

The Components of Successful Ecotourism

Ecotourism Stakeholders

The ecotourism sector of the travel industry is primarily a collection of small- and medium-sized local businesses, communities and non-governmental organizations that develop and implement ecotourism programs in remote and fragile destinations for both the group tour and independent traveler markets. They are serviced in part by outbound tour operators located primarily in developed countries that specialize in ecotourism. These operators provide the niche marketing and booking services for a significant proportion of organized ecotours worldwide.

For ecotourism to be properly implemented, local and international ecotourism stakeholders are dependent on government (particularly Ministries of Tourism and Environment) to develop policies that will protect and manage natural areas. Government tourism boards and ministries are also crucial players in establishing the reputation and “brand recognition” of the country as an ecotourism destination.

Ecotourism stakeholders also depend on the broader tourism industry to transport ecotourists and accommodate them upon arrival in the destination country, or for a part of their stay. After all, many tourists may only spend a portion of their time on an ecotour or in an ecolodge. Other important

stakeholders include local authorities, who often regulate land-use and control key infrastructure, and protected area managers who are responsible for the management of visitors in fragile natural areas.

International development agencies also have an important role to play in ecotourism development because they finance projects relating to tourism development, the conservation of biological diversity, and micro-enterprise development – all issues closely related to ecotourism.

Finally, successful implementation of ecotourism depends on the development of a stable infrastructure. This includes currency exchange rates, transport systems, peace and security, and good telecommunications systems. A variety of government ministries are involved with providing a stable environment for business development, and their cooperation is no less important for ecotourism than for other types of international trade. Even though ecotourism businesses are located in remote natural areas, they still require much of the same infrastructure as other businesses to deliver quality experiences for their clients.

The stakeholder’s role in developing successful ecotourism is reviewed here.

Ecotourism Industry

Travel Agents

Travel agents are located throughout the world and play an important role in marketing retail travel industry products but, perhaps surprisingly, have not played a significant role in marketing or sales for the ecotourism industry. In the past, outbound tour operators (*see below*) handled nearly all marketing and retail duties in the ecotourism industry. Now, the Internet is increasingly important as a sales medium for ecotourism products and is likely to further supplant the need for travel agents in this market niche. Recent reports by the Travel Industry Association of America show that travel planning is surging on the Internet. In 1999, more than 52 million online travelers used the Internet for this purpose – an increase of 54% over the previous year.

Outbound Tour Operators

Outbound tour operators are by far the ecotourism industry's dominant marketing and sales organizations. They create the brand name that sells the ecotourism products. They market destinations using four-color brochures, catalogues with photos of wildlife and ecosystems, World Wide Web pages and, in some cases, through the distribution of film, videotapes and CD-ROM disks. The outbound operator takes responsibility for selecting and packaging the tour product. They must oversee the creation of itineraries to ensure that they will meet the market demand. Outbound operators handle all sales of the tour product and also handle most air arrangements for their clients through in-house travel agents. They provide tourists with all essential pre-departure information and also are responsible for traveler insurance and liability issues.

Tour Operator Responsibilities

- Build environmental and cultural awareness through information and education for clients.
- Minimize impact on the environment.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Respect local cultures.
- Support local businesses and service providers.
- Provide local guide services and assist with training local guides.
- Manage activities in a responsible manner, using local guidelines for visitor behavior.
- Support parks and protected areas, paying entry fees at all times.
- Work in cooperation with local NGOs and government to develop plans for visitor management that protects local people and the environment.
- Avoid over-crowded, over-exploited destinations on itineraries and help develop lesser-known sites.
- Offer site-sensitive accommodations.

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

A common misunderstanding is that outbound tour operators handle all tour details throughout a trip – this is rare. Outbound operators usually contract inbound tour operators to deal with the specifics of a travel program once the client enters the destination country. The inbound operator (*see below*) usually represents the outbound operator, making it appear that the “brand-name” company is handling the tours throughout the client’s travel experience.

Outbound tour operators, however, must also take responsibility for meeting ecotourism objectives as part of their responsibility to oversee their product. This may require extensive work with their inbound operators to ensure that guiding, business, conservation practices and host community relations concur with ecotourism guidelines.

It is important to note that while most outbound operators are private businesses, a substantial number are non-profit organizations providing ecotravel as a service for their members. While most non-profit travel programs in the U.S. market tours to their members, they still contract an outbound tour operator to provide the tour service. A survey of U.S.-based outbound tour operators in the early 1990s (*Higgins 1996*) indicated that 17% of their pre-packaged itineraries were arranged in cooperation with non-profit organizations. This trend has continued to advance rapidly throughout the 1990s according to many industry sources. A growing number of non-profit organizations are successfully marketing tours to their members, and tour operators are observing that their non-profit clients are extremely successful at marketing trips.

Inbound Tour Operators

Inbound tour operators usually are located in the major cities of destination countries, such as San Jose, Costa Rica; Quito, Ecuador; Kathmandu, Nepal; or Nairobi, Kenya. They handle multi-day group tours for outbound operators, but they also may offer alternative excursions for walk-in business. Their activities can even extend to providing conference services or customized itineraries directly to individual clients. Inbound operators may also, in some cases, own their own lodges or hotels, which they use for their tour clients.

The inbound operator takes the primary responsibility for the client during the trip. As such, they are the primary entity that is responsible for ensuring that any trip is of a high quality and, particularly, that the educational component meets ecotourism industry standards. To achieve this, inbound companies must have quality interpretive guides.



Ecolodge Cabin, Kenya

This is the key human resource that establishes an inbound operator as a top competitor in the marketplace, and it is particularly important to their outbound clients.

Ecotourism inbound operators need special support services, such as a network of comfortable but rustic

Ecolodge Owner/Manager Responsibilities

- Design the lodge to reflect the local natural and cultural environment, using the principles of sustainable design and endemic design styles.
- Use site planning to minimize the environmental impact of construction and to protect key natural features such as vegetation. Avoid use of non-renewable construction materials and use recycled building products whenever possible.
- Design an operational ecolodge that will minimize use of natural and, particularly, non-renewable resources. This could include energy and water reduction strategies but also a waste management plan that encourages reduction of excess waste through reuse and recycling.
- Work in collaboration with the local community and involve them in the planning of the ecolodge. Support the local economy and initiatives by contracting local service providers and buying local products. Offer local people employment that spans a wide range of responsibilities and incorporates them into management roles.
- Provide benefits to local conservation and research programs, either public or private.
- Work with government and local NGOs to develop long-term sustainable land-use plans.
- Offer visitors interpretive programs that will educate them about the local natural and cultural environment.
- Give clients the opportunity to contribute directly to local development and environmental projects.
- Investigate the economic and legal aspects of developing the ecolodge and run it as a business. A facility that operates in contravention of the law or is not financially viable will not effectively contribute to the conservation of the natural environment or benefit the local community.

