic value.

The role of the tour guide is not only an important one, but also one of influence. Studies have shown that guides have significant influence over the visitors' behaviour. As result, the visitors' impact on the environment is minimized, management strategies are properly explained and safety messages are supported (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). To be employable, to be competent and to keep stakeholders happy, guides need training, often extensive training (Ham and Weiler 2000). Howes & Ingamells (1994) and Saunders (1989) underlining that: *not all staff of a nature centre are well suited to this role and thus so specifically trained staffed are required*. As in any profession, work experience is vital. It seems sensible to recruit staff specifically trained for the field or to help them access this training while employed (Armstrong and Weiler, 2003). This professional development is especially important since informal educators often have not been taught how to educate (Robertson, 2003). Education personnel is often hired to teach in non formal educational settings for their content expertise and have little systematic teacher training (Taylor, 2006). This is particularly true in the case of environmental education where it is often a natural resource professional, who is responsible for educating the public at the informal education site. According to Bainer et al (2000) although nature professionals are well trained to address resource related needs, many of these professionals "have serious problems with serving people". Magil (1992) found that too often they are either, not trained, minimally trained, or disciplined to understand and manage social interactions and to use basic education principle. Moreover, research by Simmons (1998) revealed that teachers using various nature settings for environmental education expressed the need for special training as well as a desire for more training before they took their students to this place.

Most of the research in the area of environmental interpretation and education has focused on the evaluation of environmental programs and the impact they have on the knowledge and attitude of the park visitor, not on the role of the park interpreter (Taylor and Galdarelli, 2004). Research of Roggenbuck et al 1992 reports that trained guides devoted more time and attention to communicating the natural and cultural history of a natural resource. Black et al. (2001) cite that training has been instrumental in increasing the awareness of environmental and socio-cultural impacts caused by ecotourism. Such awareness leads to minimal impact behaviour by both visitors and residents to sites and allows the

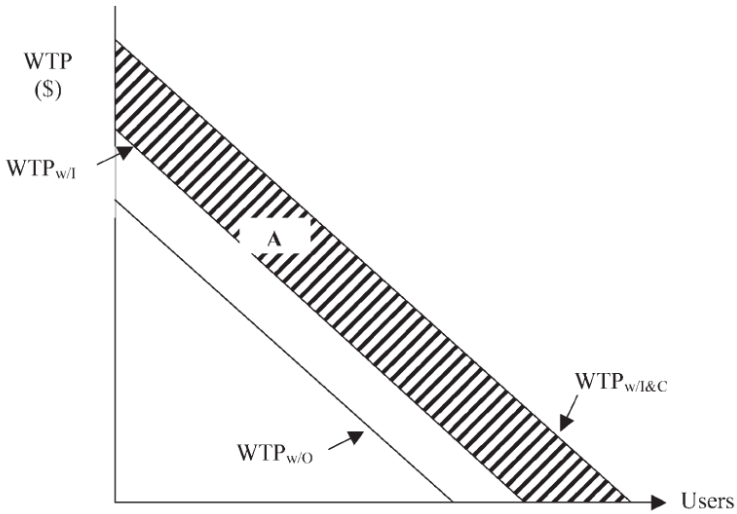
effective enforcement of park regulations. Training enables guides to encourage conservation, to act as mediators between hosts and guests, to provide quality service and customer satisfaction as well as deliver effective visitors' experience. Christie & Mason (2003) cite the lack of a theoretical base, benchmarks, or best practice principles in the profession despite its long history. Calls for more professionalism, required standards, appropriate training and better delivery skills are frequently made and punctuate most discourse on tour-guiding (Christie and Mason, 2003; Dioko and Unakul 2005). Cherem (1977) argues that because guides are primarily interpreters and only secondarily subject specialists, guides should be the subjects of more formal courses in interpretive methods, field courses, research, and even theory (cited in Christie and Mason, 2003). Knudson et al (1995/2003) acknowledge that it is vital that interpreters are trained.

