Sustainability *Watch*

Ecotourism   2009

A Look at the Fastest Growing Segment of the Travel and Tourism Industry

Watch List

- In early 2009, Travelocity joined Orbitz and Expedia in mainstreaming "green" travel by launching their "Green Directory."

- In October 2008 at the World Conservation Congress, Ted Turner announced the launch of the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC), baseline criteria for sustainable tourism. A growing number of travel and tourism businesses are adopting the GSTC as a guideline.

Related Sustainability Watch Reports

- Greenwashing
- Green Jobs
- Sustainability in Emerging Economies

Key Takeaways

- The definition of ecotourism varies depending on who is using it. Generally, ecotourism involves travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and benefits and empowers local communities.

- Globally, ecotourism generates $77 billion in revenue and makes up 5-7% of the overall travel and tourism market. It is one of the fastest growing sectors of the industry.

- Volunteer ecotourism is a growing segment of the ecotourism market. It is a combination of volunteerism and tourism.

- Among the benefits of ecotourism are the conservation and preservation of natural areas and the economic boost to local communities.

- In recent years, ecotourism has come under criticism, with some calling it "ego-tourism" or "greenwashing."

- Some critics view ecotourism as a paradox – the more successful an ecotourism destination becomes, the more difficult it is to avoid having an environmental and/or cultural impact.

- In addition to environmental impacts, ecotourism can also have unintended negative economic and cultural impacts on the local communities.

- More than 100 voluntary certification programs exist for sustainable tourism and ecotourism, ranging from self-monitoring programs to ISO14000 certification, the "green" standard for the hotel industry.

Executive Summary

Ecotourism is not easily defined. Some industry experts view it as a continuum, with mass tourism at one end of the spectrum and volunteer, community-based ecotourism at the other end. However, most industry experts agree that ecotourism involves travel to natural areas in an effort to conserve the environment and benefit local communities. Globally, ecotourism generates $77 billion in revenue and makes up 5-7% of the overall travel and tourism market. It is one of the fastest growing sectors in the travel industry, with a growth rate of 10-30%. Quickly growing segments of ecotourism include sustainable (or green) tourism and volunteer ecotourism. Sustainable tourism involves selecting environmentally-friendly tour operators and facilities while volunteer ecotourism (or "voluntourism") involves travelers volunteering at their destination.

In its intent to benefit the environment, ecotourism employs several methods: Park fees are used to fund conservation efforts and educational programming increases tourists' knowledge of conservation programs, thus improving behavior patterns and enhancing philanthropic support. Additionally, ecotourism benefits local communities, often in developing nations, by providing jobs, infrastructure and tourist dollars. There are, however, unintended negative impacts of ecotourism. One of the greatest negative environmental impacts is the large carbon footprint of air travel, particularly to remote ecotourism destinations. Tourism and environmentalism are also an uncomfortable pair – the more popular an ecotourism destination becomes, the more difficult it is to limit the cultural and environmental impacts to the community. The local community also tends to face the disadvantages of ecotourism – crowding, restricted access to pasture lands or water and increased prices of goods – without enjoying its benefits. Local politics and corruption often mean that only the elite or those in government positions experience significant economic benefits from ecotourism.

In order to address these concerns, more than 100 voluntary certification programs have emerged for sustainable tourism and ecotourism. These programs range from regional to international, mainstream to grassroots, and self-monitoring to process-based certification. A coalition of environment nonprofits, including the Rainforest Alliance, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), the United National World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) and the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST), are working together to develop and implement a framework for sustainable tourism.

Ecotourists in Norway Getty 2008

Business Options & Best Practices

Ecotourism Background

Defining ecotourism is not an easy task. Are hotels that reduce water use by washing towels only by request considered an example of ecotourism, or are they, as some critics have argued, merely "ecotourism lite"? Is volunteer ecotourism, where participants spend their vacations working on conservation efforts, the only true form of ecotourism? Many in the industry view ecotourism as a kind of continuum, with mass tourism at one end of the spectrum and community and volunteer-based ecotourism at the other end.