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

lodges that offer good backcountry experiences and excellent wildlife viewing, while meeting standards of environmental sustainability. They must select ground transportation services that are suitable in size for their small groups, and minimize energy usage and select restaurants that feature

local cuisine and are owned by local entrepreneurs. They must also work with local vendors to ensure that tourists have an opportunity to view and ideally purchase genuine local products, such as handicrafts.

It is the inbound operator's responsibility to ensure that tourism products generate dollars for local conservation projects. They must work with local communities at each destination site visited to ensure that host communities have proper opportunities to benefit from the tourism program and that appropriate guest-host interactions exist.

Ecolodges

All ecolodges reflect the creative initiative and entrepreneurialism of business pioneers, rather than large multinational corporations. Found in nature tourism destinations around the world, each ecolodge tends to be individually owned rather than part of a chain. Some lodge owners depend on business from inbound tour operators to provide a steady, predictable client base, while others have established their own market base through direct marketing and public relations strategies.

In some cases, skilled entrepreneurs have partnered with indigenous landowners to co-manage the wild land resources that tourists visit and local people depend upon, thereby achieving a positive situation for both the lodge and the local people. Ecolodges also frequently contribute towards maintaining official protected areas, because they are often quite dependent on proper management of government-controlled reserves. Lodge owners may be involved in long-term agreements with protected areas worldwide, either as concessionaires that pay percentage fees

Capacity Building in Brazil – A Case Study of Conservation International (CI)

Conservation International (CI) has made ecotourism one of several sustainable development alternatives to assist highly diverse regions. CI targeted Brazil, a nation of high biological diversity, as one of many important nations to develop capacity for delivering quality ecotourism. CI in 1994 initiated the Ecotourism Capacity Building Workshop program, which would conduct courses in regions with the greatest need for biodiversity conservation and areas with endangered ecosystems. Capacity building included three components: *Product Development* to train professionals with little theoretical knowledge of ecotourism; *Train the Trainer* to complement the first workshop and develop skills to conduct similar courses on ecotourism; and the *Leveling and Upgrading* workshops to provide advanced training and qualify participants as Regional Ecotourism Experts.

In the *Product Development* workshops, small groups of five to seven participants (determined by their knowledge of a target region, education, etc.) would develop an ecotourism business – either a tour operation or an ecolodge. To close the workshop, attendees participated in an ecotourism experience that solidified their understanding of all the course's concepts. The *Train the Trainers* program was crucial to the success of CI's ecotourism training. Tourism and environmental institutions selected participants with high credibility in their communities, who were good communicators and, administratively, who were able to facilitate an ecotourism course. The first course involved 35 people who now promote and facilitate ecotourism product development in their own regions.

When CI evaluated their program in 1996, the 600 survey responses indicated that 75% of workshop attendees applied the concepts they learned in their daily professional activities, 67% used the techniques taught to develop new ecotourism products (38% were new tour itineraries and 26% were new ecolodges), and 54% of participants have since created new ecotourism learning events in their regions.

Adapted from Hillel and de Oliveira, *Ecotourism Capacity Building Workshop*, 2000

to parks, as “friends” who are financial supporters of park initiatives, or as informal supporters that provide assistance on a project-by-project basis. These ecolodges may actively contribute to trail maintenance, volunteer research programs, clean-up days, or the monitoring of visitor use, depending on the local situation.

Non-Governmental Organizations

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a prominent role in ecotourism development. They usually are involved for one of two reasons: 1) protection of biodiversity and environment, or 2) sustainable development for local people. NGOs are ideal partners for the private sector by developing a myriad of programs such as research on best practices, guide training, regional planning and stakeholder meetings, community development,

protected area management, and targeted conservation initiatives.

NGOs also are actively working nationally and internationally to ensure that ecotourism is developing in a manner that is consistent with national and international conservation and sustainable development priorities. In fact, NGOs worldwide are increasingly developing their own ecotourism programs because of their strong desire to use ecotourism as a tool for conservation and sustainable development. For example, The Nature Conservancy, the largest private conservation organization in the world, has developed an ecotourism program that is assisting with the responsible development of ecotourism products, the planning of ecotourism for protected areas, and the development of user fees to assist

with conservation and sustainable development with projects in Ecuador, Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Bolivia and Peru.

Finally, many local NGOs are implementing true grassroots ecotourism initiatives focused on the conservation of local resources that can benefit from ecotourism's economic and educational potential. Turtle-, whale-, penguin- and bird-watching programs, for example, are an excellent example of how ecotourism can successfully raise awareness and funds for protection, involve local guides and rangers, and lead to long-term sustainable conservation of an endangered species.

Communities

Communities have a vital stake in appropriate ecotourism development in their region, and their participation and involvement are critical to the process. The socioeconomic and cultural impacts of tourism are great, with several well-known negative impacts:

1. loss of local traditions;
2. commercialization of local cultural products;



Community-based boat builder, Malaysia

3. erosion of self-worth;
4. undermining of family structure;
5. loss of interest (particularly among youth) in land stewardship;
6. fighting among those that benefit from the tourism cash economy and those that do not;
7. crime and adoption of illegal underground economies to serve tourists through prostitution, gambling and drugs.

Most researchers agree that some of these social ills can be prevented if the community gives its prior informed consent to any ecotourism projects in its area, participates in tourism development, and remains part of the planning process for tourism entering into the community. If ecotourism is to succeed as a viable form of sustainable development, the private sector, governments and NGOs all must cooperate to include local communities in the development process. Basic guidelines for community participation offer the approaches required to involve local communities.

The need to understand and evaluate a community in advance of proceeding with any partnership or development initiative is paramount, with many assessment approaches available for this purpose (Ashley & Roe 1998, Lash et al *in press*).

Pre-assessment is important to ensure that community leaders objectively evaluate their needs and goals, and that they are not mistakenly swayed by the offer of funding or business opportunities that might later prove detrimental to the community.

