

ECOTOURISM: PRINCIPLES, PRACTICES & POLICIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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Foreword

“Putting tourism on a sustainable path is a major challenge, but one that also presents a significant opportunity”.

KLAUS TÖPFER, UNEP Executive Director.

Ecotourism has been growing rapidly over the last decades. Yet, while ecotourism has the potential to create positive environmental and social impacts, it can unfortunately be as damaging as mass tourism if not done properly.

Typically located in pristine, fragile ecosystems, ecotourism projects run the risk of destroying the very environmental assets on which they depend. The loss of biodiversity and wildlife habitats, the production of waste and polluted effluent in areas that have little or no capacity to absorb them are just some of the worries. Furthermore, serious concerns about ecotourism exist as regards the degree of social fairness involved, and that of stakeholder involvement and control.

Recognizing the global importance of the issue, the United Nations designated 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, and the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) mandated the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization to carry out activities for the Year. Its goal is to review the lessons learned in implementing ecotourism, and to identify and promote forms of ecotourism that lead to the protection of critically endangered ecosystems, sharing the benefits of the activity

with local communities and respecting local cultures.

The last three Conferences of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity's have dealt with tourism's contribution to the sustainable use of biodiversity. They have also stressed that tourism generates significant revenues, and that as a growing percentage of the activities are nature-based, ecotourism does present a significant potential for realizing benefits in terms of the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable use of its components.

As a contribution to the International Year of Ecotourism, UNEP and the International Ecotourism Society have jointly prepared this guide that should act as a basic resource book for governments and practitioners who want to develop environmentally and socially sound ecotourism practices. It includes background data and reference sources as well as practical guidelines. Case studies illustrate how these guidelines can be applied. The document has benefited from inputs by academia, and a broad range of experts coming from NGOs, inter-governmental agencies and ecotourism practitioners at both the international and local level. UNEP

hopes it will provide useful insights to readers and we will welcome all comments or suggestions for another edition.

Putting ecotourism on a truly sustainable path is a major challenge, requiring partnership and cooperation between the tourism industry, governments, local people and the tourists themselves. With your help, we can achieve

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the ambitious goals set for the International Year of Ecotourism.

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Kingfisher Bay: *page 53.*

Introduction

Travel and tourism are among the world's fastest growing industries and are the major source of foreign exchange earnings for many developing countries. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) reports that receipts from international tourism grew by an average annual rate of 9% between 1988-1997. The number of international tourist arrivals reached more than 664 million in 1999 (well over 10% of the world's population), and international arrivals are expected to reach 1 billion by 2010. The increasing economic importance of tourism has captured the attention of most countries. However, the global growth of tourism poses a significant threat to cultural and biological diversity.

Ecotourism is a growing niche market within the larger travel industry, with the potential of being an important sustainable development tool. With billions of dollars in annual sales, ecotourism is a real industry that seeks to take advantage of market trends. At the same time, it frequently operates quite differently than other segments of the tourism industry, because ecotourism is defined by its sustainable development results: conserving natural areas, educating visitors about sustainability, and benefiting local people.



Entering a national park by boat, Bolivia

Market research shows that ecotourists are particularly interested in wilderness settings and pristine areas. According to the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, ecotourism has a unique role to play in educating travelers about the value of a healthy environment and biological diversity. However, proper planning and management are critical to ecotourism's development or it will threaten the biological diversity upon which it depends.

In the last 10 years, travel experiences in fragile natural and cultural areas have benefited from a variety of innovative small-scale, low-impact solutions offered by ecotourism – some of which will be documented in this package. These approaches have had an influence on the larger tourism market, but ecotourism will never transform the tourism industry, nor can it be a perfect model in every instance. Like all forms of sustainable tourism, it is a dynamic field, with new techniques and

approaches evolving every year. A wide variety of stakeholders must be involved in its implementation – including business, government, non-governmental organizations and local communities. Responsible businesses must be encouraged to manage tourists properly with guidelines, certification and regulation. And local destinations must be ready to properly fund ecotourism management, or they will risk damaging their natural and cultural resources and, ultimately, their position in a rapidly growing international market.

Local communities have the most at stake, and therefore the most to lose, in the emerging international ecotourism marketplace.

As globalization makes local economic control increasingly difficult, ecotourism seeks to reverse this trend by stressing that local business owners and local communities must be vitally involved. Opportunities to involve rural communities in tourism have attracted attention and raised many expectations, but the risks are great unless proper preparations are made. Local people must be informed in advance of all the possible consequences



Local ecotourism project, Belize

of tourism development, and they must formally consent to development in their areas.

The underlying concepts and principles behind ecotourism have helped set new standards for the tourism industry, and these standards continue to evolve. Many aspects still need to be fully addressed during implementation, and as answers to some of these questions arise from the field, the quick global dissemination of results is a priority. This document provides a short introduction to ecotourism, providing a look at the progress made in the last decade, and what will be needed to make it sustainable in the future.

This report is not intended to be academic in format or style. References used are catalogued in the list of resource documents at the end of the book along with a list of resource organizations.



Rain forest canopy walkway, Malaysia

What is Ecotourism?

Ecotourism has been defined as a form of nature-based tourism in the marketplace, but it has also been formulated and studied as a sustainable development tool by NGOs, development experts and academics since 1990. The term ecotourism, therefore, refers on one hand to a concept under a set of principles, and on the other hand to a specific market segment. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (previously known as The Ecotourism Society (TES)) in 1991 produced one of the earliest definitions:

“Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people.”

IUCN (now called the World Conservation Union) states in 1996 that ecotourism:

“is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.”



Jaguar Preserve, Belize

Ecotourism as a Concept

Ecotourism is a sub-component of the field of sustainable tourism. *Figure 1* offers a reflection of where ecotourism can be placed within the process of developing more sustainable forms of tourism. This figure also provides a demonstration of how ecotourism is primarily a sustainable version of nature tourism, while including rural and cultural tourism elements.

Ecotourism aspires in all cases to achieve sustainable development results. However, it is important to clarify that all tourism activities – be they geared to holidays, business, conferences, congresses or fairs, health, adventure or ecotourism – should aim to be sustainable. This means that the planning and development of tourism infrastructure, its subsequent operation and also its marketing should focus on environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability criteria.

Components of Ecotourism

- Contributes to conservation of biodiversity.
- Sustains the well being of local people.
- Includes an interpretation / learning experience.
- Involves responsible action on the part of tourists and the tourism industry.
- Is delivered primarily to small groups by small-scale businesses.
- Requires lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources.
- Stresses local participation, ownership and business opportunities, particularly for rural people.

The strong orientation of the ecotourism field toward the evolution of principles, guidelines, and certification based on sustainability standards gives it an unusual position in the tourism field. Over the years, discussion in conferences has provided a general consensus on the components of ecotourism (*as seen in box above*).