Mexican architect and environmental activist, Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, is credited with coining the term "ecotourism" in the early 1980s. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural area that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." There are many other organizations and individuals who have come up with additional definitions. What is important to note is that all of them point out three important goals or qualities of ecotourism:

1. Travel to natural areas;
2. Conserve the environment;
3. Empower and benefit local communities.

When businesses seize on one or another of these goals and claim "ecotourism" without truly embracing all three, critics have declared it "greenwashing." Other critics go as far as to call all ecotourism, "egotourism" – less about saving the environment than about the social status associated with visiting unspoiled nature.

The travel and tourism industry makes up 230 million jobs worldwide; by 2010, this figure is estimated to grow to 250 million, or 1 in every 11 jobs. Tourism is the principal source of income for 83% of developing countries. Globally, ecotourism generates $77 billion in revenue and makes up 5-7% of the overall travel and tourism market. It is one of the fastest growing sectors in the travel industry, with a growth rate of 10-30%. According to information published by the Nature Conservancy, the regions most visited by US ecotourists are: Central America (38%), South America (25%), North America (18%), Mexico and the Caribbean (5%).

The United Nations declared 2002 the International Year of Ecotourism. Later that year, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), working with the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), Conservation International (CI) and Ecological Tourism Europe (ETE), helped organize

Who is an Ecotourist?	
The International Ecotourism Society constructed the following ecotourist market profile based on a 1998 survey of North American travelers	
Age	Ranged from 35-54 years old, although age varied with activity and other factors such as cost.
Gender	50% were female and 50% were male, although differences by activity were found.
Education	82% were college graduates; however, a shift in interest was found to those with less education, indicating expansion of ecotourism into mainstream markets.
Household Composition	No major differences were found between general tourists and experienced ecotourists (those who have been on one or more trips).
Party Composition	A majority (60%) of experienced ecotourists preferred to travel as a couple; only 15% preferred to travel with their families; and 13% preferred to travel alone.

Who is an Ecotourist? (cont.)	
Trip Duration	The largest group of experienced ecotourists (50%) preferred trips lasting 8-14 days.
Expenditure	Experienced ecotourists were willing to spend more than general tourists; the largest group was willing to spend $1,001-$1,500 per trip.
Important Elements of the Trip	Experienced ecotourists' top three responses were: (1) Wilderness setting; (2) wildlife viewing; and (3) hiking and trekking.

Drumm, A. & Moore, A. (2005). Ecotourism Development: A Manual for Conservation Planners and Manager. The Nature Conservancy. Retrieved June 30, 2009, from http://conserveonline.org/workspaces/

the World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec City, Canada. While interest in ecotourism has continued to grow after the summit, recent natural disasters, the global economic downturn and health scares have had a negative effect on the tourism industry in general.

Volunteer Ecotourism

A growing segment of the ecotourism market is volunteer ecotourism, a combination of volunteerism and tourism. As criticisms of ecotourism have developed, environmental activists have been turning to volunteer ecotourism as an alternative. Volunteer ecotourists consider it a decommodified, ideal form of ecotourism – a way for a tourist to make a difference. The timeframe for such trips can range from a week to many months. The number of volunteer ecotourists rose by almost 500% from 2003 to 2007. The top ten countries for volunteer ecotourism are: India, Costa Rica, Peru, Ecuador, Kenya, Thailand, Ghana, South Africa, Nepal and Brazil. In one study, the participants were reluctant to identify themselves as tourists, or even ecotourists. They saw themselves more as volunteers and made a conscious effort to distance what they were doing from more traditional ecotourism.

Benefits & Disadvantages of Ecotourism

Benefits

Environmental

One of the main goals of ecotourism is its benefit to the environment. At many destinations, park fees are directed towards conservation and park preservation efforts. The economic benefits of ecotourism provide strong anti-poaching incentive for local communities, which increase wildlife diversity. Ecotourism also provides environmental education, awareness and funding for conservation efforts. According to a study done in the Galapagos Islands, educational information provided through ecotourism increased knowledge of the protected area, changed behavior patterns of tourists and increased philanthropic support of conservation.

Local Communities

Ecotourism provides visitors with exposure to local culture and lifestyles. Ecotourism dollars also provide economic benefits for local people in the form of park fees that go to build schools and infrastructure, additional jobs within the community and the sale of local crafts and products.