Understanding the decision-making process of a community is highly important. Many local communities do not have a top-down decision-

Basic Steps to Encourage Community Participation

- **Understand the Community's Role.** Communities should exercise control over their growth and development. They will in many cases need technical assistance to make appropriate decisions and should be given adequate information and training in advance. Allocate time, funds and experienced personnel to work with communities well in advance. Avoid allowing communities to feel they are powerless to influence patterns of development.
- **Empower Communities.** Participation is a process that is more than just making communities the beneficiaries of an ecotourism project. Jobs are an important benefit, but they do not replace empowerment. Communities must genuinely participate in the decision-making process. This involves more than just consultation. Processes must be initiated to ensure that communities can manage their own growth and resources wisely.
- **Urge Local Project Participation.** Project managers must identify local leaders, local organizations, key priorities of the community, and ideas, expectations and concerns local people already have. Information can be gathered for and by the community. The opinions gathered should be disseminated and discussed with the community along with other relevant information such as government market statistics or regional development plans. Training opportunities must be formulated at this phase to help community members gain planning skills, and also the entrepreneurial skills required to run small businesses.
- **Create Stakeholders.** Participation can be encouraged at two levels – for individuals and for local organizations. Investment in project development areas should be encouraged, either in cash, labor or in-kind resources. Developing lodging by local entrepreneurs, and setting standards for local services by local organizations are two good examples.
- **Link Benefits to Conservation.** The links between ecotourism benefits and conservation objectives need to be direct and significant. Income, employment and other benefits must promote conservation.
- **Distribute Benefits.** Ensure that both the community and individuals benefit from projects.
- **Identify Community Leaders.** Identify opinion leaders and involve them in the planning and execution of projects. Identify leaders that represent different constituents to ensure that a cross-section of society is involved (including both men and women). Be sure the project has good information on the local social structure. Strategize on the effects of the projects on different social groups and never assume that all parts of society will cooperate or agree. Be strategic and gain appropriate allies early.
- **Bring About Change.** Use existing organizations already working in the community to improve its social well-being through economic development. Development associations or local cooperatives are good prospects. Groups involved in organizing recreation can also be good allies. Community participation through institutions is more likely to bring about effective and sustained change.
- **Understand Site-Specific Conditions.** Be aware that authority structures vary greatly in each region. Consensus is not always possible, nor is the full participation of all sectors of society (women are often excluded).
- **Monitor and Evaluate Progress.** Establish indicators in advance to track tourism's impacts – both positive and negative. Goals such as employment and income levels are only one type of indicator. The project should track negative impacts such as evidence of rapidly escalating prices for local goods, inflation in land prices, antagonism towards visitors, frequency of arrests, change in youth activities, and evidence of drug, prostitution and other illicit activities. Ideally, the more the local community is fully involved in ecotourism development, the less these problems should develop. Another important indicator of local involvement is evidence of initiatives within the community to respond to the negative influences of tourism.

Brandon, *Ecotourism: A Guide for Planners & Managers – Volume 1*, 1993

making structure but may instead decide by consensus. This can be very slow and painstaking. It also must be understood that if the community is not involved in initial decisions for the project – such as establishing the objectives for the project

or defining its scope – they likely will care less about its success.

Ecotourism development procedures include reviewing with the community the range of possible project

Posadas Amazonas – A Case Study from Peru

In May 1996, the members of the local Native Community of Infierno (CNI) and a private Peruvian tour operator, Rain Forest Expeditions (RFE), signed a legally binding contract to build and co-manage a lodge called Posadas Amazonas. The partners agreed to split the profits 60% to the community, and 40% to the company, and to divide the management responsibilities in half. A critical tenet of the agreement was that community members should be actively involved in the enterprise, not only as staff, but also as owners, planners and administrators, and that they should join RFE in making decisions about the company's future. The partners also agreed that after 20 years, the lodge would belong to CNI. In return, the CNI members were obligated to maintain an exclusive contract with RFE on communal territory for 20 years.

In the project's first year, the community's participation was relatively passive. One of the obstacles to equal management participation was the community members' sheer lack of experience, and their uncertainty what full participation entailed. Only one year later, the community partners became more active decision makers. In general, the community members were more aware of their status and privilege as partners. For most in the community, this sense of ownership came only after the project was up and running, and after they had invested their own time in creating it. Members of the community now comment, "they have theories, but we have the experience." Learning has gone both ways. The staff of Rain Forest Expeditions changed considerably, learning to listen and leave more of the decisions to the community. They became more appreciative of local skills and traditional forms of organization and more attentive to voices that before remained unheard. At the same time, the members of CNI learned how to better forecast into the future, weighing advantages and disadvantages of various development options before proceeding with their next step.

Adapted from Stronza, Because It Is Ours, 2000

benefits (both economic and social) and its potential negative impacts. Using trained intermediaries skilled at community facilitation and assessment at this stage is highly recommended. All experts in community development agree that the community must have the information needed to decide if the project's negative impacts may outweigh the benefits, before proceeding with a new project. If the project is approved by the community, community representatives must be clearly integrated into the decision-making process during all phases of the project. A written agreement between the ecotourism project and the community can help to give both sides the security of having all roles and responsibilities clearly defined from the outset. As part of successful agreements, communities must have the means to invest in projects using the types of resources available to them, such as labor, local

renewable resources and land. Case studies indicate that the community must invest in the project in order for it to be a success.



Local guide, Peru

Community-Based Ecotourism

Community-based ecotourism (CBE) is a growing phenomenon throughout the developing world. The CBE concept implies that the community has substantial control and involvement in the ecotourism project, and that the majority of benefits remain in the community. Three main types of CBE enterprises have been identified. The purest model suggests that the community owns and manages the enterprise. All community members are employed by the project using a rotation system, and profits are allocated to community projects. The second type of CBE enterprise involves family or group initiatives within communities. The third type of CBE is a joint venture between a community or family and an outside business partner.

Certainly all efforts should be made to maximize benefits to local communities, but it may not be realistic to expect that an entire community can control and manage ecotourism. Researchers Rolf

Wesche and Andy Drumm comment in their 1999 book *Defending Our Rain Forest: A Guide to Community-Based Ecotourism in the Ecuadorian Amazon* that “the notion of long-term communal enterprise requires the permanent, consistent

Behind the Scenes of a CBE Experience – The Community Perspective

The local community typically organizes itself to manage tourism by establishing a cooperative or small company with community shareholders. Homestays often are rotated between community members to ensure all families have the opportunity to host tourists. While a leader must emerge to manage the tourism enterprise, the input and involvement of the whole community is essential for success. Younger community members often take a keener interest in leading the enterprise, while older members prefer to maintain their traditional lifestyles of hunting or farming. Conflicts and questions may arise about the old versus new way of life, but unique relationships emerge when the young managers work together with their elders to teach tourists about medicinal plants and other traditional uses of the natural resources.

