

**ECOTOURISM AND CONSERVATION  
IN THE AMERICAS**

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# ECOTOURISM AND CONSERVATION IN THE AMERICAS

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# Preface

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Among today's contending conservation and development strategies, ecotourism is one of the most popular. It seeks to curb the often deleterious effects of large-scale, conventional tourism on local communities and ecosystems. But more than that, it holds the promise of overcoming a number of today's biggest environmental and social challenges. Ideally, ecotourism can help conserve biological and cultural diversity, alleviate rural poverty, strengthen ties between parks and neighbouring peoples, increase public awareness of environmental concerns, and manifest a new 'triple bottom line' for business that includes profit, social benefits and environmental conservation.

For these reasons, interest in ecotourism has never been greater. According to the World Tourism Organization, ecotourism is now the fastest growing segment of an already mammoth tourism industry. By some estimates, ecotourism generates as much as US\$300 billion in revenues annually. International development and lending agencies channel millions of dollars into projects that include ecotourism. Major conservation organizations sponsor ecotourism projects in biodiversity 'hotspots' around the world. Most countries with parks and protected areas now have some kind of marketing strategy to attract ecotourists. Increasing numbers of universities in the USA and abroad now offer courses and degree programmes in ecotourism. The United Nations declared 2002 the 'International Year of Ecotourism' and marked it as a time to take collective stock of the lessons learned. At the Ecotourism World Summit in Quebec, Canada, thousands of delegates from over a hundred nations gathered to assess the pros and cons of ecotourism for peoples and ecosystems around the world.

But does ecotourism actually measure up to the environmental, social and economic ideals it has promised? Has ecotourism sensitized tourists to tread more lightly on the destinations they visit? Has it created

economic incentives to conserve wildlife species and natural habitats? Has it augmented benefits to locals from established protected areas? What are the tangible impacts for people in surrounding human communities? Are there lessons for how to ensure net positive impacts in the future?

In preparing this volume, we gathered experts in the fields of conservation, ecotourism and community development to try to answer some of these questions. We first joined during the International Year of Ecotourism in a workshop entitled 'Ecotourism and Conservation in the Americas: Putting Good Intentions to Work', in the Department of Anthropological Sciences at Stanford University. Delegates came from the private tourism sector, community and non-profit organizations, research institutes and academia from seven countries. The 3-day workshop became the catalyst for this book. In the interim, we screened original contributions for current relevance to the field and worked with the authors to revise and update each of the chapters several times. We also selected a cross-cutting sample of topics and cases from the broad spectrum of geographic regions and ecosystems in the Americas.

We hope this book fulfils its mission, and offers professionals in conservation and ecotourism organizations, non-governmental organizations and government offices, particularly in the USA and Latin America, a worthy assessment of ecotourism's tangible impacts in the Americas. We also hope the volume will provide useful case studies, testimonies of 'ecotourism at work' in the field, and regional overviews for students and their professors in university classrooms. The time has come to take stock of what works and what does not in ecotourism, and ask why. This book is a step in that direction.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the many people and organizations who contributed to this book. At Stanford, these include the Department of Anthropological Sciences, the Continuing Studies Program, the Center for Latin American Studies, the Center for Social Innovation at the Graduate School of Business and the Stanford Alumni Association. In the later stages of the book, we appreciated the support of the Center on Ecotourism and Sustainable Development based at Stanford and in Washington, DC. Thanks also to several students for their help at various stages of the process, particularly Audrey Davenport, Fernando Galeana, Joanna Levitt, Biasha Mitchell, Christina Shaheen, Thomas Kohnstamm, Nico Slate, Carter Hunt and Fernanda Pegas. We also thank our colleagues: Charles Junkerman, David Brady, Terry Karl, Duncan Beardsley, Pamela Matson, Flora Lu, Alison Pearce, Vernita Ediger, Constanzo Ocampo-Raeder, Emma Stewart, Susan Charnley, Dominique Irvine, Suki Hoagland, Larry Goulder, Cynthia Lang, Nancy Lonhart, Tracy Pizzo, Jen Paris and Tracy Robinette. Several participants from the original workshop provided important insights and made our original workshop especially worthwhile. These include: Ron Mader, Robert Healy, Daniela Vizcaino, Stephen Edwards, Alberto Mesquita, Eduardo Nycander, Candido Pastor, Zenon Limaco, Miguel Pesha, Kurt Kutay, John Shores and Sharon Matola.

Every book has its challenges and vicissitudes – we particularly enjoyed the opportunity afforded here to work through them together.

