

Chapter 1

Laying the foundation for the study

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Problem statement, aim, and objectives

The concept of ecotourism comprises four fundamentals, namely the local community, the ecotourism industry, tourists and the resource base (Hattingh, 1996). Each one must be considered when implementing ecotourism. However, the **problem** has been identified that the concept of ecotourism is seldom understood and implemented in its totality, and the term is often misused.

The dissertation therefore **aims** to explore the four fundamentals of ecotourism in depth, and to demonstrate their holistic application by putting them into practice, using Mkambati Nature Reserve on the Wild Coast of South Africa as a case study.

To achieve this aim, the following **objectives** have been established:

1. To conduct a literature study on the four fundamentals of ecotourism and problems that occur within their interrelationships;
2. To provide a background to Mkambati Nature Reserve, and to examine its setting within the context of tourism on the Wild Coast; and to
3. Based on the literature study, research the implementation of ecotourism in the following aspects of Mkambati Nature Reserve, and to provide guidelines in this regard:
 - accommodation and facilities;
 - fauna and flora;
 - culture and community; and
 - activities.

1.1.2 Methodology

The study consists of a literature study on the fundamentals of ecotourism, along with its problems and challenges. To illustrate how theory derived from the literature is applied in practice, a case study was undertaken on the Mkambati Nature Reserve, situated on the Wild Coast between Port Edward and Port St Johns in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. As instructor

and facilitator, the author took the Ecotourism Honours students of the Department of Tourism Management, University of Pretoria, to the reserve for their practical project. Using the literature study as a base, the facilitator and students formulated initial guidelines on the implementation of ecotourism at the reserve. These were subsequently refined by the author. More detail on the *modus operandi* is provided in Section 4.6.1.

1.1.3 Structure of the study

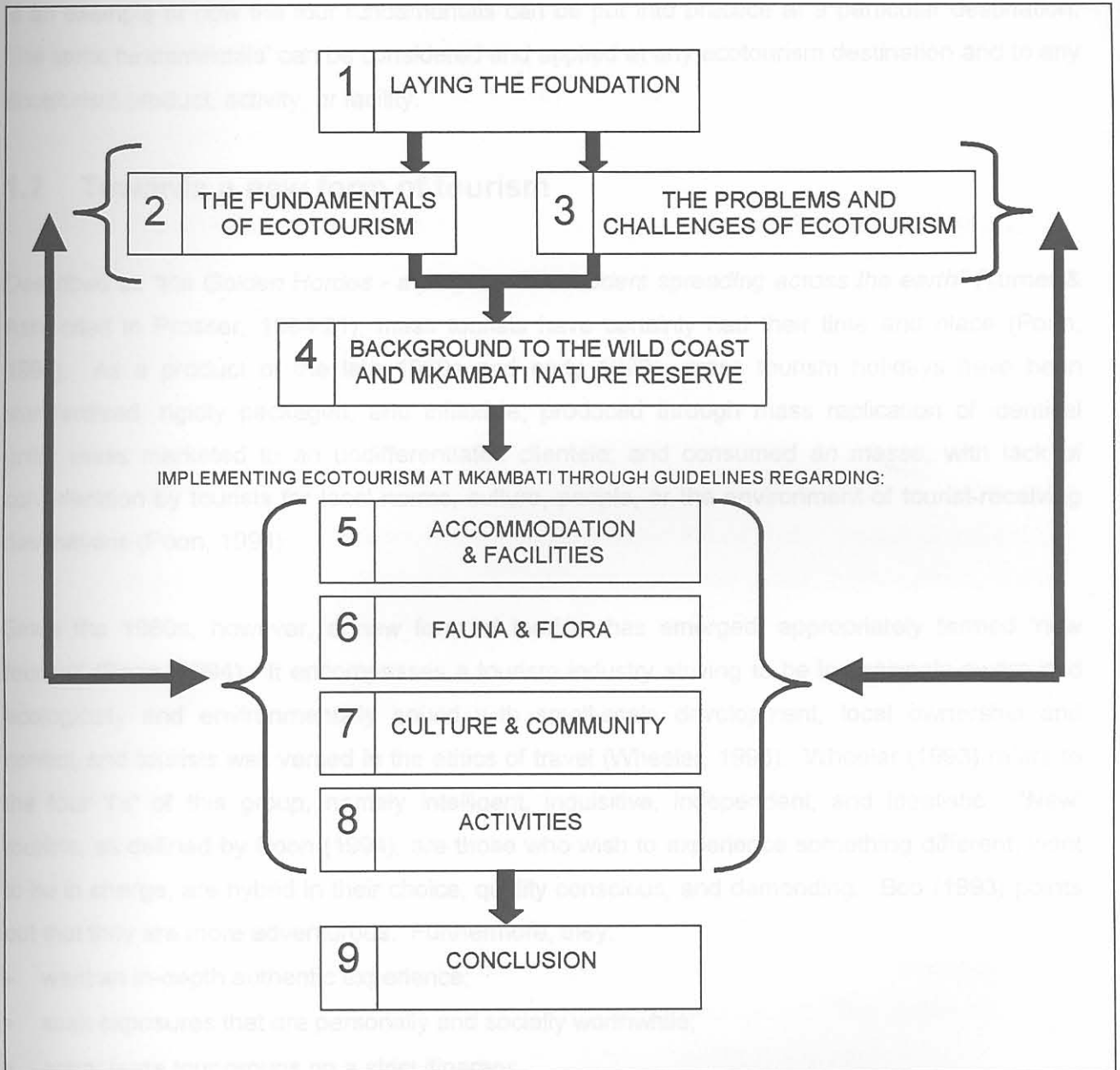
A diagrammatic representation of the structure of the study is given in Figure 1.1. This is reproduced at the beginning of each chapter to place the chapter in the context of the wider study. **Chapter 1** lays the foundation to the study, introducing the concept of 'new tourism', with ecotourism as a by-product. The confusion surrounding ecotourism is also described, as well as its connection to sustainable development and nature-based tourism. Finally, the overlap is explained between the fundamentals of ecotourism, as well as between ecotourism and other forms of tourism. These important points of departure set the context for this dissertation.