Previously disinterested youth may seek to increase their traditional knowledge for tourist guiding and may do so by approaching their shamans or other traditional leaders. Home-based craft making is often revived, with women using ancient and at times abandoned craft techniques to increase the value of their products. Extended networks of women may form crafts cooperatives. These cooperatives provide important empowerment centers for women who work together to sell a wide variety of distinctive products in one central location. This type of commerce frequently gives women new independence and more clout in their own households. Frequently women will speak out against such destructive trends as abuse and alcoholism, once they have the economic independence they need.

The keys to success are community control over the tourist product and management through community discussion that addresses any concerns over tourism management. Transparent accounting practices are vital to equitably share the economic benefits with all members of the community.

A Community-Based Ecotourism Experience – The Traveler’s Perspective

Tourists are greeted by community leaders and stay in village guest houses that are simple in design and similar to other houses in the community. Locals take tourists for hikes to natural sites and tell them about the traditional uses of resources in the area. Traditional stories about natural sites are often shared. Tourists are given a chance to learn about how the local community perceives its natural setting, their wildlife and wild lands, and to learn something about local customs. After a full day outdoors, tourists are treated to local cooking and have an option to buy handicrafts from villagers. Evening gatherings take place in community houses or centers, where an exchange of worldviews takes place between hosts and guests. This can lead to long-lasting bonds between community members and their visitors.



Community women with new product, Mexico

commitment of all community members. It has to be learned and reinforced through positive experience. Problems have resulted from the communal enterprise approach such as the slowness of democratic decision making and inconsistent quality of services. The community enterprise model is being adapted to allow for allocation of responsibilities to specialized, trained members of the community.”

While CBE projects remain an evolving framework for tourism development, they are not a utopian concept. Wesche and Drumm documented more than 30 CBE projects in the Ecuadorian Amazon alone, based on the definitions supplied above. While there are variations, the descriptions on page 41 of the CBE experience are based on dozens of actual experiences in Latin America.

While the CBE concept is less studied in regions outside Latin America, an Overseas Development Institute study looked at CBE projects in Namibia, described below.

Women and Ecotourism

A wide range of studies on rural development demonstrate that women are less likely to benefit from development initiatives than men, unless special measures are taken to involve them. This problem prevails in ecotourism development projects as well. A study on gender issues and tourism in Indonesia

Community-Based Ecotourism – A Case Study from Namibia

Residents of Namibia are forming conservancies which under law gives them conditional use rights over wildlife. Nearly all the four registered conservancies and more than a dozen emerging conservancies are actively developing tourism plans and have become key actors in rural tourism development.

Residents of the Bergsig area formed the Torra Conservancy, which became involved with two different tourism investors. The residents selected a small camp-style proposal over a potentially more lucrative lodge proposal because the proposed luxury lodge would have impinged on the local way of life, including livestock management and access to water sources. The community selected the camp because it was small-scale, required a lease for only 10 years and, importantly, the campground operator had established a high level of trust within the community. NGOs were identified as important resources that guided the community, outlined the benefits and pointed out the disadvantages of incorporating tourism into community life.

The government in Namibia presently recognizes community tourism enterprises, rural residents and the emerging conservancies as significant players in tourism. Current regional tourism planning procedures include considerable community consultation. In addition, community tourism enterprises in Namibia have joined forces to form the Namibian Community Based Tourism Association, which is recognized by government and consulted on many matters.

Ashley, The Impact of Tourism on Rural Livelihoods, 2000



Weaver selling wares, Peru

(Shah & Gupta 2000) shows that women were willing to increase their workloads tremendously through the sale of handicrafts, in order to gain some new measure of financial independence.

Programs to involve women in ecotourism development are still scarce. One good example of such a program is in Nepal, undertaken by the Mountain Institute (*see below*).

Langtang Ecotourism Project –A Case Study from Nepal

Women in Nepal have lower literacy rates, educational opportunities, access to resources, control of assets and decision-making powers than men. For many women the tasks of caring for tourists adds considerably to their daily household duties, especially when husbands are away working as trekking porters and guides. They are never idle, however – whatever time they have to sit down is spent knitting woolen caps, mittens and socks, weaving bags, or making handicrafts for sale. Much attention is paid in Nepal to gender issues, but real progress has been rare.

The Langtang Ecotourism Project was established in 1996 to build local capacity for tourism management. Women embraced the program and played a vital role in the transition from trying to meet tourism demand to proactively developing sustainably managed tourist services. Through a special participatory planning approach, they developed a collective dream of how community-based tourism could look and function in the future. For example, by participating in the assessment of different cooking fuels, they elected to use kerosene instead of wood. A kerosene depot was established and the profits are now allocated to conservation initiatives, such as the planting of 17,500 tree seedlings. Independent of becoming local environmental managers, the women also have coordinated a cultural revival. Craft cooperatives, traditional dancing and singing are now generating income for the women of the community and promoting pride in their local culture.

Adapted from Brewer-Lama, Cultural Survival Quarterly, 1999

Mutawintji National Park – A Case Study from Australia

Mutawintji has been a popular tourist destination in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, since the 1880s because of its famous gorges, rock pools and Aboriginal rock art. The NSW Parks and Wildlife Service opened a campground there in the 1970s without any involvement of Aboriginal people. By the 1980s, Aboriginal people were so outraged by unregulated tourist behavior that they blockaded the park to control the area and demand respect for their sacred sites. In 1996, the parliament of New South Wales passed legislation that enabled the return of ownership of several national parks to their traditional Aboriginal owners using joint management agreements with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. These agreements were to be overseen by boards with a majority of traditional owners. Mutawintji National Park became the first park returned to its Aboriginal owners as agreed by parliament.

A Mutawintji Local Aboriginal Land Council (MLALC) is now in charge of all tours in the park, and members of the council handle all guided tours. The MLALC has formally licensed its own tour operation, Mutawintji Heritage Tours, which serves as a liaison with all non-indigenous tour operators on behalf of the park. The enterprise received federal funding for guide training, which has taken place, resulting in improved skills and confidence among Aboriginal guides. The company is steadily aiming for self sufficiency, and plans to be free of the need for further funding in a few years. General satisfaction with tourism management in the area has improved considerably since 1996.

Adapted from Sutton, Cultural Survival Quarterly, 1999

Ecotourism and Indigenous Communities

Ecotourism may often be identified as a means by which communities can raise their standard of living without unsustainable exploitation of natural resources or cultural degradation. Indigenous communities have very special opportunities to develop ecotourism, because they often live in remote natural areas. However, ecotourism is not necessarily the proper course for indigenous communities. Most indigenous people have been marginalized by their national governments. Frequently they do not have land rights, giving them little clout or control over the development of their homelands. Furthermore, they may be subject to a number of pressures to change their social, technological and even religious practices to adopt a market- or service-based economy. This can lead to highly unjust situations where tourism is developed without permission on their own lands.

