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**Evaluation of the Potential of Ecotourism to Contribute to
Local Sustainable Development:
A Case Study of Tengtou Village, China**

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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, “ecotourism” has emerged as a much talked about topic that is frequently linked to the term “sustainable development”. Despite the fact that the definition of ecotourism has been expanded from primarily pristine nature-based areas to modified areas, relatively few studies have been devoted to evaluating the relationship between “ecotourism” and “sustainable development” in those destinations. To address this research need, this thesis attempts to analyse the potential of ecotourism as a strategy for sustainable development, where it does not depend only on nature-based opportunities. Relevant literature on the topics of ecotourism and sustainable development was examined to develop a framework to assess ecotourism in a case study area.

The case study employed was Tengtou village, China, which is one of the earliest national eco-villages. Tengtou hosted 76,200 tourists in 2006. Data was collected using qualitative methods, which included semi-structured interviews, informal discussions, focus groups, participant observation and questionnaire surveys. The research revealed that ecotourism has brought a variety of favourable impacts, and the local people hold optimistic attitudes about ecotourism, which indicate the feasibility of the ecotourism industry and the comparative success it has achieved. On the other hand, the research also found several potentially adverse effects, which suggest that ecotourism does not yet make a full contribution to local sustainable development.

This thesis concludes that effective regulation and sound planning play a significant role in enabling the sustainability of ecotourism. Meanwhile, the importance of local people’s active involvement at different levels of ecotourism development in ensuring ecotourism’s success, in the long term, was also revealed. This issue of local participation, strongly pushed in the international ecotourism literature, is not something which has characterised most ecotourism initiatives in China to date. Further, considering the increasing number of tourists, the management of tourists and the expansion of physical infrastructure need to be strengthened in the research area.

This thesis is dedicated to
my beloved grandmother Xiubao Ge,
and to my loving parents, Guozhen Jiang and Sanyi Zhang

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