Chapter 2 is the first and most extensive component of the literature study. It examines the fundamentals of ecotourism, namely, the environment, local communities, the tourist, and the ecotourism industry. This chapter forms the theoretical base from which the guidelines for Mkambati Nature Reserve will be derived in Chapters 5 to 8. **Chapter 3** continues the literature review, investigating the problems and challenges that occur in ecotourism when the four fundamentals are not in place.

To set the stage for a practical implementation of the literature study, **Chapter 4** introduces the reader to the Wild Coast and describes the tourism development in this region. The history and primary constraints of Mkambati Nature Reserve, the area selected for the case study, are described. To set the context for subsequent chapters, Chapter 4 gives the *modus operandi* of this study, followed by an explanation on interpretation, outsourcing, and zoning at Mkambati.

The theory in the literature study is then practically applied (indicated by the arrow connecting Chapters 5 to 8 to Chapters 2 and 3) by providing guidelines for implementing the ecotourism fundamentals at Mkambati. These guidelines are divided into four key areas, namely, accommodation and facilities (**Chapter 5**), fauna and flora (**Chapter 6**), culture and community (**Chapter 7**), and activities (**Chapter 8**). **Chapter 9** concludes the study and presents a summary of the extent to which the literature study was applied in Chapters 5 to 8.

Figure 1.1 Structure of the study



1.1.4 Relevance of the study

This study makes two major contributions. First, the literature study is a valuable contribution to writings on ecotourism, because it uses a simple model, from which the four fundamentals are drawn and described in detail. Each aspect of ecotourism fits within one of these four fundamentals. Ecotourism has not previously been explained using such a format, and the author believes that it simplifies the concept, facilitating understanding.

The second point of relevance relates to practical application. The case study in the dissertation is an example of how the four fundamentals can be put into practice at a particular destination. The same fundamentals' can be considered and applied at any ecotourism destination and to any ecotourism product, activity, or facility.

1.2 Towards a new form of tourism

Described as "*the Golden Hordes - a plague of marauders spreading across the earth*" (Turner & Ash, cited in Prosser, 1994:21), mass tourists have certainly had their time and place (Poon, 1994). As a product of the late 1960s and early 1970s, mass tourism holidays have been standardized, rigidly packaged, and inflexible; produced through mass replication of identical units; mass marketed to an undifferentiated clientele; and consumed *en masse*, with lack of consideration by tourists for local norms, culture, people, or the environment of tourist-receiving destinations (Poon, 1994).