The relationship between indigenous communities and tourism has long been tenuous. Tourism businesses have frequently used local resources with little economic benefit to the community. If local people were involved in tourism, it was as cheap labor or as part of the tourist attraction, mostly in the form of cultural “shows” or displays. This problem continues today, giving indigenous people a natural distrust of tourism development in general, and little reason to believe in the potential of ecotourism. They often perceive it as just one more proposal to eliminate local control over their land and their community’s future – and, unfortunately, their concerns may be justified in many instances.

An indigenous working group at a Side-Event at the 2000 Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Nairobi summarized some of the indigenous community’s key concerns. Their points included:

1. The need for tools to ensure prior informed consent;
2. The need to undertake a collective review of prior informed consent;
3. The need to determine criteria for cultural diversity within the context of biological diversity;
4. The creation of a process for grievances and conflict resolutions for indigenous peoples;
5. Development of a deeper appreciation for indigenous rights separate from rural communities and others.

Some indigenous people have been able to take full control of tourism development, while other groups have entered co-management agreements that provide them with a measure of control to protect their land rights, prevent desecration of sacred areas, and reap economic benefits from tourism without undermining their cultural identity. This process cannot proceed successfully unless the indigenous community has legal control over land and full legal rights to protect any businesses that they may establish. If these vital elements are in place, an indigenous community is in the position to take advantage of ecotourism and use it as a sustainable development tool.

Efforts to make ecotourism fully beneficial to local communities are still very new and often experimental. Some communities around the world are keen to get involved, but assistance will be needed to gauge their market potential and real-life business opportunities before development projects are initiated. Certainly communities need their voices heard, and they need to be given the opportunity to develop the skills to fully participate in ecotourism development. Sustained efforts to involve local communities will be required to ensure they are fully

part of this international market, when they choose to be.

Regional and National Governments

Governments have an extraordinarily important role to play in the development of ecotourism, yet their role is complex and must be defined by a variety of agency players. Several countries have adopted specific ecotourism strategies. The first national ecotourism plan in the world, prepared by the Australian government in 1994, is the most important example of national ecotourism planning. The government of Brazil also published *Guidelines for an Ecotourism National Policy* (*Grupo de Trabalho Interministerial, 1994*), which set a benchmark for action in that nation. These plans have a strong focus on the development of appropriate tourism infrastructure and capabilities for the development of tourism in natural areas with a high level of commitment to rural peoples, making them classic examples of ecotourism planning. The commitment to national ecotourism planning development in Australia and Brazil has been very strong because these countries recognized that their tourism economies depend upon the health of their natural ecosystems.

Australia

In Australia, the decision to formulate an ecotourism strategy was made in response to growing international interest and the increasing profile of Australia's natural environment as a tourism attraction. Working on behalf of the federal government, a small team undertook a literature review and proceeded to public consultation, which involved local government agencies, natural resource managers, tour operators, tourism marketers, planners, conservation and community groups, developers and indigenous Australians. Workshops were convened around

Australian National Ecotourism Strategy

Challenges

1. Maintain acceptable levels of visitor use.
2. Adopt minimum impact practices.
3. Use monitoring to maintain oversight on resource impact.

Objectives

1. Facilitate ecologically sustainable practices.
2. Integrate regional planning.
 - a. Urge local participation in the planning and decision-making process.
 - b. Improve use of biophysical parameters in permitting process.
3. Improve natural resource management.
 - a. Seek financial benefits from entrance and permit fees.
 - b. Review permitting for use by operators.
4. Improve cooperation between ecotourism and natural resource management.
 - a. Specify mode of transport, points of entry, licensing and permits.
 - b. Train site-specific operators in ecologically sustainable practices.
5. Provide proper regulations.
 - a. Study environmental impacts of tourism developments in natural areas.
 - b. Develop guidelines or codes of practice for private sector.
 - c. Accredite private sector.
 - d. Remove inconsistencies between regional, state and territorial licensing and zoning regulations.
6. Determine infrastructure needs.
 - a. Increase capability to withstand environmental impacts.
 - b. Disperse crowds by directing flow of tourists to sites.
 - c. Offer educational information.
 - d. Provide site-sensitive design.
 - e. Utilize environmentally-friendly waste management and energy systems.
7. Monitor visitor impacts.
 - a. Establish baseline data on sites.
8. Develop information base.
 - a. Develop database on cultural and ecotourism attractions.
 - b. Develop database on existing operators servicing these attractions.
9. Conduct marketing.
 - a. Gather data on the market niches attracted to specific destinations.
 - b. Create market profiles for destinations.
10. Deliver ethical ecotourism products.
 - a. Develop local industry standards.
 - b. Accredite ecotourism products.
11. Enhance opportunities for self-determination.
 - a. Enhance abilities of local people to manage destinations.
 - b. Enhance abilities of Aboriginal peoples to self-sufficiently manage sites.
12. Develop business policies.
 - a. Offer opportunities sensitive to ecotourism business needs.

Commonwealth of Australia, *National Ecotourism Strategy*, 1994



Ecolodge in Amazon, Brazil

the country, and a call for written submissions was placed in the national press. According to Jill Grant and Alison Allcock, the two co-authors of Australia's national plan, "it was the consultative process that inspired and stimulated the direction of the document."

The final objectives for the National Strategy are outlined on page 46.

Brazil

Ecotourism began in Brazil as a small market niche driven by the demand for school field trips focusing on environmental studies. This changed, however, when international visitation began to rapidly increase – until 1994, Brazil received less than 2 million international visitors annually, but by 1998 this figure reached 5 million people annually and was increasing. To address the environmental threat of rapid tourism growth, the Brazilian government established the Interministerial Ecotourism Task Force in the early 1990s. This group produced *Guidelines for an Ecotourism National Policy*, which was officially endorsed and released by President Fernando Henrique Cardoso in March 1995.

The Ministry of the Environment took the lead in implementing the ecotourism policy guidelines. Nine Amazon states were used to test the guidelines due to the high biodiversity value and growing tourist demand to see the Amazon rain forest. Efforts to protect the rich biological heritage of the Brazilian Amazon, which is roughly 5 million square kilometers in size, have been hampered by its vast size and remoteness. Protected areas cover just 3.2% of the region, and the parks are in scattered, hard-to-reach locations, all understaffed and without management plans or infrastructure to allow visitation. At present the average stay of a tourist in Amazonian Brazil is just 3.5 days because of its remoteness, lack of infrastructure, and lack of qualified ecotourism businesses in the region capable of giving visitors a true sense of its wonders.