Finally, we thank the editors at CAB International, especially Sarah Hulbert, Claire Parfitt and Lesley King, for their support and willingness to invest in this book as a valuable addition to their Ecotourism Series.

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Part I

# **Introduction**

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# 1

## The Bold Agenda of Ecotourism

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### Introduction

A century into the age of modern travel and tourism, few corners of the planet remain truly off the beaten path. Tourism is a mammoth industry that generates an estimated US\$300 billion in annual revenues and nearly 10% of all employment in the world (Honey and Rome, 2000). Under globalization, the numbers are expected only to rise, and by the year 2010, more than one billion tourists will be roaming the world (TIES, 2000; WTO, 2004). For environmentalists, development specialists and indigenous rights advocates, the predictions are both promising and worrisome.

A hundred years or more of tourism have revealed that the industry can, and often does, leave considerable 'baggage' for the people and natural environments of local destinations. Some of the problems introduced historically by tourists include crowding and disruption of local communities, commercial exploitation of cultural traditions, social conflict, entrenchment of ethnic stereotypes, disturbance to wildlife, degradation or outright conversion of habitats, increased economic dependency, the emergence of black markets, and increased illicit trade in everything from exotic pets to drugs and sex (Greenwood, 1989; Eadington and Smith, 1992; Giannecchini, 1993; Lanfant *et al.*, 1995; Butler and Hinch, 1996; Stonich, 1998; Burns, 1999; Desmond, 1999; Chambers, 2000). In short, so many experiences with tourism, both on and off the beaten path, have proved disruptive, damaging and, in a word, unsustainable.

### Ecotourism: A Better Path?

Today's approaches to tourism are aimed at eliminating the baggage and introducing an array of benefits to natural environments and local

peoples. These alternative tours, variously labelled 'sustainable', 'eco' and 'responsible', strive to make tourism profits work for local environments and communities rather than against them. Among these new approaches, ecotourism stands out for its promise both to advance conservation goals and improve the livelihoods of local peoples. Ecotourism is thus broadly defined as nature-based tourism with three special features: (i) it minimizes the negative environmental, economic and social impacts often associated with mass tourism; (ii) it delivers a net positive contribution to environmental conservation; and (iii) it improves the livelihoods of local people (Lindberg and Hawkins, 1993; Cater and Lowman, 1994; Barkin, 1996; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Honey, 1999; Wearing and Neil, 1999). In other words, it is tourism that attempts to minimize negative impacts and make instead serious positive contributions to a number of today's environmental and social challenges.

Economically, this form of tourism can be a real boon to people in host destinations. In addition to raising foreign exchange and investment on a national level, ecotourism offers the potential of new jobs for local labour and new markets for locally produced goods and services. The cash and employment benefits from ecotourism, however, may actually be modest compared with its non-economic benefits. The latter can include revalorization of cultural traditions and beliefs, improved community organization and leadership, increased self-esteem and pride in the community, new skills and languages, and contact with an expanded network of people and potential sources of support, including international tourists and tour companies, private foundations, universities and researchers, and non-governmental organizations (Stronza, 2001; Landell-Mills and Porras, 2002).

Community-based ecotourism has an advantage with regard to ecotourism's conservation and development goals. In community-based ecotourism, a local community or group of communities has substantial involvement in, and control over, ecotourism's development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain within the community (Denman, 2001). In a community-based approach, local voices, values and knowledge are proactively channelled into strategies for managing resources (Brosius *et al.*, 1998). Many proponents argue that such participation is an essential element of sustainability, giving rise to a sense of ownership and empowerment in the community (Schevyens, 1999; Alexander, 2000; Stronza, 2005). Conversely, other authors see unequal relations of power among locals and visitors in tourism destinations as a potential source of environmental problems (e.g. Stonich, 2000; Gossling, 2003). The debate is currently not *whether* local communities should be involved in the development of tourism to their areas, but *how* they should be involved.

Meanwhile, conservationists are hopeful that the array of social and economic benefits from ecotourism will generate incentives for local residents to protect the landscapes and resources tourists pay to see. In this light, ecotourism is sometimes viewed as the quintessential 'integrated

conservation and development project' (ICDP). It has the potential to make economic development work in the service of conservation in various ways. First, ecotourism can minimize or eliminate local economic dependence on activities that exploit natural resources directly and are therefore more damaging to biodiversity, such as commercial agriculture, hunting, logging, cattle ranching and gold mining (Langholz, 1999; Jones and Young, 2004). Second, ecotourism can generate visitor fees to help finance parks and protected areas (Groom *et al.*, 1991; Borges Hernández *et al.*, Chapter 12, this volume). This is especially noteworthy in places that are rich in biodiversity but poor in revenues. Ecotourism can also help build the managerial and organizational capacity of local communities to manage natural resources (Borman, 1999; Gordillo Jordan *et al.*, Chapter 3, this volume). By establishing ecotourism operations in their own territories, local peoples may become better prepared to defend resources and even resist outside interests, such as timber or mining companies (Rodríguez, Chapter 10, this volume).