Since the 1980s, however, a new form of tourism has emerged, appropriately termed 'new tourism' (Poon, 1994). It encompasses a tourism industry striving to be increasingly aware and ecologically and environmentally sound with small-scale development, local ownership and control, and tourists well versed in the ethics of travel (Wheeler, 1993). Wheeler (1993) refers to the four 'I's' of this group, namely intelligent, inquisitive, independent, and idealistic. 'New' tourists, as defined by Poon (1994), are those who wish to experience something different, want to be in charge, are hybrid in their choice, quality conscious, and demanding. Boo (1993) points out that they are more adventurous. Furthermore, they:

- want an in-depth authentic experience;
- seek exposures that are personally and socially worthwhile;
- abhor large tour groups on a strict itinerary;
- seek physical and mental challenge;
- desire cultural learning and interaction with locals;
- are adaptable and often prefer rustic accommodation (although some demand luxury even in the most remote destinations);
- seek involvement and are not passive in behaviour;
- prefer to pay for experience rather than for comfort; and
- are more nature-oriented and concerned for the environment (Poon, 1994).

The last characteristic is very timely, considering the scrutiny currently focussed on the tourism industry, both from the public and internally, in terms of how it may contribute to sustainable development (Wight, 1995). Prosser (1994) mentions the dilemma that the tourism industry faces as each component place more focus on quality (for the environment and the tourist) while simultaneously confronting the inexorable growth in quantity.

The tourist engaging in ecotourism falls within the bracket of new tourism, yet has specific characteristics moving beyond those mentioned above. These are described in Section 2.4.

1.3 A proliferation of terms

In recent years, there has been a growth in tourism niche terms relating to an environment and community ethic. Some of this terminology appears very similar - such as 'eco', 'environmentally friendly', 'green', 'soft', 'responsible', 'low-impact', 'nature-based', and 'sustainable' tourism (Marajh & Meadows, 1992:2). Prosser (1994:32) mentions the terms 'harmonious', 'gentle', 'sensitive', and 'appropriate', while Wheeler (1993:122) uses the term 'new wave'. The above terms have been largely grouped under the generic title of 'alternative' tourism (Prosser, 1994:32), with some people viewing the latter as synonymous with sustainable tourism (Clarke, 1997). Although some of these terms have been described as vague and meaningless (Isaac, 1991 cited in Wight, 1993), all have arisen due to dissatisfaction with existing products and increased environmental awareness (Pearce, 1989 cited in Prosser, 1994).

This proliferation of terms has created inconsistency (Hvengard & Dearden, 1998) and confusion in the industry, with many disregarding ecotourism as another buzzword. Although these concepts have merit, they do not address the complexity of ecotourism. The author takes the position that, although the existence of so many terms is regrettable, it is of prime importance that certain fundamentals are addressed. These are laid out in the definition of ecotourism used in this dissertation (Section 1.4) and described in Chapter 2. Once industry members are committed to a responsible form of tourism, balancing the roles of the tourism industry, the local community, the tourist, and the environment, then the term used is not critical. In this regard, Ceballos-Lascuráin, the founder of the concept 'ecotourism', argues for less purism and more pragmatism in ecotourism (Van der Merwe, 1995).

1.4 Defining ecotourism

Since the inception of the term 'ecotourism', the concept is perceived as both controversial and vague (Addison, 1997). There are numerous definitions of ecotourism, none of which is universally accepted (Litvin, 1996; Weiler & Richins, 1995; Wight, 1993). Sirakaya *et al* (1999) reveal the underlying themes found when doing a content analysis of ecotourism definitions. The term was most often associated with environmentally-friendly, responsible travel, educational travel, low-impact travel, eco-cultural tourism, sustainable/non-consumptive tourism, and community involvement. The environmental aspects are easy to derive because of the 'eco' for ecology in the word 'ecotourism' (Singleton, 1997).

This study has determined that most definitions include the two key aspects of sustainable utilisation of the resource base (both natural and cultural) and involvement of the local community. The definition used in this study includes two further aspects, namely, those of the interaction of the tourist and the role of the ecotourism industry. These four are the fundamentals on which this dissertation is based. If all these fundamentals are in place in a balanced manner, it dictates that ecotourism cannot merely be a product, destination, or an experience - as some have described it. It must rather be viewed as an approach to tourism and as a philosophy – a way of life.