Ecotourism as a Market Segment

Ecotourism is a small but rapidly growing industry working within a niche market that is governed by market forces and regulations. Ecotourism is primarily

advertised as being equivalent to nature tourism in the marketplace. Some countries, companies and destinations have social and environmental policies and programs, while others do not. This has led to confusion worldwide about the meaning of the term ecotourism as it is applied in the marketplace. Further discussion of guidelines and accreditation systems relating to sustainability criteria for the ecotourism industry can be found later in this chapter.

Figure 2 provides a reflection of how ecotourism fits into the larger tourism marketplace. Both adventure

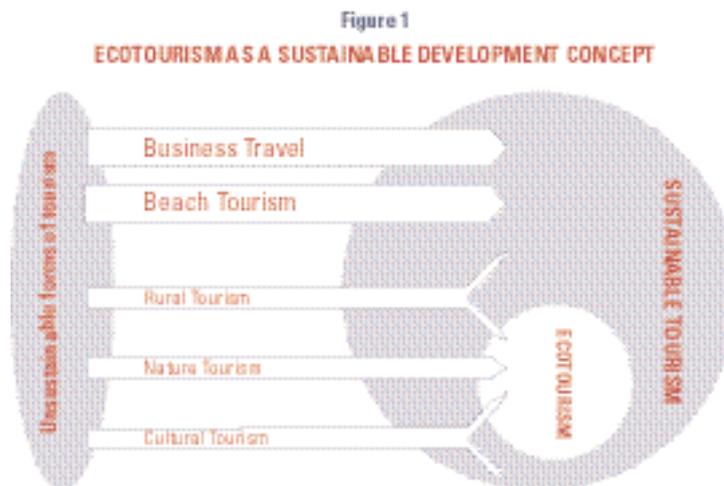
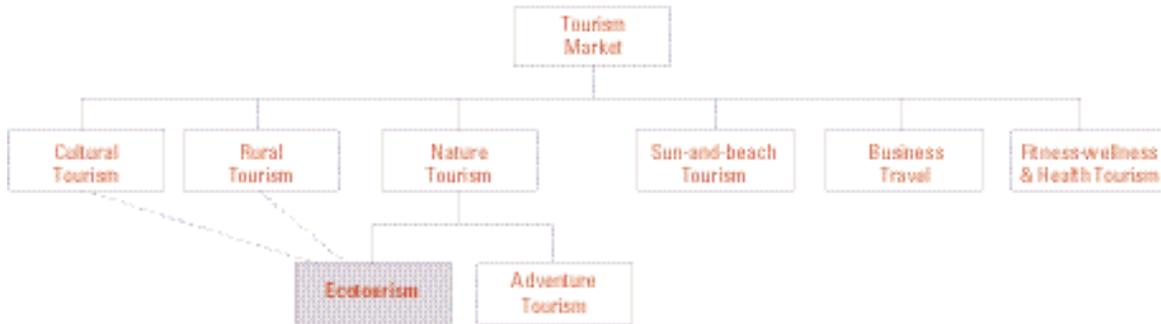


Figure 2
ECOTOURISM AS A MARKET SEGMENT



WTO, modified by Strabon 2001

tourism and ecotourism are shown as subcomponents of nature tourism, while ecotourism has stronger links to rural and cultural tourism than adventure tourism.

In ecotourism the prime motivation is the observation and appreciation of natural features and related cultural assets, whereas in adventure tourism it is rather the physical exercise and challenging situations in natural environments.

From a functional viewpoint, ecotourism in the marketplace is mostly individual or small-scale tourism (tour groups up to 25, and hotels with less than 100 beds) that is operated by small- and medium-sized companies in natural areas. It represents a segment of the marketplace that concentrates on leading and accommodating small groups in natural areas in an educational manner using interpretive materials and local specialist guides.

The Roots of Ecotourism

With a history deeply rooted in the conservation movement, ecotourism has provided a highly strategic source of revenue to natural areas that need protection. Ecotourism began as an untested idea that many hoped could contribute to the conservation

of natural resources worldwide. Research undertaken in Kenya in the 1970s (*Thresher 1981*) demonstrated that the economic benefits of wildlife tourism far surpassed hunting – an activity that was banned in Kenya in 1977. In the early 1980s, rain forests and coral reefs became the subject of both innumerable studies by biologists interested in biological diversity and of a plethora of nature film documentaries. This interest helped launch a wide variety of local small businesses specializing in guiding scientists and filmmakers into remote zones. As these small businesses quickly began to prosper in countries such as Costa Rica and Ecuador, a more formal industry soon evolved to meet the needs of small tourism groups that were primarily composed of birdwatchers and committed naturalists. In many areas of the world, pioneer entrepreneurs created special field visits and studies for adult travelers, students and volunteers.

International nature-based businesses began to thrive in the 1980s with the growing interest in outdoor travel and the environment, spurred by excellent new outdoor equipment for camping and hiking, and events such as Earth Day. These companies began to realize that they could take the initiative to conserve the environment by sponsoring



Tourists enjoying tea house, Nepal

local conservation groups in the destinations they visited or by raising funds for local causes. They soon learned that training and hiring local people to run their businesses was the best way to manage their operations, and an excellent way of creating significant benefits for local people. Tour operators selling trips to the Galapagos Islands, Costa Rica, Kenya and Nepal were some of the early players in this movement. Some of these companies argue that, in fact, they had already been using ecotourism principles for some 20 to 30 years.

Because so many individuals with unique ideas and creative approaches are involved, it is rarely carried out the same way twice. Ecotourism is a business and can be profitable, but it should be a responsible business that aims to meet higher social and environmental goals. As such, ecotourism is highly dependent on the commitment of individual business owners who must be willing to apply a unique set of standards to their business approaches – standards that have only evolved in the last 10 years. The fact

that no international regulatory body exists, and that standards in the field of ecotourism are quite difficult to measure, has allowed businesses and governments to promote ecotourism without any oversight. Many travel and tourism businesses have found it convenient to use the term “ecotourism” in their literature, and governments have used the term extensively to promote their destinations, all without trying to implement any of the most basic principles explained in this document. This problem of “greenwashing” has undermined the legitimacy of the term ecotourism. Some greenwashing, though certainly not all, is the result of a lack of understanding of the underlying principles of ecotourism. International conferences, workshops and publications have made some advances in educating governments and businesses about ecotourism, but the misuse of the term remains a problem worldwide.