Economic Value of Guides Training and Certification

Taking into consideration the previous remarks, Carver et al. (2003) provide a graphical view showing how one could determine the economic value of interpretation as well as how professional training and certification could affect the social value and quality of interpretation in a given site (see figure 2). The vertical axis represents the cumulative dollar value of what society is willing to pay (WTP) to preserve a resource. The horizontal axis represents the number of people (users and non-users) surveyed by Carver et al (2003). The line $WTP_{W/O}$ represents the rank ordered maximum willingness to pay across individuals for the resource without interpretive services. The vertical line intercepts the highest dollar amount an individual is willing to pay to preserve the resource. The horizontal intercept represents the point where the willingness-to-pay for the next person equals zero.

Furthermore, a second and third willingness to pay which includes interpretation but no training and certification: $WTP_{W/I}$ and interpretation with training and certification: $WTP_{W/I\&C}$. To derive an economic value one could use the difference of the value of interpretation in WTP function. The difference between $WTP_{W/I}$ and $WTP_{W/I\&C}$ represents the marginal social benefits of a certification program (represented by area A in figure 2). In particular, the difference in WTP is due to change in quality. These changes can be due to additional education, training and certification of interpreters (Carver et al, 2003).

Figure 2. A Graphical View of the Value of Interpretation and its extension through Training and Certification



WTP: willingness to pay.

$WTP_{w/O}$: willingness to pay across individuals without interpretive services.

$WTP_{w/I}$: interpretation but no training and certification.

$WTP_{w/I\&C}$: interpretation with training and certification.

Source: Carver et al. 2003

In western developed countries the study of environmental interpretation is more and more mature with the help of other academic fields (Ham, 2002). Ecotour Interpretive guiding is acknowledged as a profound profession by official bodies worldwide.

Greece now has 27 National Parks, among which 11 Ramsar sites for the protection of wetlands. These protected areas are affected by serious management and protection problems. Two of the most significant problems are dearth of specialized personnel and inadequate provision of information and services to tourist visitors (Beriatos, 2005). Although the term of Ecotourism has been established in the Greek tourism market since the late 1980s (Svoronou and Holden, 2005), there is no significant link between available natural resources and appropriate tourist activities (Beriatos, 2005). Nowadays in Greece the majority of the ecotourism clientele is occasional in nature, in that the individuals are likely to be involved in a number of other tourist activities, and the ecotourism planning for the protected areas reflects this perspective.

At the Research Centre of Environmental Education and Communication, at the University of the Aegean, we studied a group of individuals running small ecotourism enterprises in Greece. The research resulted that ecotourism clientele is mostly males in the age group of 26-60 with basic educational background. Half of them depend on ecotourism business to meet their financial needs. They present a high degree of environmental activism and a thorough understanding of their environmental education needs. They were ready to financially commit in the environmental protection process and were willing to accept environmental education. (Skanavis et al., 2004).

The only place which recruits local inhabitants as ecotour guides is one of the most precious biotopes of Greece, Dadia Forest Reserve. These guides are trained locally by the nongovernmental organization, WWF which is the main administrator manager of the local nature centre (Svoronou and Holden, 2005; Buckley, R. 2003). Conducted ecotours in these areas usually last approximately fifteen minutes. During these tours emphasis is given of the empowerment of the affective variable of visitor's environmental attitudes. The cognitive variables are confined to mere descriptions of biodiversity. Human interventions to any kind of environmental conservation initiative are not addressed (Hovardas and Stamou 2006).

The School of Tourist Guides in Greece, a state school belonging to the Ministry of Tourism, is compulsory for guides in all museums, sites, monuments, churches etc and the study program lasts for 2.5 years. All guides in Greece are national guides- which means, they have a guiding permission to work in the whole country- and not local guides like in other countries. The 75% of the funds come from the European Union Fund for Training via Greek Government and the 25% originates from Greek Ministry itself (Cookson Phillip, 2006). Judging by the courses offered, there is a lack of specialization in ecotour guiding and there is an absence of any kind of training in the interpretation or the non formal environmental education fundamentals. To the contrary according to the curriculum there is a strong focus to tour guiding in historical and archaeological sites with less emphasis to natural heritage sites. The curriculum lacks of sustainable tourism or ecotourism courses.