Some authors go beyond a definition, differentiating between different types of ecotourism. Plant & Plant (1992 cited in Weiler & Richins, 1995:30) refer to light green and deep green tourists, Weaver (1999:793) mentions active and passive ecotourism, Acott *et al* (1998:238) use the terms deep and shallow ecotourism, while Fennell (1999:242) distinguishes between hard and soft ecotourism. These various types refer to differences in the level of environmental and community responsibility, level of activities undertaken, and type of accommodation used. This study does not use any of these terms, but recognizes that, even within the definition of ecotourism given below, there are various levels of compliance. This is explored in Section 2.6.

The definition used in the study follows:

“Ecotourism is an enlightening, interactive, participatory travel experience to environments, both natural and cultural, that ensures the sustainable use at an appropriate level of environmental resources, while producing viable economic opportunities for the ecotourism industry and host/local communities, which make the sound environmental management of the resources beneficial to all tourism role players” (Hattingh, 1996. Adapted).

This definition can be subdivided into the following elements.

- An enlightening, interactive, participatory travel experience.
- Natural and cultural environments.
- Sustainable use of resources.
- Economic opportunities for industry and host/local communities.
- Sound environmental management beneficial to all role players.

Two terms need to be qualified. First, a distinction is made between the host and local communities with the latter being a spatial concept, i.e. the people living within and around the ecotourism destination, and the former referring to the host responsible for the tourists' experiences, which may not necessarily be a local. The host forms an integral part of the ecotourism industry. For the purposes of this study, however, the focus is on the local community, because it is more applicable to the situation at Mkambati Nature Reserve. Second, the term 'ecotourist' is not used since the study adopts the view of Boo (1990) and Wight (1995) who report that there is no specific and definable 'ecotourist'. People visit ecotourism ventures for a variety of reasons, ranging from casual observation to intensive research (Boo, 1990). Furthermore, within a single trip, an individual may be an 'ecotourist' on some occasions but not on others. The term 'tourist' is therefore used.

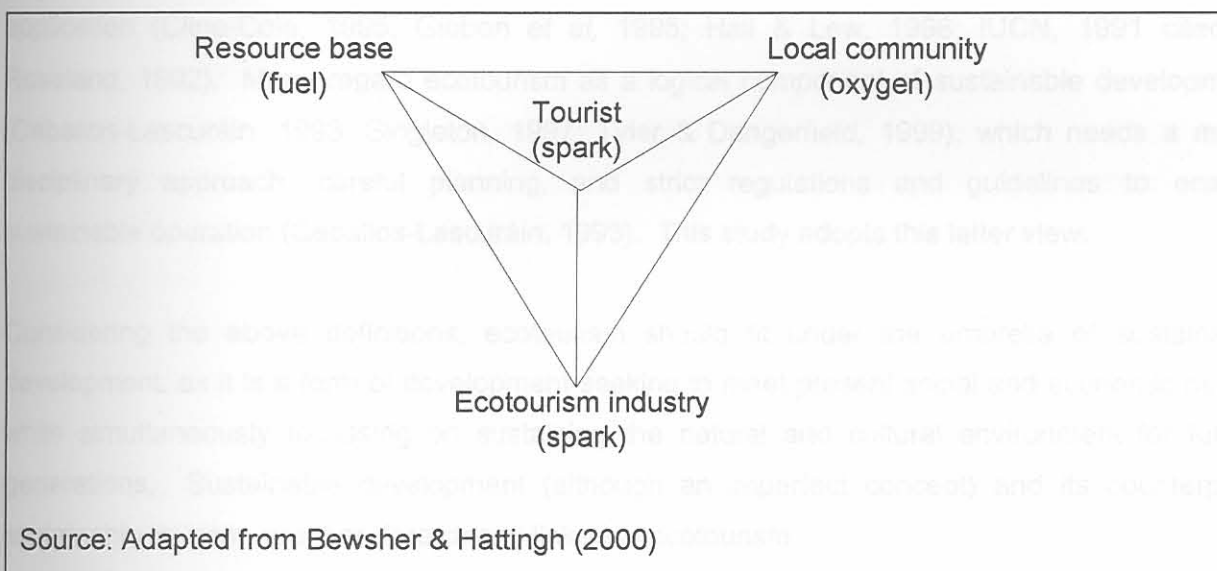
The fundamentals of ecotourism (as set out in the definition), and their interrelationships are simplified through the ecotourism tetrahedron model (Figure 1.2). This model serves as the basis of this dissertation, since all four fundamentals (the four corners of the tetrahedron) will be expanded in the literature study (Chapter 2) and the inherent principles implemented in the case study on Mkambati Nature Reserve (Chapters 5 to 8). Furthermore, the problems and challenges of ecotourism will be investigated using the relationships within the tetrahedron (Chapter 3). These will also relate to Mkambati in Chapters 5 to 8.