Many people often ask why ecotourism should be viewed differently from other forms of sustainable tourism. In essence, ecotourism must be planned and managed to successfully offer its key social and environmental objectives. This requires:



Birdwatchers in wetlands, Philippines

1. Specialized marketing to attract travelers who are primarily interested in visiting natural areas.
2. Management skills that are particular to handling visitors in protected natural areas.
3. Guiding and interpretation services, preferably managed by local inhabitants, that are focused on natural history and sustainable development issues.
4. Government policies that earmark fees from tourism to generate funds for both conservation of wild lands and sustainable development of local communities and indigenous people.
5. Focused attention on local peoples, who must be given the right of prior informed consent, full participation and, if they so decide, given the means and training to take advantage of this sustainable development option.

Principles of Ecotourism

Because ecotourism was originally just an idea, not a discipline, many businesses and governments promoted it without an understanding of its most basic principles. Establishing internationally and nationally accepted principles, guidelines and certification approaches proceeded throughout the 1990s but at a modest pace, because the process involves stakeholders from many regions, disciplines and backgrounds. Each region affected by ecotourism should develop its own principles, guidelines and certification procedures based on the materials already available internationally. This process of creating international certification guidelines is far from being completed.

The International Ecotourism Society has tracked the results of stakeholder meetings since 1991 to develop the set of principles on page 14, which are being embraced by a growing constituency of NGOs,



Tourist viewing Mt Kilimanjaro, Kenya

private sector businesses, governments, academia and local communities.

Once principles have been agreed upon, specific guidelines can be developed that help define the market's best possible performance. Guidelines offer practical approaches to achieving sustainable development results, as gleaned from survey research on best practices and stakeholder meetings among researchers, the private sector, NGOs and local communities. International review finalizes the guidelines process, helping to assure that a wide variety of viewpoints are incorporated.

As ecotourism guidelines are being developed, it is important to consider some issues that may not be fully addressed by practitioners globally, such as:

1. The amount of control that traditional/indigenous communities retain when ecotourism is developed in natural areas that they manage or inhabit.
2. The efficiency and social fairness of current concepts of protected areas (which are central

Principles of Ecotourism

- Minimize the negative impacts on nature and culture that can damage a destination.
- Educate the traveler on the importance of conservation.
- Stress the importance of responsible business, which works cooperatively with local authorities and people to meet local needs and deliver conservation benefits.
- Direct revenues to the conservation and management of natural and protected areas.
- Emphasize the need for regional tourism zoning and for visitor management plans designed for either regions or natural areas that are slated to become eco-destinations.
- Emphasize use of environmental and social base-line studies, as well as long-term monitoring programs, to assess and minimize impacts.
- Strive to maximize economic benefit for the host country, local business and communities, particularly peoples living in and adjacent to natural and protected areas.
- Seek to ensure that tourism development does not exceed the social and environmental limits of acceptable change as determined by researchers in cooperation with local residents.
- Rely on infrastructure that has been developed in harmony with the environment, minimizing use of fossil fuels, conserving local plants and wildlife, and blending with the natural and cultural environment.

to ecotourism) for long-term conservation of biological and cultural diversity.

3. The risk that unregulated tourists contribute to lowering genetic capital and traditional knowledge belonging to traditional communities; i.e. biopiracy.
4. How to balance the needs of medium- and large-scale investors, often outsiders to local communities, with local expectations in participation with small-scale efforts for community-based tourism.

Ecotourism Guidelines for Nature Tour Operators was published in 1993 by The International Ecotourism

Society, setting a standard for this sector of the industry. These guidelines have been distributed worldwide, and reprinted by dozens of organizations in numerous languages. Evaluation forms reveal that they have widespread acceptance from the industry, NGOs and academics. TIES will publish guidelines for ecolodges and marine ecotourism in 2002.

The Association for Ecological Tourism in Europe published recommendations in 1997 for environmentally oriented tour operators, and many local organizations, such as Alianza Verde in the Guatemalan region of the Peten, have developed ecotourism guidelines for all stakeholders with a local approach. Development of guidelines around the world has been a useful step to help local stakeholders address questions of how to develop ecotourism in local communities, ecosystems or in specific sectors of the industry, such as accommodations or tour operations. This can help to solve the problem of greenwashing, but ultimately, certification will be a fundamental tool to ensure businesses are meeting ecotourism standards.

Efforts to certify ecotourism are in their infancy. Certifying ecotourism industries involves gathering data from companies on their environmental and social performance, and then verifying these data. As ecotourism further defines itself through its stakeholders and in the marketplace, many questions remain about how well ecotourism can be certified, given that ecotourism businesses are small, highly dispersed and regional in character. Many are found in developing countries, where monitoring services and even communication systems may not be available. Ecotourism enterprises

Nature Tour Operator Guidelines

- **Prepare travelers.** One reason consumers choose an operator rather than travel independently is to receive guidance: How can negative impacts be minimized while visiting sensitive environments and cultures? How should one interact with local cultures? What is an appropriate response to begging? Is bartering encouraged?
- **Minimize visitor impacts.** Prevent degradation of the environment and/or the local culture by offering literature, briefings, leading by example and taking corrective actions. To minimize accumulated impacts, use adequate leadership and maintain small groups to ensure minimum group-impacts on destination. Avoid areas that are under-managed and over-visited.
- **Minimize nature tour company impacts.** Ensure managers, staff and contract employees know and participate in all aspects of company policy that prevent impacts on the environment and local cultures.
- **Provide training.** Give managers, staff and contract employees access to programs that will upgrade their ability to communicate with and manage clients in sensitive natural and cultural settings.
- **Contribute to conservation.** Fund conservation programs in the regions being visited.
- **Provide competitive local employment.** Employ locals in all aspects of business operations.
- **Offer site-sensitive accommodations.** Ensure that facilities are not destructive to the natural environment and particularly that they do not waste local resources. Design structures that offer ample opportunity for learning about the environment and that encourage sensitive interchanges with local communities.

The International Ecotourism Society, *Ecotourism Guidelines for Nature Tour Operators*, 1993

Proposed Guidelines for Successful Ecotourism Certification

- Indicators for sustainability must be arrived at by research of appropriate parameters based on current best practice.
- Indicators for sustainability must be reviewed and approved via a stakeholder process.
- Indicators for sustainability must be arrived at for each segment of the industry, e.g. hotels, tour operators, transportation systems, etc.
- Indicators for sustainability will vary according to region and must be arrived at via local stakeholder participation and research.
- Certification programs require independent verification procedures that are not directly associated with the entity being paid to certify. University involvement is ideal for this process.
- Certification programs, particularly for the small ecotourism business sector, are unlikely to pay for themselves through fees, and will need national, regional or international subsidization.
- Certification programs can be given to the operating entity, but should specify the products or locations that fulfill relevant criteria as certified.
- Certification should be ground tested before full-fledged implementation to ensure all systems are properly in line, due to the difficulty of verifying appropriate performance standards without advance testing.

