

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.

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