

EarthTrends: Featured Topic

Title: **Ecotourism and Conservation: Are They Compatible?**
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From African wildlife safaris, to diving tours in the Caribbean's emerald waters and coral reefs, to guided treks in Brazil's rainforests, nature-based tourism is booming. The value of international tourism exceeds US\$444 billion (World Bank 1999:368); nature-based tourism may comprise 40-60 percent of these expenditures and is increasing at 10-30 percent annually (Ecotourism Society 1998).

This burgeoning interest in traveling to wild or untrammled places may be good news, especially for developing countries. It offers a way to finance preservation of unique ecosystems with tourist and private-sector dollars and to provide economic opportunities for communities living near parks and protected areas. For Costa Rica, tourism generated \$654 million in 1996, and for Kenya \$502 million in 1997, much of it from nature and wildlife tourism (Honey 1999:133, 296). Tourism has been influential in helping to protect Rwanda's mountain gorillas and their habitat in Volcanoes National Park. Prior to the outbreak of civil war, tourist visits provided \$1.02 million in direct annual revenues, enabling the government to create antipoaching patrols and

employ local residents (Gossling 1999:310).

But the reality of nature-based travel is that it can both sustain ecosystems and degrade them. Much nature-based tourism falls short of the social responsibility ideals of "ecotourism," defined by the Ecotourism Society as "travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people" (Ecotourism Society 1998). Destinations and trips marketed as ecotourism opportunities may focus more on environmentally friendly lodge design than local community development, conservation, or tourist education. Even some ecosystems that are managed carefully with ecotourism principles are showing signs of degradation.

Ecotourism's Costs and Benefits

At first glance, Ecuador's Galápagos Islands epitomize the promise of ecotourism. Each year the archipelago draws more than 62,000 people who pay to dive, tour, and cruise amidst the 120 volcanic islands and the ecosystem's rare tropical birds, iguanas, penguins, and tortoises. Tourism raises as much as \$60

million annually, and provides income for an estimated 80 percent of the islands' residents. The tenfold increase in visitors since 1970 has expanded the resources for Ecuador's park service. Tour operators, naturalist guides, park officials, and scientists have worked together to create a model for low-impact, high-quality ecotourism (Honey 1999:101, 104, 107).

But closer examination reveals trade-offs: a flood of migrants seeking jobs in the islands' new tourist economy nearly tripled the area's permanent population over a 15-year period, turned the towns into sources of pollution, and added pressure to fishery resources (Honey 1999:115, 117). Only 15 percent of tourist income directly enters the Galápagos economy; most of the profits go to foreign-owned airlines and luxury tour boats or floating hotels—accommodations that may lessen tourists' environmental impacts, but provide little benefit to local residents (Honey 1999:108, citing Epler 1997). The hordes of tourists and immigrants have brought new animals and insect species that threaten the island's biodiversity (Honey 1999:54).

The Galápagos Islands well illustrate the complexities of ecotourism, including the potential to realize financial benefits nationally, even as problems become evident at the local or park scale. For example, to a government that is promoting ecotourism, more visitors means more income. But more visitors can translate into damage to fragile areas. Park officials often complain of habitat fragmentation, air pollution from vehicle traffic, stressed water supplies, litter, and other problems. In Kenya's Maasai Mara National reserve, illegal but virtually unregulated off-road driving by tour operators has scarred the landscape (Wells 1997:40).

These impacts can be minimized with investments in park management, protection, and planning. However, developing countries often lack the resources to monitor, evaluate, and prevent visitor impacts, and infrastructure and facilities may be rudimentary or nonexistent.

Low entrance fees are part of the problem; they often amount to just 0.01-1 percent of the total costs of a visitor's trip (Gossling 1999:309). Setting an appropriate park entry fee—one that covers the park's capital costs and operating costs, and ideally even the indirect costs of ecological damage—is one way that management agencies can capture a larger share of the economic value of tourism in parks and protected areas. Most parks have found that

visitors are willing to pay more if they know their money will be used to enhance their experience or conserve the special area. To ensure broad affordable access to parks, Peru, Ecuador, Kenya, Jordan, Costa Rica, and several other countries have raised fees for foreigners while maintaining lower fees for residents.

Unfortunately, tourism revenues are not always reinvested in conservation. Of the US\$3 million that Galápagos National Park generates each year, for example, only about 20 percent goes to the national park system. The rest goes to general government revenues (Sweeting et al. 1999:65). This is typical treatment of park income in many countries, but it undermines visitors' support for the fees and destroys the incentive for managers to develop parks as viable ecotourism destinations. Fortunately, some countries are using special fees and tourism-based trust funds to explicitly channel tourist dollars to conservation. Belize, for example, raises funds for conservation through a US\$3.75 tourist tax levied on every foreign visitor as they depart the country, generating about US\$750,000 per year (Sweeting et al. 1999:69).

Well-planned and -managed ecotourism offers greater potential to bolster local and rural economic development than traditional tourism, in which most of the economic benefits linked to tourist

expenditures "leak" back to commercial tour operators in the richer countries (where most tourists originate) or are captured by large cities of the host countries (Wells 1997:iv). But increasing prices for land, food, and other products can coincide with the growing popularity of a tourist or ecotourist haven, to the detriment of local residents. In Zanzibar, villagers and townspeople have been enticed into selling their property to tourism investors who do not guarantee any profit sharing, joint ownership, or other form of sustained benefit (Honey 1999:287). In Tonga, tourism-driven inflation has caused shortages of arable land (Sweeting et al. 1999:29).

Some countries have introduced policies that help reimburse local residents for the direct and indirect costs of establishing a protected area. Kenya, for example, aims to share 25 percent of revenue from entrance fees with communities bordering protected areas (Lindberg and Huber 1993:106). Ecotourism planners also advocate sales of local handicrafts in gift stores, patronage of local lodges, use of locally grown food in restaurants and lodges, and training programs to enable residents to fill positions as tour guides, hotel managers, and park rangers. Both tour operators and visitors have a role to play by screening trips carefully and committing to ecotourist principles. Developers can choose sites

based on environmental conditions and local support, and use sustainable design principles in building and resort construction.

Poorly planned, unregulated ecotourism can bring marginal financial benefits and major social and environmental costs. But with well-established guidelines, involvement of

local communities, and a long-term vision for ecosystem protection rather than short-term profit by developers, ecotourism may yet live up to its promise.

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