Epler Wood and Halpenny, *Ecolabels in Tourism*, 2001

Ecotourism Certification – A Case Study from Australia

Australia's National Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP) is an industry initiative of the Ecotourism Association of Australia, with funding from the Office of National Tourism. NEAP was revised and relaunched in March 2000 with a new sub-program for nature-based tourism. Its accreditation now has three levels: nature tourism, ecotourism and advanced ecotourism.

A performance-based accreditation program, NEAP requires that products of program participants achieve specific goals that are classified under specific categories: natural area focus, interpretation, ecological sustainability, contributions to conservation, work with local communities, cultural component, client satisfaction and responsible marketing. To attain the ecotourism accreditation level, the product must meet all core criteria in each category. Achieving advanced ecotourism status requires that the product meet 80% of bonus criteria.

The tourism operator or facility owner must complete an extensive form that addresses each criteria. In its first phase, NEAP was entirely dependent on the honesty of the applicant. But the new program launched in March 2000 will develop mechanisms for random auditing of products. The greatest limitation of the NEAP program, according to research, is the poor consumer recognition of the program and its labels; as of January 2000, Australia had accredited 237 NEAP products. This program only certifies products, not tour operators or facilities.

Adapted from Buckley, *Ecolabels in Tourism*, 2001

are operating on a small scale and are probably best evaluated using criteria designed for their style of enterprise.

Efforts to certify ecotourism businesses have been led by Australia, which established a research program in 1994 and launched a federally funded initiative in 1996 that is the only ecotourism-specific certification program in the world.

Regardless of whether global certification programs are developed for ecotourism or for more general sustainable tourism, international guidelines detailing how to develop and manage such certification programs are urgently needed. The proposed guidelines for ecotourism certification, seen on page 15, were developed for a publication on ecolabels by TIES staff and for circulation to leading researchers worldwide for further comment.



TIES Guidelines.

The Ecotourism Experience

Ecotourism is a travel experience, first and foremost, that helps travelers come to a better understanding of unique natural and cultural environments around the world. Hundreds of specialized tours and lodges now exist in natural areas that allow small groups to see unique environments and cultures with local guides. These guides are trained to interpret the cultural and environmental settings that visitors are coming to discover. They also focus on helping travelers develop better instincts on how to travel and how to properly contribute toward environmental conservation, cultural survival and other important sustainable development issues. Finally, small ecotourism groups are informed how to minimize their environmental and cultural impacts. The ecotourism experiences that have seen the most success evolved from the innovations of scientists, architects and local community leaders.

For example:

- Wildlife field researchers made many breakthroughs in studying wildlife species in the 1980s, working with unique species such as whales, turtles, mountain gorillas, orangutans, macaws and harpy eagles. A variety of specialized tours were developed to bring visitors for the first time to these field locations to see



Blue and gold macaw

these species. Many of these trips were originally in very rustic field stations, and travelers paid a fee to support conservation and research initiatives. As the programs evolved, a great deal of effort was placed in designing the tours to prevent impacts on the wildlife and culture of the regions.

- Research breakthroughs in fields such as tropical ecology, ethnobotany, whale and primate ecology, and the archeology of ancient civilizations have motivated travelers to meet the scientists involved and to help with research. Workshops and other educational programs now allow tourists to take part in intensive field seminars with the scientists themselves – and at the same time help pay for the research.
- Innovative entrepreneurs and architects began to design specialized low-impact lodges that allowed travelers to stay in relative comfort while having magnificent wildlife-viewing opportunities at their doorstep. Ecolodges specializing in innovative approaches that minimally impacted the natural environment were built on every continent, many powered by alternative energy, designed in harmony



Mayan ruins, Mexico

with the local environment, and using local materials and indigenous designs.

- Local people became shareholders and owners of ecolodges or nature inns, or ran local community-based ecotours. Community-run ecotourism programs emerged around the world, offering travelers the opportunity to learn about different cultures, the social and cultural threats that local people face, and their understanding of local ecology. These programs can assist local communities with health care, education and with maintaining local traditions.
- In rural environments with rich natural resources, especially in Europe, ecotourism can be a sustainable alternative to dwindling agriculture revenues, offering

visitors a natural and rural experience and partially reversing economic deterioration.

Environmental Awareness and Ecotourism

All this fresh interest in the environment and local cultures has created a dynamic economic engine that can spur healthy economic growth in underdeveloped areas, but also may result in unsustainable growth followed by rapid downturns, called “boom-bust” cycles. Past history has shown that the boom-bust syndrome – in locations such as Hawaii or coastal Spain – were very destructive to the environment and for the local economy. Such economic cycles should be avoided, and are the antithesis of building a healthy and sustainable

economy that benefits local people in the long term. Statistics and research confirm that an increasing number of travelers will be reaching remote ecotourism destinations with greater ease, at less cost and faster than ever before, indicating that some ecotourism destinations may become vulnerable to the exact same boom-bust cycles that have plagued more accessible destinations in the past.

While a variety of lifestyle research studies show that travelers are concerned about environmental conservation and the welfare of local people, their travel choices do not appear to be based on these outlooks. The consumers' need to make responsible travel choices is increasingly pivotal to the success of ecotourism objectives, making it highly important that they understand precisely what a good ecotourism experience is. Consumer education campaigns, such as The International Ecotourism Society's *Your Travel Choice Can Make A Difference*, help travelers distinguish between enterprises

and destinations that make no effort to conserve, limit growth or benefit local people, and those that do. Consumer education and guidelines for the selection of ecotourism experiences will strengthen the legitimate ecotourism marketplace and diminish the effectiveness of false claims of environmental and social responsibility (i.e. greenwashing).

The Number of Ecotourists

Because ecotourism is defined by its objectives to conserve nature and contribute to local people, it has been difficult to measure. As yet, no in-depth studies have attempted to determine how many nature tourists are actually motivated to make travel decisions based on ecotourism principles. Ecotourism is widely researched as nature tourism, leading to false assumptions on the size of the market. Research on nature tourism has shown that as much as 50% of the total travel market wants to visit a natural area during a trip, which might include a short day stop in a national park. While this is a very



Aerial of ecolodge, Ecuador

large market, it is quite different from the market that is actually motivated to travel in small groups, learn about wildlife and culture with a local guide, and help support local conservation and sustainable development.

An extremely rough estimate of the world's international ecotourism arrivals would be seven percent of the tourism market (*Lindberg 1997*), or approximately 45 million arrivals in 1998 and 70 million expected for 2010. To this, one must add the substantial number of domestic visitors to natural areas.

Key ecotourism destinations have reported dramatic increases in visits to protected and other natural areas. Ecotourists have always been strongly attracted to national parks and protected areas. While simply visiting a park or natural area is nature tourism – not ecotourism – visitor trends to parks give an indication of the growth of ecotourism as well. Surveys from the early 1990s began to register the dramatic growth in tourism to national parks

in important ecotourism markets – showing an important shift in tourism preferences from the traditional destinations of Europe to a broader range of nature destinations, primarily in developing countries. Foreign visitors to Costa Rica's parks skyrocketed from 65,000 in 1982 to 273,000 in 1991 – a 30% annual increase.