A technical cooperation program was developed for the Amazon region and signed in 2000 by President Cardoso. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) loaned US\$13.8 million to establish a framework to implement the necessary investments in the nine Brazilian Amazonian states to responsibly prepare

Starting Points for Government Ecotourism Programs

- Establish an Inter-Ministerial Working Group that combines expertise of Ministries of Tourism, Environment and the agency or agencies charged with rural development, natural resources or park authority.
- Empower and fund a secretariat of experts that work in the fields of natural resource management, community development and tourism.
- Develop a participatory planning program that involves stakeholders from throughout the country or region, including rural and indigenous communities.
- Establish objectives for a program based on stakeholder input, such as increased rural economic development, increased budgets for management of protected areas, and better management of visitors in fragile areas.
- Review transportation corridors, trail systems, small-scale non-commercial river transportation systems, small aircraft access and other infrastructure necessary to develop ecotourism. Develop a transportation plan that facilitates good ecotourism itineraries; stresses low environmental impact, low energy use, visitor safety and scenic qualities; and provides quality visitor information.
- Develop both policies to meet objectives and budgetary mechanisms to fund them. Seek legislative approvals where necessary.
- Develop a visitor information program and niche marketing plan.
- Develop a long-term community training program to develop community participation in ecotourism development.
- Establish biological and social carrying capacity benchmarks through research that establishes long-term monitoring of tourism impacts.
- Develop finance mechanisms for the development of small ecolodges, which provide incentives to conserve land and train local people.
- Develop an information base and best practice information through university research programs on issues of ethical delivery of ecotourism products, certification and visitor management plans.
- Develop land-use planning capacity in local municipalities through exposure to the benefits of zoning and regulatory techniques. Limit dense development in buffer zones of protected lands and other important ecotourism attractions.

themselves to manage selected ecotourism areas. This loan package, called Proecotur, is a pre-investment for a major effort to develop the country's Amazon region for ecotourism. The pre-investment stage will proceed by having all nine Amazonian states develop ecotourism strategies, including the following measures:

1. Strengthen the legal framework of these regions to regulate tourist activities.
2. Prepare a detailed market study.
3. Develop 19 management plans for existing and newly established protected areas.
4. Make key pilot investments in ecotourism products and sites.

5. Prepare 19 pre-feasibility and feasibility studies for infrastructure projects.
6. Implement training and capacity-building programs throughout the region.
7. Create a website to inform the public on the project's progress.

Government Planning Guidelines

Because ecotourism is a growing market, governments around the world are expressing increasing interest in attracting it as part of their tourism development program. While no guidelines for government planning of ecotourism exist, the above box provides a set of starting points.

Development Agencies

Multilateral development agencies, such as World Bank, European Commission and InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB), as well as bilateral agencies including the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), German Ministry for Economic Development (GTZ), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), have become increasingly involved in funding ecotourism projects with loans and grants. Most of these organizations have strict guidelines that target the alleviation of poverty and, in the past, this has kept development agencies and banks out of tourism development work. Since the early 1990s, an ever-increasing number of development agency projects have been addressing environmental deterioration and the loss of biological diversity. Small portions of these projects have allocated funding to alternative sustainable development initiatives, such as ecotourism.

At present, development agencies fund ecotourism development in the following ways:

1. Through programs that offer conciliatory loan rates to "green" businesses in developing countries.
2. Through programs that offer loans to developing nations for the development of tourism as an important source of foreign exchange, with the understanding that tourism must be developed according to strict environmental and social guidelines.
3. Through loans, such as Proecotur in Brazil, that seek to use sustainable development of an under-developed region to contribute to the protection of biological diversity of critical ecosystems, such as the Brazilian Amazon.

4. Through grant programs that assist the development of micro-enterprises.
5. Through grant programs that assist the conservation of biological diversity and protected area management.

For the most part, ecotourism is not identified as a funding priority by development agencies, and it is difficult to find it when searching their funding records because it falls under larger categories of development assistance. Because it is such a new category of assistance, few development agencies have specified policies for ecotourism to date.

GTZ's manual *Tourism in Technical Cooperation* (Steck et al 1999) provides policy approaches

Procedures Necessary in First Stage of Ecotourism Technical Assistance

- Examine national tourism strategies.
- Examine laws and regulations in force, e.g. regulations on land ownership, land utilization rights, conditions and controls for authorizing tourism facilities and infrastructural measures, regulation of investment incentives, etc.
- Introduce the collection of statistical data to gauge the development of ecotourism.
- Improve cross-sector coordination, especially between institutions of tourism and environment and nature conservation agencies.
- Create new or adapt existing national image and marketing programs as a by-product of the strategic goals of the sustainable development of ecotourism.
- Create/consolidate the legal framework for local authorities or NGOs to actively participate in cooperative protected area management as well as generate and manage their own revenues from tourism.
- Create inter-regional and inter-communal benefit and financial adjustment mechanisms to avoid or reduce disparities brought about by tourism development.

Steck et al, *Tourism in Technical Cooperation*, 1999

for technical assistance in ecotourism. Other agencies seeking to develop loan and grant programs can use this model to produce good projects with conservation outcomes and measurable benefits to local communities. One key set of recommendations is supplied here.

European and American researchers followed up on the work done by GTZ by holding an *Ecotourism Development Policy Forum* at IDB in Washington, D.C., in September 1999, co-sponsored by The International Ecotourism Society, Conservation International, World Resources Institute and Environmental Enterprises Assistance Fund. Meeting participants wanted to ensure a productive funding environment for ecotourism, to structure successful ecotourism finance packages, to set criteria for funding projects, and to energize cooperation between equity investors, donors and green loan funds. Results from this meeting are in draft form (*see next column*).

European researchers (*SECA 2000*) involved in the 1999 IDB meeting subsequently undertook research for France's Global Environmental Facility on ecotourism development policy. They found that ecotourism is of increasing interest to European development agencies, but that assistance is usually part of larger projects. DFID's Tourism Challenge Fund, which was established to provide small focused grants to projects where the private sector is working with communities, is the one assistance program in Europe that specifically targets ecotourism as a fundable item. Researchers found that most agencies support projects that seek to link biodiversity conservation with poverty reduction within local communities, local culture preservation, sensitive promotion to visitors, and biodiversity improvements. Researchers also

found that strict criteria and evaluation procedures are rare and that only informal principals and approaches for funding have been identified.