Disadvantages

Environmental

One of the greatest environmental impacts of ecotourism is the carbon footprint created by flights to far-away places. Ecotourist destinations tend to be remote, and although travelers can buy carbon offsets for plane travel, there is still an impact on the environment. Another potential environmental impact is the paradox of ecotourism: The more successful an ecotourism destination becomes, the more difficult it is to avoid having an environmental and/or cultural impact. Tourism and environmental-

ism are, in some respects, at odds with each other. The more people visit a natural location, the greater the possibility for degradation of local ecosystems and a decrease in biodiversity. Ecotourism in Kenya led to land-use change when pastoral lands were divided up and converted to farming. This change led to decreases in wildlife populations, with wildebeest populations decreasing by 80% and the overall game population in and around the reserve declining by 60%. Tourism to the area has also changed the way people interact with the wildlife, with vehicles often crowding and harassing the animals. There is also a tendency of ecotourism destinations to focus on "flagship" species, such as dolphins and whales and large carnivores, rather than the entire ecosystem.

Economic

As developing countries become more dependent on ecotourism for revenue, it is important to remember that it is not always a stable source of income. Tourism can be affected by the global economy, the local political situation and natural disasters. Following the events of September 11, 2001 and the current economic crisis, tourist bookings have faced substantial decline. A significant decline in tourism income could have a significant impact on the economy of a developing country. Also problematic is economic leakage, which occurs when international or non-local businesses fill the gap community businesses are not able to provide. Economic leakage not only funnels profits away from the local community; local, rural residents are often forced to bear the cost of conservation (restricted access to water, pasture lands, increase in population, etc), while the benefits often go to others outside this group. Even when ecotourism is run by local communities, rather than international tour operators, the financial benefits are often limited to the elite or those in high government positions. In Kenya, which began one of the first community-run ecotourism programs including local community participation and revenue-sharing

of park fees, the results were mixed. A study conducted in Nepal, concluded that only 6% of families living near the national park received income from ecotourism. Finally, the influx of tourists to a location can result in increased prices for local goods; a phenomenon that can seriously impact the ability of residents to buy and use the goods themselves.

Cultural

As a result of ecotourism, local communities sometimes face crowding from visitors, as well as other indigenous people who move closer to the area to take advantage of the economic benefits such tourism has to offer. These communities can also face excessive development in the form of hotels, restaurants and stores. Sometimes, poorly planned projects and infrastructure are put into place quickly to meet tourism needs. Additionally, cultural change resulting from increased contact with the outside world is of concern.

"Greenwashing"

False or inflated ecotourism claims could have the potential to undercut the entire industry. Businesses that proclaim themselves a part of "ecotourism" without making any efforts to change their practices open themselves up to claims of "greenwashing."

Characteristics of Responsible Ecotourism

• Visitor management that does not exceed the carrying capacity of the site.

• Minimum environmental impact to the site.

• Direct financial benefit for conservation.

• A local community invested with control.

• An increase in visitor length of stay.

• Small-scale development.

• Use of sustainable resources for energy, such as solar panels.

• Local economic diversification, so that the area is not dependent on tourism for revenue.

- Coordination with government institutions and local NGOs.

- A comprehensive approach to flora and fauna education, rather than a focus on one or two "flagship" species.

Established Standards

More than 100 voluntary certification programs exist for sustainable tourism and ecotourism. The programs vary greatly. At one end of the spectrum are programs that involve nothing beyond the payment of a fee, and which might be more accurately described as advertising. In the middle are performance-based certification programs, where a business can measure itself against a series of benchmarks. These programs may or may not involve site visits and interviews. At the other end of the spectrum are process-based certification programs such as ISO14000, the green standard for the hotel industry. These programs are significantly more expensive and intensive.

In 2000, the Mohonk Agreement was adopted by 45 experts from 20 countries to provide a social/cultural, ecological and economic framework for tourism certification programs. A coalition of NGOs including the Rainforest Alliance, UNEP, UNWTO, TIES and CREST formed two organizations to develop and implement a framework for sustainable tourism. The Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) was created to develop and implement a set of universal minimum standards for certification programs. The Partnership for Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) was created to develop baseline criteria for sustainable tourism. The GSTC were announced in October 2008 at the World Conservation Congress. The Criteria outline sustainability goals for tourism under four main headings:

- Demonstrate effective sustainable management;

- Maximize social and economic benefits to the local community and minimize negative impacts;

- Maximize benefits to cultural heritage and minimize negative impacts;

- Maximize benefits to the environment and minimize negative impacts by conserving resources, reducing pollution, and conserving biodiversity, ecosystems and landscapes.