Other countries quickly began to note similar trends. Australia undertook a thorough survey of its nature-based tourists in 1995 (*Blamey & Hatch 1998*) and these results strongly confirmed that national parks and reserves have “high appeal” among international visitors to Australia. Of the 1.7 million foreign visitors to Australia in 1995, 50% visited at least one national park during their stay – a 10% increase over the previous year.

Many other nature-based destinations have documented high growth rates throughout the 1990s (*see the following table*).

In preparation for 2002, designated by the United

Visitation Rates to Nature-based Destinations

Country	1990	1999 Increase	Total % Increase	Average Annual
South Africa	1,029,000	6,026,000	486%	19.3%
Costa Rica	435,000	1,027,000	136%	9.0%
Indonesia	2,178,000	4,700,000	116%	8.0%
Belize*	88,000	157,000	78%	6.0%
Ecuador	362,000	509,000	41%	3.5%
Botswana*	543,000	740,000	36%	3.1%

* Visitation rates available only from 1990 to 1998.

World Tourism Organization, *Tourism Highlights 2000*, 2000



Birdwatchers with guide, Peru

Nations as the *International Year of Ecotourism*, the World Tourism Organization is conducting market surveys in some European countries, with results available in late 2001.

Ecotourist Demographics

At present, hundreds of independent nature tourism companies in the U.S. and Canada handle well over one billion dollars in annual sales. A number of research studies provide excellent information on the clientele of North American companies, providing demographics and information on nature tourist motivations. Based on data collected by HLA and ARA Consulting firms, it has been possible to construct a nature tourist market profile of North American travel consumers seen on page 22.

A portion of this market is undoubtedly ecotourism in design and implementation, but it is still unknown how much. In well-documented ecotourism destinations – including Costa Rica, Ecuador, Belize, South Africa, Kenya, Botswana and Nepal – hundreds of tour operators and lodges receive nature tourists from around the world, but no ecotourism market research is yet available in published literature on these destinations, though

all these countries do provide data on their nature tourism market.

European statistics do not provide clear data on the nature tourism market, even though demand for environmentally friendly products is clearly demonstrated there. Research indicates that Europeans are more likely to seek out rural tourism in Europe rather than nature tourism, because most of the European natural environment is not a wilderness landscape (*Blangy & Vautier 2001*). Northern Europeans in particular have consistently shown interest in tourism with high standards of sustainability as part of the package they purchase, and nature tourism is strongly developing as an outbound market for these countries and for England.

Although Europe is a vital tourist market, little data is available on European interests or attitudes towards nature-based travel or ecotourism. Australian research (*Blamey 1998*) on its inbound nature-based market demonstrates that a high percentage of German (20%), Swiss (23%) and Scandinavian (18%) tourists were interested in Australia because of its nature-based outdoor activities. The European market interest in nature travel exceeded any other inbound market, including the U.S and Canada. This clearly indicates that Europe will be an important nature tourism outbound market, if European market research begins to identify nature and ecotourism as a category of research.

More research on the ecotourism market is necessary to better define what portion of the large and growing nature tourism market will most likely respond to social and environmental approaches and be willing to pay for them. Research shows that while consumers support environmental issues, they have

Nature Tourist Market Profile

- *Age:* 35-54 years old, although age varies with activity and other factors such as cost.
- *Gender:* 50% female and 50% male, although clear differences by activity were found.
- *Education:* 82% were college graduates.
- *Household Composition:* No major differences were found between general tourists and experienced nature tourists*.
- *Party Composition:* A majority (60%) of experienced nature tourist respondents stated they prefer to travel as a couple, with only 15% stating they prefer to travel with their families, and 13% preferring to travel alone.
- *Trip Duration:* The largest group of experienced nature tourists (50%) preferred trips lasting 8–14 days.
- *Expenditure:* Experienced nature tourists were willing to spend more than general tourists, the largest group (26%) stating they were prepared to spend \$1,001–\$1,500 per trip.
- *Important Elements of Trip:* Experienced nature tourists top three responses were (1) a wilderness setting, (2) wildlife viewing, and (3) hiking/trekking.
- *Motivations for Taking Next Trip:* Experienced nature tourists top two responses were (1) to enjoy scenery/nature, and (2) new experiences/places.

* Experienced nature tourists were tourists that had been on at least one ecotourism oriented trip. Ecotourism was defined in this study as nature/adventure/culture-oriented travel. This research included both domestic and international travel.

HLA and ARA Consulting, 1994. Wight 1996a, 1996b.

been more enthusiastic about expressing their concern in surveys than about purchasing green products (Ackerstein & Lemon 1999). Future market research should distinguish between nature tourism and ecotourism, which requires a more sophisticated survey instrument that examines lifestyles and a consumer's willingness to pay for environmental and social sustainability approaches, not simply the activities the tourist has participated in. The question that remains is how many tourists

in the 21st century will be willing to pay for environmentally and socially designed ecotourism programs. Such research will assist practitioners in designing programs for this market.

Explanation of an Ecotour

Today, many responsible ecotour operators are working successfully around the globe to create well-planned, interactive learning experiences that introduce small groups of travelers to new environments and cultures, while minimizing negative environmental impacts and supporting conservation efforts. These service providers can be local or international, and range from seasonal community-run and family operations to medium-scale outbound operators with yearly revenues in the millions of dollars.

However, most countries probably have more tour operators that do not follow responsible guidelines than those that do. Additionally, tour operators have been hesitant to develop their own reporting systems, making it difficult to statistically document ecotourism's overall performance. One progressive example of ecotourism certification standards, however, is Australia's National Ecotourism Assessment Program, with nearly 200 operator and lodge owner participants.

Case study evidence from the field shows that ecotour operators are seeking to provide small – to medium – sized donations to small NGOs operating in their destinations, and to assist with the development of new regional organizations that advocate sustainable tourism policies. Funds are primarily given for land conservation and community development.

Characteristics of A Good Ecotour

- Provides information prior to the trip on the culture and environments to be visited.
- Offers guidelines on appropriate dress and behavior in writing before departure and verbally during the tour.
- Offers in-depth briefing upon tourist s arrival of the destination s geographical, social and political characteristics, as well as its environmental, social and political challenges.
- Offers in-depth guiding throughout the trip with well-trained local guides.
- Offers the opportunity to meet and interact with local communities in a setting that is clearly not just a commercial venue for shopping or sales.
- Develops an understanding of both the local people s daily life and traditions, and the types of issues that are appropriate to discuss, well in advance of community interactions.
- Provides opportunity for contributions to local NGOs.
- Ensures that all park entry fees are paid in full.
- Offers site-sensitive accommodations.