Draft results from the 1999 IDB meeting prepared by The International Ecotourism Society and Conservation International found the following:

1. Critical gaps exist in knowledge and information regarding ecotourism.
2. No brokering entity is currently available that can bring effective ecotourism projects to the point where loan funds are effective.
3. Government tourism agencies lack knowledge on how to develop appropriate packages for donor agencies.
4. Ecotourism projects in the donor community lack coordination and have high overlap.
5. Donor packages intended to conserve biological diversity often have failed to properly account for tourism market realities.

Draft recommendations from the 1999 Ecotourism Development Policy Forum follow:

1. Establish an ecotourism consultative group that joins representatives of NGOs, multilaterals and bilaterals with expert country representatives.
2. Create a grant-funded "deal-making" entity that could incubate good ecotourism business projects and broker them.
3. Test an innovative combination of loan and grant funds to ensure that biodiversity and social impact studies are undertaken and that long-term monitoring and evaluation take place.

In summary, it is clear that new innovative policies for ecotourism are needed to ensure that technical assistance meets the demand for serious long-term projects that are sustainable and fully prepared

to compete in the market. The 1999 IDB meeting also indicated that traditional finance mechanisms demand rates of return that are well above what standard ecotourism projects can offer, and that grant mechanisms should fully fund the complex systems and programs required to make ecotourism sustainable.

Developing the Capacity for Successful Ecotourism

Research Community

Research is crucial to minimize the impacts of ecotourism in natural areas and to build technical capabilities that manage and deliver quality ecotourism. Universities play a critical role in ecotourism development by offering technical support in the form of both academic research and documentation of best practice case studies.

The Australian government identified a range of areas where ecotourism research was needed and worked with the university community to develop a better base of information. This was put into practice via the National Ecotourism Program (NEP), which made competitive grants available:

Australian National Ecotourism Program Grant Guidelines

- **Infrastructure development:** Projects that utilize innovative designs and technologies, and environmental protection approaches such as boardwalks and wildlife viewing platforms.
- **Baseline studies and monitoring:** Projects that assess the impact of tourist infrastructure on environmental processes.
- **Regional ecotourism planning:** Projects that encourage local participation in planning and decision-making.

Grant, Allcock, 1998.

NEP identified four central research themes that were pivotal to the development of Australia's ecotourism industry:

Australian National Ecotourism Program Research

- **Energy and Waste Minimization Study:** A comprehensive investigation of how the private sector could implement sustainable energy practices and benefit by minimizing their waste stream.
- **Ecotourism Education Consultancy:** A study of current and future education and training needs of the ecotourism industry, and the creation of a directory of training courses, education resource materials and useful contacts.
- **Business Development Consultancy:** An investigation of the networks and alliances needed for cooperative marketing, purchasing and skill sharing.
- **Market Research Consultancy:** A market profile of ecotourists, their expectations and interests.

Grant, Allcock, 1998.

The research program's results provided guidance on many issues for ecotourism developers. For example, the Australian federal government in 1994 published *A Guide to Innovative Technology for Sustainable Tourism*, followed one year later by *Best Practice Ecotourism: A Guide to Energy and Waste Minimization*. Both publications, developed with NEP research grants, concluded that the greatest measurable negative impact of tourism stems from excessive use of natural resources and the production of waste. The researchers recommended that the ecotourism industry, like the rest of the tourism industry, address these issues. To provide guidance to the fledgling ecotourism

industry, these studies provided concrete examples of how new technologies and practices could be adopted to achieve more ecologically and socially sustainable outcomes. The grants established collaborative networks that continue to exist today such as the Ecotourism Association of Australia.

To address the long-term research goals of the tourism industry, the Cooperative Research Center for Sustainable Tourism was founded in 1997 in Australia with A\$14.72 million of government funds. The CRC researches numerous aspects of sustainable tourism,

Limits of Acceptable Change – A Research Case Study from the United States

Since the 1970s, the overwhelming growth of recreation in U.S. protected areas was leading to damage of fragile natural resources. To cope with the problem, the U.S. federal government sponsored research using the state university cooperative research program, which had already worked with federal agency resource managers for decades on land management and wildlife conservation issues.

The concept of carrying capacity emerged from the biological sciences to take on a new meaning in the field of tourism. Today the tourist carrying capacity is defined as the level of human activity an area can accommodate without adverse effects on the natural environment, resident community or on the quality of visitor experience. During the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. Forest Service developed a model to address carrying capacity for tourism management in protected areas and in 1985 released *The Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) System for Wilderness Planning* (Stankey et al, 1985).

The principles behind LAC had been developed by many researchers over the years, but this publication summed up much of the relevant work, and gave it a new focus by establishing measurable impact benchmarks that are identified and reviewed periodically in a public consultation process. New systems have been formulated over the years, but LAC is still the landmark system by which all others are measured. Today the money spent by the American government some decades ago helps protect U.S. public lands and many protected area systems throughout the world.

Guide Training Guidelines – A Research Case Study on Capacity Building

- Select an appropriate group of course participants to implement ecotourism s principles in the field.
- Teaching and learning should be collaborative and interesting. Short lectures and many small group activities are needed to improve understanding of concepts.
- Trainees should be encouraged to learn and perform at their own level; educators need to recognize different learning styles and teach appropriately.
- Programs should be cost effective to enable the best candidates to attend, not just the wealthiest.
- Training the trainer should be a priority in developing nations where outside expertise comes at considerable cost sacrifice; local training maximizes the benefits to the host economy.
- Training requests should come from the host country, not from foreign intermediaries.

Adapted from Weiler and Ham, *New Frontiers in Tourism Research*, 1999

including ecotourism, and is focused on practical solutions. It is facilitated through private partners and a variety of university and other research institutions.

Research also played a key role in developing visitor management systems for national parks in the United States. Efforts to develop better processes fell to universities in the U.S. that traditionally worked with land management agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Park Service. These systems have been extensively adapted by protected land managers and ecotourism projects around the world (*see Limits of Acceptable Change Case Study page 52*).

Another critical research area has been the development of techniques to improve field guides' capacity to properly convey information to ecotourists in a manner that is both accurate and engaging. Researchers Betty Weiler and Sam Ham, experts in field interpretation, have evaluated guide training strategies in many developing countries, with conclusions in the box on page 52.

Because ecotourism is still an emerging field, the research community provides an invaluable resource to governments that are developing policies. Using funds for research can help address difficult management issues and avoid many potential mistakes. Researchers can quickly assess management approaches for a particular site by gathering materials on what has been tested and implemented successfully throughout the world. Before establishing policies of any kind, it is of paramount importance that research be used as the basis for real solutions.