A number of travel and tourism organizations, including the "green" guides of both Travelocity and Expedia, have adopted these criteria.

The three tables below outline the current certification marketplace.

Mainstream Travel Websites' Green Guides/Directories

Website	"Green" Guide	Website Link	Description
Expedia	A Traveler's Guide to Going Green	expedia.com/daily/sustainable_travel/going_green/default.asp	Guide to green hotels, carbon offsets, renting hybrid cars and volunteer vacations
Travelocity	The Green Directory	leisure.travelocity.com/Promotions/0,,TRAVELOCITY%7C5019%7Cmkt_main,00.html	Listing of green hotels and destinations, carbon offsets and "voluntourism" opportunities
Orbitz	Eco-Tourism Guide	eco.orbitz.com	Listing of green hotels, hybrid car rentals, carbon offsets and volunteer opportunities at national parks

International Certification Organizations/Indexes

Organization	Website Link	Description	Rating System
Green Globe	ec3global. com/products-programs/ green-globe/	Travel and tourism benchmarking and certification	Green Globe Benchmarked (Bronze) and Certified (Silver, Gold and Platinum)
International Ecotourism Club	Ecoclub.com	Provides ecolodge ratings and listings of lodges and tour operators	1-5 star rating
Rainforest Alliance's Eco-Index Sustainable Tourism	eco-indextourism. org	Provides a searchable database of accommodations and facilities using other certification programs, such as CST and ISO14000	Rainforest Alliance Eco-Index
Sustainable Tourism International	Sustainabletravelinternational.org	Global sustainable tourism eco-certification program, as well as Luxury Eco Certification Standard (LECS) for luxury hotels	Sustainable Tourism Eco-Certification Program™ (STEP) logo
Voluntary Initiatives for Sustainability in Tourism (VISIT)	visit21.net	A network of European ecolabels, including the Green Key and the Green Tourism Business Scheme	Lists member logos

Regional Certification Programs

Organization	Region	Website Link	Description	Logo
Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST)	Costa Rica	turismo-sostenible. co.cr	Tourism, sustainable tourism and ecotourism certification for accommodations, tour operators, and eventually restaurants and transportation	Plaque with one to five leaves
Ecotourism Kenya's Eco-rating Scheme	Kenya	Ecotourismkenya. org	Verification system for hotels, lodges, camps and other accommodations	3 Eco-rated logos: Gold, Silver and Bronze
Green Deal	Guatemala	greendeal.org	Travel and tourism certification	"Green Deal" logo
Green Keys	13 countries, mostly in Europe, including Denmark and France	thegreenkey.org	International ecolabel for hotels, hostels, campsites and other facilities	"The Green Key" logo
Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP)	Australia	ecotourism.org.au	Certification for tours, attractions, cruises and accommodations.	3 levels of ECO Certification: Nature Tourism, Ecotourism and Advanced Ecotourism
PAN Parks	Europe	panparks.org	Founded by the World Wildlife Foundation, a listing of national parks that meet third-party certification standards	"PAN Parks" logo

Definitions

- Community-based Ecotourism: Ecotourism that is controlled by and provides benefits to local communities. It can be considered a synonym of "ecotourism," but one that stresses the involvement of local communities.

- Ecotourism: Travel to natural areas with a focus on conserving the environment, and empowering and benefiting local people.

- Mass Tourism: Travel that is accessible to the largest segment of the population, both financially and geographically.

- Nature Tourism: Travel to natural areas, which may not involve interaction with local cultures or conservation. 20-25% of leisure travel is nature-based.

- Sustainable Nature Tourism: Travel to natural areas, with a focus on sustainable activities, but which may involve heavily traveled areas and may not involve interaction with local people.

- Sustainable (or Green) Tourism: Travel involving operators and facilities that make sustainable or green choices, not necessarily to natural areas.

- Volunteer-based Ecotourism: Ecotourism participants volunteer their time and efforts to a local conservation project. These programs usually involve significant interaction with the local community.

Related Entities

NGOs

Center for Responsible Travel (CREST)
Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria Partnership
The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)
The Nature Conservancy
The Rainforest Alliance
Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC)
United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP)

The World Tourism Organization
Youth Challenge International

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