A survey of The International Ecotourism Society's supporting members in 1998 revealed that small donations equalling US\$1 million were given by leading tour operators to locally run NGOs in the 1990s, while at the same time many owner/operators helped establish regional associations that advocate for sustainable tourism policies, such as the Alaska Wildland Recreation and Tourism Association in Alaska, U.S., the Galapagos Tour Operator Association in Ecuador, and the Asociacion de Kayakismo y Ecoturismo in Baja, Mexico. Other owner operators supported indigenous organizations through specially designed NGOs, such as Fundacion Pachamama and Accion Amazonia in Ecuador, both founded in the mid-1990s. While others gave directly to land conservation initiatives and protected areas, such as two Costa Rica-based tour operators who donated \$25,000 to the Costa Rica Park Service in the early 1990s to help with a funding crises, and a U.S.-based tour operator that helped establish the ACEER Foundation in the Peruvian Amazon which has conserved over 100,000 hectares of rain forest for biodiversity

research through private donations and tourism activities.

Ecotourism operators also directly support protected areas through gate fees. A 1994 international survey of protected areas showed that developing countries receive 54% of their revenue from tourism entrance fees (*Giongo 1993*). In Rwanda in the 1980s, tour operators paid \$170 per client for small groups visiting mountain gorillas,



Overcrowding of tents, Nepal

resulting in more than \$1 million in annual revenue to the Parc de Volcans. This was achieved while the park strictly limited the number of visitors and devoted funds to environmental education efforts across the country (*Lindberg 1991*).

Well-regulated protected areas, such as the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador, have directly benefited from entry fees paid by nature and ecotourism companies on behalf of their clients and also from license fees for boats. In 1998, nearly 65,000 travelers visited the Galapagos Islands, with Ecuadorian nationals paying \$6 to enter and foreigners paying \$80. Visitor entrance fees totaled \$4.3 million in that year, averaging \$66 per visitor.

Largely because of the Galapagos Islands' entry fees, Ecuador's national park service has been able to manage this world heritage ecosystem while limiting visitation to reasonable numbers, requiring high-

quality guiding services by local people, maintaining control of which islands and trails are visited by travelers, and providing some support to park management throughout the country. At the same time, Ecuadorians are able to visit and learn about their valuable natural heritage at a very equitable price, which has undoubtedly influenced many young people in the country to become involved in conservation.

Ecotours offer highly educational visits to the great natural destinations on the planet. Tour operators have been proactive in many instances by using their clout, time and revenue to support destinations. Fee systems are one of the most important ways that ecotourism operators can ensure that protected areas visited by their clients are properly valued by governments. It is highly important, however, that fees gathered by governments are directed toward the conservation and management of the protected areas that ecotourists are visiting.



Site for ecolodge, Egypt

Explanation of an Eco-destination

Ecotourists typically look for experiences that provide a sense of closeness to the natural attractions and local communities that first brought them to a destination. Any destination that seeks to attract these tourists must protect its resources while facilitating a sense of integration with the local community. It is commonly but incorrectly thought that the private sector is exclusively responsible for protecting the environment and local communities. But in fact, intervention of other stakeholders at the regional and national level is required. First and foremost, governments are responsible for planning, policy-making and zoning, which helps ensure that destinations are not overbuilt. Governments also are responsible for waste and water treatment systems and energy resources. As such, it is in their best interest to require more sustainable and environmentally sound approaches. If no effective regulation or enforcement of environmental laws exists, and if natural areas are developed without foresight, facilities will be improperly constructed in certain instances. Even in remote areas, where ecotourism is often developed, it is still necessary to set development standards that are approved in coordination with local stakeholders, particularly representatives of local communities.

If mega-tourism complexes are planned with built-up, walled-in complexes, golf courses, “guests-only” clubs, and “plantation-style” service, these same areas cannot be expected to be appropriate for ecotourism. The concept of an eco-destination is new, and no guidelines have been written for it. It emerged precisely because governments sought to promote ecotourism in destinations that already had been developed without any of the basic

Entrance Fee Contribution to Protected Areas – A Case Study from Zimbabwe, India and Indonesia

A study undertaken by the International Institute for Environment and Development examined the current and potential tourism contributions to three national parks: Gonarezhou of Zimbabwe, Keoladeo of India, and Komodo of Indonesia.

While in each of these cases tourism was the greatest source of revenue, the actual financial contribution of entrance fees to park finances was minimal and in two of the parks the net contribution was negative. Government funding was actually subsidizing tourism. Because entrance fees provided a substantial proportion of tourism revenues, the study endorsed raising the fees to ensure that the cost of tourism was covered and that it would also contribute funds to conservation. The survey in Keoladeo National Park outlined that tourists would in fact pay more and the authors suggested raising park fees as the best management option.

Tourism can contribute to conservation in protected areas, but it needs to be effectively managed. This study shows that the economic impacts can also be evaluated to determine opportunities for greater benefit.

Goodwin *et al*, 1997

principles that might attract an ecotourist, and at times without respect for the environment or local communities. The worst examples of this type of destination development have been reported from Southeast Asia, where in one case, millions of ethnic peoples were resettled from their homelands and compensated with so-called “ecotourism” jobs in new locations. This was clearly not true ecotourism and shows how ecotourism can be mislabeled and mishandled by governments.

The planning and management of a destination will determine how well ecotourism can thrive

Eco-destination Characteristics

- Natural features conserved within a protected landscape.
- Low density development, where natural areas are abundant and the built landscape does not dominate.
- Evidence that tourism is not harming natural systems such as waterways, coastal areas, wetlands and wildlife areas.
- Thriving small community businesses, including food stands and other types of craft enterprises owned by local people.
- Plenty of designated outdoor recreation zones that are designed to protect fragile resources, including bike paths, trails or boardwalks that are shared by locals and visitors alike.
- Thriving, locally owned lodges, hotels, restaurants and businesses that provide genuine hospitality with friendly, motivated staff.
- A variety of local festivals and events that demonstrate an on-going sense of pride in the local community's natural environment and cultural heritage.
- Clean and basic public facilities for tourists and locals to share, such as public showers and toilets.
- Friendly interaction between local people and visitors in natural meeting places, such as local shops or benches by the sea.

there. However, it is still extremely rare to see integrated regional tourism planning and management, not to mention strategies that highlight ecological and social considerations. The planning of an eco-destination depends on baseline data of social and environmental factors, zoning strategies, regulations that can prevent deliberate abuse of fragile ecosystems, local participation in developing a set of standards for limits of acceptable change, and long-term monitoring.

Once clear planning for development takes place, it is much more plausible that individual businesses can succeed at their goals of offering environmentally sensitive tours and lodging that provide benefits to local communities. Management is absolutely required at the destination to ensure the long-term harmony of tours and lodges with the people and environment of the region.