Interpretive guide, Australia

Non-Governmental Organizations

Non-governmental organizations are critical players in developing ecotourism's capacity worldwide. Some of the projects undertaken by NGOs include:

1. Training and capacity building initiatives, particularly for communities, that stress guiding skills, language and small enterprise development.
2. Establishing standards and guiding the development of ethical business standards through stakeholder meetings and forums.
3. Management of ecotourism certification programs.
4. Training young entrepreneurs worldwide on principles involved in managing responsible businesses.
5. Working with governments and international agencies to develop sustainable ecotourism policies.
6. Working with protected area agencies to establish visitor management capacity.

7. Representing underrepresented communities, such as indigenous people who at times lack political and social rights, in policy dialogues.

Non-governmental organizations are able to assess how to improve the benefits from ecotourism and establish their objectives based on who needs assistance. International and local NGOs frequently

partner to design and develop projects that will enhance local capacity for higher levels of sustainability (*see below*). With the help of foundations and development agency funding, NGOs have significant influence on ecotourism development policies and programs, and also are important watchdogs for inappropriate policies.

Ecotourism Training Program – An NGO Case Study

RARE Center for Tropical Conservation developed its guide training program in 1994 to develop basic skills for guiding and operating tours in Costa Rica. RARE's goal was to offer residents an economically viable alternative to unsustainable livelihoods via the growing industry of ecotourism. The guide training courses have since been extended to Mexico and Honduras, and courses are being planned for South Africa.

The Nature Guide Training Program was developed collaboratively between protected area managers, local tour operators and Worldteach (a Harvard University-based volunteer organization). Students live and study in an English-only environment for three months and receive more than 1,000 hours of practical experience (equivalent to more than a year at a U.S. university). The program is based on experiential learning; students design and lead tours as well as examine the inter-related components of tourism, from signage to product marketing.

To date, RARE's Nature Guide Training Program has conducted 12 workshops and graduated 180 participants. On average, graduates earn 92% more than before the course, adding additional revenue of more than \$1 million locally. From the Baja California Sur program, 65% of participants work as nature guides, while another 18% work or study in conservation or ecotourism-related activities. In Mexico, 76% of students are guiding while more than a dozen have launched ecotourism businesses in their communities. These graduates also run community programs that have educated more than 500 local adults and children.

Conclusion

Ecotourism has proven itself to be an important tool for conservation, and in certain cases it has improved the quality of life of local people, who continue to demand it as a sustainable development option. But its record has been far from uniform throughout the world. Evaluating ecotourism as a global sustainable development tool is a difficult task. It has been frequently mislabeled and implemented in ways that do not meet the standards articulated in this document. Each region of the world and their local communities will have to decide for themselves what is appropriate.

In order to become a successful sustainable development tool worldwide, ecotourism requires a thorough investigation into the planning of ecotourism destinations and their long-term management – and adequate government funds must be made available for this. Budgets need to properly acknowledge the important role of conserving areas, both cultural and environmental, for ecotourism development. Specialized fees and taxes need to be channeled into resource protection and visitor management. Clearly no destination will prosper in the long-term – particularly an eco-destination – if it is not properly managed to prevent overcrowding, environmental impacts and the loss of its biological and cultural integrity.

It is time to initiate better policies that reinvest the revenues generated by tourism into proper tourism planning and management. Tourism ministries need to take a place at the national economic planning table with other ministries. Tourism policies must stress a quality visitor experience and site integrity, not just marketing and high visitor numbers. New economic indicators are needed to determine what kind of tourism development is most economically and socially beneficial to the nation, and environmental policies must be put in place, particularly land-use planning. Tourism management is developing into a refined science and a field of excellence. The use of research and technological tools, such as Geographic Information Systems and satellite imagery, will make it easier to create appropriate tourist zones and regulations.

On the other hand, community involvement and benefits must become a requirement from the inception of all ecotourism projects. While some outstanding small-scale private sector projects have made communities their full partners, and some good examples of community-based ecotourism exist, each new project struggles to develop itself appropriately, rarely benefiting from the experience of others. While every success story is different, governments and NGOs must recognize that community ecotourism



Ecotourism project partners, Mexico

development must have long-term support; short-term projects simply will not suffice. Mechanisms that ensure a degree of local control and equitable community-wide benefit distribution have to be available and implemented.

Achieving genuine ecotourism may be viewed either as a difficult technical challenge or an impossible task. Some observe that those who hold the reins of power and money will always prevail, and that ecotourism will never genuinely offer benefits to local people. While this may be true in many circumstances, this same viewpoint has validity no matter what type of development is being discussed. Similar to other types of development, ecotourism offers opportunities, but it can never provide an entire solution. The solution must come from a will of all involved to achieve sustainable results.

Ecotourism Hosts and Guests

As more come to know and love our planet, conservation of its natural resources will become

a passion for an ever-growing percentage of the world's population. Ecotourism can and will be a tremendous contributor to the education of international travelers, as well as to the growing global middle class who are traveling in their own countries, and local people who are hosting ecotourists. The opportunity for a genuine exchange of environmental values between travelers and their hosts and the rediscovery of the importance of traditions that value a destination's land and spirit cannot be undervalued.

Not all will choose to take part in this interchange between peoples. And communities must have the power to choose their own fate. However, many people desire to communicate between cultures, host guests from outside their home region, and learn from one another.

A huge majority of the planet's population now resides in urban areas. If the future of the planet depends on humankind's commitment to conserve its environment, then surely ecotourism has a role to play. If the underlying principles of ecotourism are increasingly embraced, more people will visit natural areas with an understanding of what they are seeing and experiencing. Ecotourism is a sustainable development tool that regularly creates contact between people on opposite sides of the earth, as hosts and guests. If an ecotourism experience can truly reach the hearts and minds of both – convincing them that efforts to help conserve the environment can make a difference – the chances of achieving conservation and sustainable development into the next millennium are a little bit greater.

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The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) is an international nonprofit membership organization fully dedicated to finding the resources and building the expertise to make tourism a viable tool for conservation and sustainable development. With 1,600 members in 110 countries, TIES' global network envelops all fields of ecotourism. The Society serves tour operators, conservation professionals, park managers, government officials, lodge owners, guides, researchers, consultants, and other professionals striving to implement ecotourism projects worldwide. TIES is documenting the best techniques for implementing ecotourism principles by collaborating with a growing, global network of professionals actively working in the field.

TIES has set the following long-term objectives:

- ▶ Establish education and training programs
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- ▶ Research and develop models in the field of ecotourism

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