A school for National Parks and Recreation areas Caretaker-Guides offered by the Public and Private Vocational Training Institutes which are placed under the auspices of Organization of Vocational Education and Training also exists in Greece. The national authority providing accreditation of the certificates, entitled as Vocational Training Diploma I.E.K, given by the above Institutes, is the Greek Ministry of Education

and Religious Affairs. The prerequisite for acceptance to these Institutes is a Certificate of Unified Upper Secondary School (EL) or a Certificate of Technical Vocational Educational School B´ level (TEE) The studies last two years including a six months period of practical training.

The graduates of these programs can work in organizations managing national parks, protected areas, small woods and forests, as well as in facilities of mountain tourism, game reserves, zoological parks-gardens, botanical gardens, of environmental education, etc. The recognition of the Vocational Training Diploma I.E.K. as a qualification for appointment in the public sector is regulated by Presidential Decree no.267/2003 (Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic 240 / Vol. A / 16-10-2003). The professional rights of this specialty are regulated by Presidential Decree no.267/2003 (Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic 240 / Vol. A / 16-10-2003). The assessment of the content of the courses offered for this certification resulted in that interpretation subject is lightly covered in one course, specifically the one of Public Relations.

Therefore in Greece, there are no certification programs offered at University Level which address the census of the environmental interpretation as a separate field and this is something that needs to be addressed carefully.

CONCLUSION

The voluntary participation at a non formal environmental educational program is encouraged from its association with entertainment. Based on this association, the participant gets actively involved in a pleasant non formal educational activity and the possibility of an apathetic response is minimized. In the development of such conditions, according to the principles of environmental interpretation, main emphasis is placed on the cooperative and interdependent communication between the sources of transmitting and receiving environmental messages. According to the environmental interpretation guidelines, the educational process is productive when the environmental trainer approaches the learners as active participants of the educational experience and avoids acting as an authoritarian who just informs them about the visited area.

Determining role in the accomplishment of such a goal is the development of an appropriate educational program for the training of the involved ecotour guides at the Greek protected area sites. Such a program should be based on the fact that sustainable tourism has to be an experience that can promote responsible environmental behavior. The

well organized environmental education training of the ecotour guides is the only way that can ensure the successful results that the environmental interpretation profession is in need. By educating the ecotour guides, their environmental knowledge, communication and interpretation skills will be built and in general their environmental profile will be shaped. Then we would be able to refer to the environmental interpretation programs as ones that can contribute to the promotion of environmental awareness, knowledge, attitude and behaviour of the participants on top of a pleasant recreational experience in nature.

Those responsible for training non formal environmental educators must take into serious consideration the uniqueness of the non formal setting such as the case of protected areas and the related teaching challenges. They should assist non formal environmental educators/interpreters in developing an awareness of the specific contextual factors (e.g., the audience, teaching in a public setting, learner needs, time limitations, institutional guidelines and expectations) involved. Also, trainers of the non formal educators need to emphasize on how they can make full use of the specific non formal educational experience.

Critical analysis of teaching conceptions and the various contextual factors involved allows the non formal environmental educator to have a greater success potential over his/her practice. In addition, practitioners in formal environmental education settings, according to Brennan's (1997) view, could gain much from the processes of non formal environmental education. A good example is the challenge of educating in a limited time-frame while multiple obstacles emerge.

Following a training program based on standardized profession priorities could come in conflict with local needs. Therefore, this possible complication needs be explored. An appropriate model for establishing a regional training program for Greek environmental interpreters is an urgent issue that must be addressed. In this regard, further research in protected areas sites is mandated. The objective is to better codify this training model as well as to understand effective practices for promoting learning among non formal participants (Taylor, 2006). Such a model must adhere to the principles laid out earlier in the paper and must balance the requirements of both local stakeholders in Greece and the fulfilment of the global values related to the protection of natural heritage areas.

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