Finally, in addition to bringing benefits to local communities and supporting conservation, ecotourism also has the potential to raise public environmental awareness. Many ecotours include interpretative activities that help visitors learn about conservation and ecology as they are exploring new landscapes and communities (Orams, 1997; Kimmell, 1999; Thaites *et al.*, 2002). Many also present information on cultural history and human–environment interactions of a region, encouraging visitors to consider not only the beauty of the destination but also the environmental challenges it is facing (Bidwell Pearce and Ocampo-Raeder, Chapter 7, this volume). This mix of leisure, learning and discovery may help build new popular bases of support and advocacy for conservation (Kohl, Chapter 8, this volume).

## Will It Really Take Us Where We Want To Go?

For its many promises, ecotourism has captured considerable attention. Most international financial institutions and development agencies have begun channelling significant amounts of economic and technical assistance to potential ecotourism destinations around the world (Epler Wood, Chapter 14, this volume). Much effort has been aimed at building local capacity for ecotourism so that communities can begin making tourism work for their own development goals. With similar optimism, a number of conservation organizations have begun sponsoring ecotourism projects in biodiversity 'hotspots' around the world (Christ *et al.*, 2004). Tropical countries have been particularly encouraged to invest in ecotourism as a possible solution to raising much-needed foreign exchange while also curbing environmental degradation. In fact, most countries with protected areas now have some form of national or regional marketing strategy to attract ecotourists (Ceballos-Lascurain, Chapter 13, this volume).

Ecotourism has also become a subject of significant study and policy debate (Hawkins and Lamoureux, 2001). In the international arena, for example, the United Nations declared 2002 the 'International Year of Ecotourism', marking it as a time to take collective stock of lessons learned. At that year's Ecotourism World Summit in Quebec, Canada, over a thousand delegates from 132 different countries, representing public, private and non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, national and international development agencies, as well as local and indigenous communities, gathered to discuss the pros and cons of ecotourism for peoples and ecosystems around the world. Now plans are taking shape for discussions of certification and accreditation on a global scale. Likewise, much attention is also being paid at national and regional levels. The scholarly literature is booming, a steady stream of workshops and training sessions is under way, and national policies on ecotourism are being written daily. A number of universities in the USA and abroad now offer courses and degree programmes in ecotourism.

Despite the optimism, there have been few careful appraisals of ecotourism. Few ecotourism projects to date have been audited, accredited or even evaluated in any systematic, objective way (Redford and Agrawal, 2006). Few studies of any depth and duration have been undertaken (Kiss, 2004), and untold numbers of operations and companies are calling themselves 'ecotourism' even when they may not conform to its definition (Honey, 2002; Kruger, 2005). Though ecotourism may well be making strides towards its environmental, social and economic promise, there remains high variance and plenty of room for scepticism.

Some critics argue that ecotourism is firmly 'locked into notions of green capitalism', so that concerns for profit will always outweigh those for conservation (Duffy, 2002, p. x). Others observe that, despite the rhetoric, ecotourism is hardly culturally sensitive. The problem, they say, is that ecotourism remains embedded in a neoliberal political and economic system, which precludes real respect for local customs, real opportunities for sustainable development or real empowerment for local communities (Mowforth and Munt, 1998; West and Carrier, 2004; Cater, 2006).

Meanwhile, other sceptics note that even the business side of ecotourism has come up short. By some accounts, ecotourism has created only a few jobs (Lindberg, 1994) and even then is increasing local dependency on a single income source, compelling local communities to shift away from more stable, diversified economies (Belsky, 1999). The industry is prone to boom-bust cycles and dramatic seasonal fluctuations, which can create great vulnerability, especially for subsistence producers (Epler Wood, 2002). Operations labelled 'ecotourism' have also been associated with increased social differentiation and a growing gap between the rich and the poor (Stonich, 2000). At the same time, leakage of profits is a persistent problem, and though tourists often pay heavily for their eco-expeditions, some tour operators have been reluctant to pass on the returns to local communities (Lindberg, 1991; Landell-Mills and Porras, 2002). In fact, analysis indicates