Eco-destination Planning Guidelines

- Master plans for the entire tourism development region should specify green zones, trails, walking paths, public access areas, and clear rules on the density of development allowed in residential and commercial zones.
- Zones for tourism use should be clearly designated, as are zones inappropriate for tourism use.
- Visitor management plans and procedures should incorporate public comment during design and implementation phases, with monitoring programs that allow for regular discussion of tourism use and the correction of problems when they occur.
- Full stakeholder consultation should take place on the type of tourism development (if any) desired by local communities, utilizing local neutral intermediaries who understand the community's viewpoints and will not advocate a particular development approach. This process must give the community adequate time to consider its options, with outside counsel and representation available on request.
- Integrated natural resource planning should offer residents a variety of sustainable economic development alternatives beyond ecotourism.

Eco-destination Management Guidelines

- Provide adequate budgets to conserve popular tourist areas, and earmark tourism fees for conservation.
- Tourism businesses should pay impact fees that fund the infrastructure for solid waste treatment, sewage treatment capacity, electricity and water, because their guests will require these services. Tourism properties should receive clear incentives for conserving electricity and water.
- Environmental impact assessment programs should be followed by impact monitoring programs. These programs should be tied to business licensing and certification systems.
- Well-managed trails and camping areas should provide clearly marked rules for low-impact use.
- Published and recognized rules or regulations for public lands should detail the type of vehicles permitted in specific zones, speed limits, fines for dumping or pollution, clear rules for limiting off-road driving, oversight on the number of visitors allowed in zoned areas, and instructions on how and when to observe wildlife. Guidelines should state what is inappropriate.
- Training programs are necessary to provide local inhabitants with the opportunity to run their own businesses.
- Affordable housing programs should ensure that local residents are not excluded from their own communities due to ballooning real estate prices.

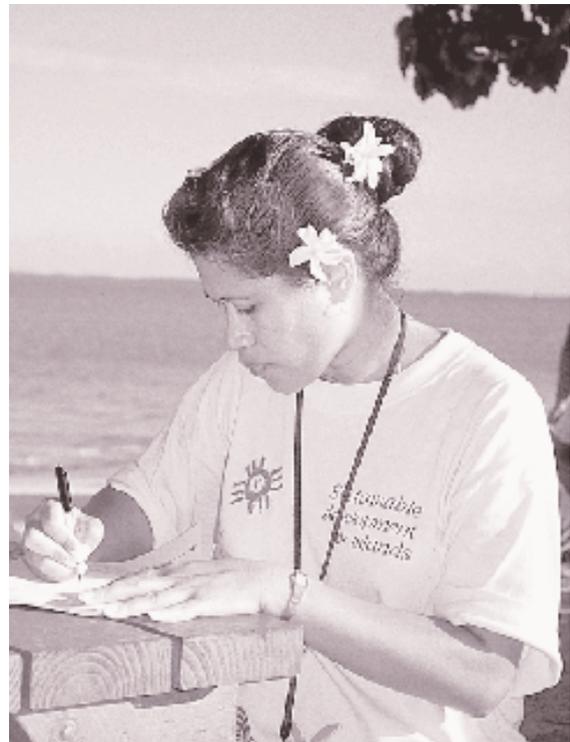
Explanation of an Ec lodge

The term “ec lodge” was formally launched in the marketplace at the First International Ec lodge Forum and Field Seminar held in 1994 at Maho Bay Camps in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Formal dialogue at this conference resulted in *The Ec lodge Sourcebook for Planners and Developers* (Hawkins et al 1995). The first *International Ec lodge Guidelines* (Mehta et al, *in press*) are the result of a 1995 international conference in Costa Rica and five years of research and international review.

This is the first book to offer a definitive international definition of an ec lodge.

It must be stressed that an ec lodge’s value is as much in its setting as its structures. Ec lodges need a well-protected setting that is not plagued by over-development or resource destruction issues. The value of an ecotourism property rises and falls with its ability to protect substantial biodiversity, wildlife and pristine landscapes. Many ec lodges have established their own private reserves, enabling them to directly manage the natural resources they depend on for their business.

Ec lodges can be extremely rustic or very luxurious. Accommodations in general for the ecotourism industry are usually mid-range



Ecotourism planning workshop, Samoa

Ecolodge Definition

An ecolodge is a tourism accommodation facility that meets the following criteria:

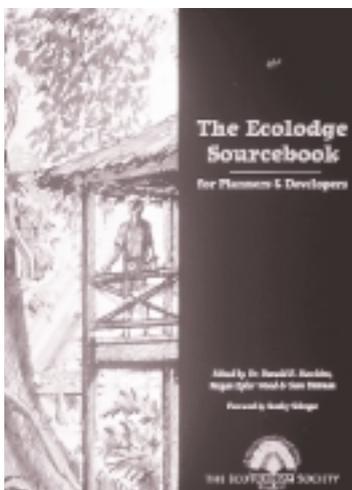
- It conserves the surrounding environment, both natural and cultural.
- It has minimal impact on the natural surroundings during construction.
- It fits into its specific physical and cultural contexts through careful attention to form, landscaping and color, as well as the use of localized architecture.
- It uses alternative, sustainable means of water acquisition and reduces water consumption.
- It provides careful handling and disposal of solid waste and sewage.
- It meets its energy needs through passive design and combines these with their modern counterparts for greater sustainability.
- It endeavors to work together with the local community.
- It offers interpretative programs to educate both its employees and tourists about the surrounding natural and cultural environments.
- It contributes to sustainable local development through research programs.

Adapted from Mehta et al, *International Ecolodge Guidelines*, In Press

in price, though the range of accommodation types is enormous – from luxury tent-camps in Africa, to backpacker tents in Alaska, to rustic lean-tos and homestays in Belize, to ranches and haciendas in Venezuela, to tea houses in Nepal. Live-aboard boats also are popular, particularly on the Amazon.

High-end small cruise ships that can travel to idyllic marine environments such as Baja, Mexico, or Australia’s Great Barrier Reef have also been extremely successful.

Many lodges offer their own guides and interpretation walks, as their visitors are frequently independent travelers that are not traveling with a tour guide. Often local farmers or indigenous people with in-depth knowledge of the local flora and fauna are hired to guide for ecolodges. Local guides usually are highly motivated by the unexpected opportunity to interpret the natural features of their home to outsiders, after years of surviving by poaching wildlife or laboring in unsustainable logging, agriculture or oil exploration. The local guide’s knowledge of the land goes well beyond what most urban citizens have ever experienced in their lives, and this gives visitors a genuine respect for the people and places they are visiting. The interaction between host



Ecology Sourcebook



Visitors at ecolodge, Malaysia

and guest can lead to a whole new outlook for local people on the special nature of where they live.