One way to understand the fundamentals of ecotourism and their interrelationships is to use the analogy of a fire (Bewsher, 1997). Fire consists of three basic components, namely fuel, energy (the spark), and oxygen, which need to act together. Ecotourism has its four fundamentals, each of which can be related to a component of fire. The 'fuel' of ecotourism is the natural and cultural resources on which the tourism product is based. The ecotourism industry, together with the tourists provides the 'spark' or 'energy' to light the ecotourism fire. One can have plenty of 'fuel' and 'energy', but without 'oxygen', there will be no fire. The local communities are seen as the 'oxygen', the lifeblood of a good fire. Tourism products often lack 'oxygen' and lie smouldering,

getting sold to the undiscerning tourist or one who is not concerned about community involvement.

Bewsher (1997) takes this analogy further when he explains three alternative cases of a fire. First, if left without care and attention in confined spaces, it will be reduced to a heap of ashes. This illustrates that the ecotourism fire needs to be carefully tended. Second, there can be too much fuel, energy or oxygen, with the ecotourism not being planned, managed, and controlled. This leads to a wild fire, another undesirable situation. Third, and the ideal, is to have a correctly managed, attended, and controlled fire, with balance between all four fundamentals.

Figure 1.2 The ecotourism tetrahedron



1.5 Connecting sustainable development and ecotourism

Now that ecotourism has been defined, one needs to understand its linkage with sustainable development, as the two concepts are so interrelated in the literature. More recently, an off-shoot of sustainable development, namely sustainable tourism, has also been closely linked with ecotourism (Weaver, 1999). At the 1972 United Nations Conference on Human Environment, the idea of 'eco-development' was proposed. In the 1970s and 1980s, coordinated and integrated development and resource management was proposed. The mid-1980s saw the ecological principles of community-based development being propounded (Hall & Lew, 1998). In 1992, Agenda 21 was drawn up, as a policy statement aimed at taking the world into the 21st century. It states that only whatever can be sustained by nature and society in the long term is permissible (Cooper *et al*, 1998). By this time there was an awareness of the environmental crisis requiring solutions, and the term sustainable development emerged in an attempt to reconcile conflicting

value positions with regard to the environment (Hall & Lew, 1998) and to protest the negative impacts of development (Hattingh, 1994a). Sustainable development was defined in 1987 as *“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987:43 cited in Smith, 1993). Another definition (among the many) is *“... an approach to development aimed at harmonizing social and economic objectives with ecologically sound management, in a spirit of solidarity with future generations”* (Sachs, in Adams, 1990 cited in Marajh & Meadows, 1992:24).

Although writers like Murdoch (1993) propose that sustainable development is an idea whose time has come, the term is ambiguous and open to a wide range of interpretations as to its application (Cline-Cole, 1995; Gibbon *et al*, 1995; Hall & Lew, 1998; IUCN, 1991 cited in Roseland, 1992). Many regard ecotourism as a logical component of sustainable development (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1993; Singleton, 1997; Tyler & Dangerfield, 1999), which needs a multi-disciplinary approach, careful planning, and strict regulations and guidelines to ensure sustainable operation (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1993). This study adopts this latter view.

Considering the above definitions, ecotourism should fit under the umbrella of sustainable development, as it is a form of development seeking to meet present social and economic needs while simultaneously focussing on sustaining the natural and cultural environment for future generations. Sustainable development (although an imperfect concept) and its counterpart, sustainable tourism, are therefore clearly linked to ecotourism.