Other recreation opportunities offered by lodges vary tremendously depending on the site: game drives, bird watching, canoeing, horseback riding, bicycling, beach trips and educational visits to locally run museums, zoos, butterfly farms, agricultural and livestock farms, craft production areas and other natural history and cultural sights. Some high-end lodges are creating jungle canopy walkways on their own properties as another guest amenity; these walkways provide unparalleled opportunities to explore the life above the rain forest tree-tops and in the most diverse part of the rain forest. Coordination of a fulfilling ecotourism itinerary requires an active working relationship with the local community. Ecolodges need to work with local guides and interact with the owners of different tourism resources – whether these are farms, canoes or horses – that would provide interesting day and half-day tours for visitors.

The management and operation of an ecolodge differs from a mainstream hotel for many reasons.

According to *International Ecolodge Guidelines* (Mehta et al, *in press*), the ecolodge is most often found in wilderness areas that are the least-developed, most-remote areas in any country; therefore, they are the last places to receive government investments in health, education, electricity, potable water, roads, etc. This poses a special challenge to the ecolodge owner or manager who must achieve sustainable development by supporting local communities in a long-term development program and putting a land-conservation program in place with a minimum of outside assistance. Education is one of the main mediums that will create successful ecotourism, and it falls to the ecotourism owner or manager to provide it.

Local Vendors

Local vendors in the ecotourism industry include food stands, restaurants, guiding services, vehicle rentals, taxis, recreation services (horses, boats and rafts, bikes, etc.) and craft producers/vendors. These types of service are most often offered by local community members. These vendors play a crucial role in the success of the ecotourism



Local field guide, Ecuador

Ecology Management Characteristics

- Provides on-the-job training to community members and local guides.
 - Uses a majority of local staff people, and avoids giving city-trained or expatriate individuals all of the key responsibilities.
 - Sets up after-hours second-language programs (to assist staff in speaking the language of visiting guests) using a local college graduate with expertise in language training.
 - Has guests contribute to staff education and community development projects involving education or health.
 - Encourages interested community members to communicate their knowledge about the area, while encouraging local guides to mingle with guests during communal hours.
 - Supports guest learning experiences through visits to local farms, nurseries, reforestation projects, butterfly farms and other efforts to promote sustainability in the region.
 - Promotes a system for guests to contribute financially to the preservation of natural areas in the region.
 - Insists on recycling everything from table scraps to plastics, paper and metal.
 - Uses alternative energy wherever possible.
 - Uses biodegradable detergents and avoids the use of toxics whenever possible.
 - Does not keep caged or exotic animals on the premises.
- Adapted from Lewis, *International Ecology Guidelines*, In Press

product and its ability to benefit local communities.

Many times, these businesses are very small and the owners need encouragement and a small amount of capital to get started. They can turn to NGOs or to the ecotourism industry itself to provide assistance with start-up businesses.

Ecotourism's economic contribution to local people must largely be evaluated based on the success of local vendors. These estimates vary greatly depending on the destination. Research from Belize

(Lindberg & Enriquez 1994) indicates that more than 40% of local community members see economic benefits from nearby Hol Chan Marine Reserve, while Costa Rica studies (Baez & Fernandez 1992) estimate that less than 10% of local households benefit from visitors to Tortuguero National Park. The first location, the village of San Pedro in Belize, is well-known for a wide variety of small local businesses, from hotels to bars to clothing shops – all frequented by divers who have cash to spend. The second, Tortuguero, is characterized by all-inclusive lodges where visitors pay in advance, travel by boat in remote wetlands to view wildlife, and then simply return to lodges that are not owned by local people.

The problem of economic leakage is difficult to evaluate uniformly. In the case of Tortuguero, no small-scale economy of any kind exists – locals primarily survive on subsistence fishing, or they may have worked for nearby banana plantations in the past. A low diversity of goods in local communities, long dominated by large-scale plantations or cattle ranches, hurts their ability to benefit from ecotourism. In contrast, if tourist destinations contain more micro-enterprises, it is more likely that a larger percentage of local people will benefit.

In areas not characterized by small business, leakage can be reduced by lease fees, land rental fees, and other per person usage charges that return to local residents. In Kenya, the Maasai have long chosen to continue their pastoral lifestyle despite growing visitor numbers on or near their lands. They are not interested in small business, and their culture would actually be damaged if they were to become local vendors. In this case, the Maasai have begun



Fruit vendor, Tobago

to charge safari companies leases for the use of their land, a specialized concession fee that goes toward community needs. This enables them to continue with their traditional lifestyle while receiving direct income from ecotourism companies for the use of their land. This model has been successful, with Maasai group ranch managers even publishing annual reports for the community based on the revenues received from the fees.

Efforts to improve community entrepreneurship must therefore be based on local cultural needs. Local products must also be marketed with value-added approaches, using attractive packaging to call attention to the fact they are locally made or grown. Organic products have received particularly good reception in the ecotourism marketplace in such countries as Costa Rica and Belize. While local vending certainly provides an important opportunity to generate additional revenues, it is important that local products are

not undervalued. For example, communities in Amazonian Peru's Puerto Maldonado have many shops and local businesses, but only 26% of the community receives income, largely because of the modest nature of the vendors' products, and the fact that the backpacker market that frequents the area puts a low value on



Quinoa bar vendor, Peru

Handicrafts and Ecotourism – A Case Study from Nepal, Laos and Indonesia

The study *Tourism, the Poor and Other Stakeholders: Experience in Asia*, published by Overseas Development Institute (ODI), notes that the growth of Nepal's handicraft industry was rewarded with nearly 15% of all tourism expenditures in 1990. In a specific example, tourism gave a boost to craft makers in Nepal's Kullu region, who developed a thriving souvenir industry with shawls and caps that are now an important export item. On the other hand, numerous examples show where ethnic minority women, such as the Sa Pa in Laos, have seen their embroidery and designs co-opted by cheap imitators, forcing them to sell their originals at unfair prices in order to earn the cash they have come to depend on. In many cases, local people have excellent, marketable crafts, but few skills in marketing. They can be easily undercut by cheap imitators. This problem can be counteracted, according to the ODI report, if agencies intervene to create fair marketplace conditions for all vendors. For example, in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, an annual art auction was organized to prevent this problem and generate high profits for local wood carvers on the island.

Adapted from Shah and Gupta, *Tourism, the Poor and Other Stakeholders*, 2000
Case Studies from Nepal, Laos, & Indonesia

the community's simple services. However, a nearby lodge in Infierno that was developed for the mid-priced market has made the community a full partner in its enterprise, sharing 60% of the profits (*Stronza 2000*). The lodge is working with the community

to develop a whole range of crafts to sell at the lodge at higher prices. Clearly this option provides Infierno's community with a much improved rate of return on their efforts and a much better outlook for their future.