1.6 Nature-based tourism versus ecotourism

Confusion arises in the ecotourism industry due to the association of ecotourism with nature-based tourism. Nature-based is, as the name implies, tourism based on nature. Many authors view ecotourism as nature-based tourism that needs to be sustainable. A handful recognize the vital role of the local community, whilst very few acknowledge the participatory, interactive, and enlightening aspect for the tourist. It is the latter two that distinguish ecotourism from nature-based tourism and they appear to be lacking in many sources. Books such as Lindberg and Hawkins' (Eds.) (1993) *‘Ecotourism: A Guide for Planners and Managers’* and Weaver's (1998) *‘Ecotourism in the Less Developed World’*, among others, may mention these elements, but do not view them as critical to ecotourism. Even the book edited by Cater & Lowman (1994), *‘Ecotourism: a sustainable option’*, appears to deal more with nature-based tourism than ecotourism. Although Beeton (1998) in *‘Ecotourism: a practical guide for rural communities’*,

understands the importance of the visitors' enlightenment and interaction, and the role of the local community, even some of her examples appear to be more nature-based. Boo's (1990) book 'Ecotourism: the potentials and pitfalls', where she compares 'ecotourism' in Belize, Costa Rica, Dominica, Ecuador, and Mexico, is also a cause of concern. Although elements of ecotourism are present, the examples discussed appear to fit the definition of nature-based tourism rather than ecotourism. Quite a few authors have focused on the above mentioned destinations as topping the charts of 'ecotourism'. Other authors, including some of the above, simply view ecotourism and nature-based tourism as synonymous, for example, Marajh & Meadows (1992). The author, however, agrees with Burton (1998), who clearly states that strict ecotourism is a far cry from nature-based tourism.

Within this context of uncertainty, there are references to ecotourism being the fastest growing segment within the tourism industry (Cater, 1993; Jeffreys, 1998; Litvin, 1996). Furthermore, Sator (South African Tourism Organisation) stated in 1994 that South Africa is to become the leading ecotourism destination (Singleton, 1997). These proposals cause concern since, in the light of conflicting meanings, it is more likely that **nature-based tourism** is the fastest growing segment of the industry. If ecotourism should move into the mainstream of tourism, as Litvin (1996) claims it is doing, it is doubtful that it can indeed be pure ecotourism. This issue of remaining small-scale and out of the mainstream is discussed further in Section 2.5.

1.7 Overlap

It is also important at this stage to mention the increasing overlap between various niches of the tourism industry. As seen in Section 1.6, there is obvious encroachment between the terms ecotourism and nature-based (Queensland Ecotourism Plan, 1999). Ecotourism is often based on nature (unless culture is the main attraction), while some nature-based tourism, with all four fundamentals in place, can certainly be termed 'ecotourism'. There is extensive overlap between adventure tourism, ecotourism, and nature-based tourism (Queensland Ecotourism Plan, 1999; Wight, 1996) while tourism under the banner of cultural, heritage, ethnic, afro, rural, etc. has clear elements of ecotourism due to the involvement of local people. Getz & Page (1997) also link this cultural side (occurring in a natural environment) to adventure tourism. However, even extensive overlap does not imply that terms are synonymous.

A further form of overlap clearly evident in this study is that between the four fundamentals of ecotourism. Since ecotourism exists when the fundamentals are in balance, there is definite linkage throughout Chapter 2. Numerous practical examples are used to illustrate the

implementation of fundamentals, and more often than not there will be clear reference to another fundamental. To illustrate this, an example on the involvement of the local community may have a strong emphasis on the interactive enlightenment of the tourists through the community. A summary of the fundamentals of ecotourism is given in Table 2.1, where the overlap between rows is indicated in bold.

The fundamental of a responsible ecotourism industry is left till last (Section 2.5) since the implementation of the other three fundamentals is, to a large extent, the responsibility of the ecotourism industry. By the time the reader reaches Section 2.5, he/she will already have a comprehensive idea of the role of the industry in ecotourism due to Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4. The division of a holistic concept such as ecotourism into different fundamentals has its weaknesses. However, the author believes it is conducive to understanding ecotourism.

2.2 The environment

It is important first to define the 'environment'. Huxley (1960) points out that the environment comprises biophysical, human, and cultural components, with humans as an integral part of the ecosystem, dependent on it for their biological needs. At the same time they are cultural beings, and part of a cultural environment. This applies to the definition of ecotourism used in this dissertation, where the term 'environmental resources' is used to describe both the biophysical (natural) and the cultural, meaning that either or both can be the attraction. The definition implies, saying that these resources must be sustainably used at an ecosystem level. The focus here is mainly on the biophysical environment, since the cultural environment is examined in Section 2.3.

As indicated in Section 1.7, the local community (Section 2.3), the tourists (Section 2.4) and the industry (Section 2.5) have overlapping roles to play in sustaining the resource base. This section is therefore fairly brief since the principles involved occur numerous times in the following sections.