

Eco Tourism

13th Conference of Mediterranean Lions

Bodrum - 25-28 March 2010

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What is Eco Tourism

Eco-tourism also known as ecological tourism is perhaps the most over-used and mis-used word in the travel industry.

The Eco-Tourism Society defines it as "responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people".

The International Eco-Tourism Society defines it as: "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people".

The Australian Commission on National Eco-Tourism Strategy calls it: "nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable".

Eco-Tourism is about *uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel*. This means that those who implement and participate in Eco-Tourism activities should follow the following principles:

- Travel to natural destinations
- Minimize impact
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
- Respect local culture
- Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate.

Some elaboration of the above principles will help better place eco-tourism in the right perspective:

1) Involves travel to natural destinations. These destinations are often remote areas, whether inhabited or uninhabited, and are usually under some kind of environmental protection at the national, international, communal or private level.

2) Minimizes Impact. Tourism causes damage. Eco-Tourism strives to minimize the adverse affects of hotels and other infrastructure by using either recycled materials or abundantly available local building materials, renewable sources of energy, recycling and safe disposal of waste and garbage, and environmentally and culturally sensitive architectural design. Minimization of impact also requires that the numbers and mode of behavior of tourists be regulated to ensure limited damage to the ecosystem.

3) Builds environmental awareness. Eco-Tourism means education, for both tourists and residents of nearby communities. Well before departure tour operators should supply travelers with reading material about the country, environment and local people, as well as a code of conduct for both the traveler and the industry itself. Essential to good Eco-Tourism are well-trained, multilingual naturalist guides with skills in natural and cultural history, environmental interpretation, ethical principles and effective communication. Eco-Tourism projects should also help educate members of the surrounding community, schoolchildren and the broader public in the host country.

4) Provides direct financial benefits for conservation: Eco-Tourism helps raise funds for environmental protection, research and education through a variety of mechanisms, including park entrance fees, taxes and voluntary contributions.

5) Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people: National Parks and other conservation areas will only survive if there are "happy people" around their perimeters. The local community must be involved with and receive income and other tangible benefits (potable water, roads, health clinics, etc.) from the conservation area and its tourist facilities. Campsites, lodges, guide services, restaurants and other concessions should be run by or in partnership with communities surrounding a park or other tourist destinations. More importantly, if Eco-Tourism is to be viewed as a tool for rural development, it must also help shift economic and political control to the local community, village, cooperative, or entrepreneur. This is the most difficult and time-consuming principle in the economic equation and the one that foreign operators and "partners" most often let fall through the cracks.

6) Respects local culture: Eco-Tourism is not only "greener" but also less culturally intrusive and exploitative than conventional tourism. Whereas prostitution, black markets and drugs often are by-products of mass tourism, Eco-Tourism strives to be culturally respectful and have a minimal effect on both the natural environment and the human population of a host country. This is not easy, especially since Eco-Tourism often involves travel to remote areas where small and isolate communities have had little experience interacting with foreigners. Like conventional tourism, Eco-Tourism involves an unequal relationship of power between the visitor and the host and a commoditization of the relationship through the exchange of money. Part of being a responsible eco-tourist is learning beforehand about the local customs, respecting dress codes and other social norms and not intruding on the community unless either invited or as part of a well organized tour.

7) Supports human rights and democratic movements: Although tourism often is hailed as a tool for building international understanding and world peace, this does not happen automatically. Frequently in fact tourism bolsters the economies of repressive and undemocratic states. Mass tourism pays scant attention to the political system of the host country or struggles within it, unless civil unrest spills over into attacks on tourists. Eco-Tourism demands a more holistic approach to travel, one in which participants strive to respect, learn about and benefit both the local environment and local communities. Although not part of The Eco-Tourism Societies definition, giving economic benefits and showing cultural sensitivities to local communities cannot be separated from understanding their political circumstances. In many developing countries, rural populations living around national parks and other Eco-Tourism attractions are locked in contests with the national government and multinational corporations for control of the assets and their benefits. Eco-tourists therefore need to be sensitive to the host country's political environment and social climate and need to consider the merits of international boycotts called for by those supporting democratic reforms, majority rule, and human rights.

A walk through the rainforest is not eco-tourism unless that particular walk somehow benefits that environment and the people who live there. A loose interpretation of this definition allows many companies to promote themselves as something that they are not. If true eco-tourism is important to you, ask plenty of questions to determine if your trip will help "conserve and improve" the places you visit.

The philosophy of Eco tourism is very important so that future generations can experience the wonderful environment we have today. After all, the world that we inhabit today has been passed onto us by previous generations to improve, preserve and pass onto future generations.

However it is defined, the ultimate goal of Eco-Tourism should be to infuse the entire travel industry with the principles and practices of Eco-Tourism and thereby transform tourism into an environmentally and culturally sensitive activity that contributes to sustainable growth in developing countries.

Some facts and figures about Eco Tourism - Putting it in perspective

Size of Global Tourism:

- As the largest business sector in the world economy, the Travel & Tourism industry is responsible for over 230 million jobs and over 10% of the gross domestic product worldwide.
- If tourism were a country, it would have the 2nd largest economy, surpassed only by U.S.
- In over 150 countries (four out of five), tourism is one of five top export earners. In 60 countries, tourism is the number one export.

Global Growth of Tourism:

- 1950: 25 million tourist arrivals.
- 1990's: Tourism grew globally at 7% per year.
- 2004: 760 million tourism arrivals corresponded to a 10% global growth.
- 2005: The number of international tourist arrivals recorded worldwide grew by 5.5% and exceeded 800 million
- 2020: Global tourism is forecast to reach 1.56 billion international arrivals.

Importance to Tourism in Developing Countries:

- Tourism is a principle "export" (foreign exchange earner) for 83% of developing countries, and the leading export for 1/3 of poorest countries.
- For the world's 40 poorest countries, tourism is the second most important source of foreign exchange, after oil.
- International tourism in developing countries is increasing by 9.5% a year compared to 4.6% worldwide.

Negative Impacts of Tourism

- There are 109 countries with coral reefs. In 90 of them reefs are being damaged by cruise ship anchors and sewage, by tourists breaking off chunks of coral, and by commercial harvesting for sale to tourists.
- Cruise ships in the Caribbean are estimated to produce more than 70,000 tons of waste each year
- An average 18-hole golf course soaks up at least 525,000 gallons of water a day - enough to supply the irrigation needs of 100 Malaysian farmers.

Size of Global Eco-Tourism:

- Beginning in 1990s, Eco-Tourism has been growing 20% - 34% per year which is 3 times faster than the tourism industry as a whole.
- Sustainable tourism could grow to 25% of the world's travel market within six years, taking the value of the sector to £250 billion (US\$473.6 billion) a year.
- Analysts predict a growth in eco-resorts and hotels, and a boom in nature tourism — a sector already growing at 20% a year — and suggest early converts to sustainable tourism will make market gains.

Economics of Eco-Tourism vs. Mass Tourism:

- In Dominica, in the Caribbean, "stay over" tourists using small, nature-based lodges spent 18 times more than cruise passengers spend while visiting the island.
- 80% of money for all-inclusive package tours goes to airlines, hotels, and other international companies. Eco-lodges hire and purchase locally, and sometimes put as much as 95% of money into the local economy.
- The daily expenditure of cultural tourists (over €70/US\$90) is higher than visitors on a touring holiday (€52/US\$67), beach holiday (€48/US\$62), city break (€42/\$US\$54) or rural trip

Summarizing these statistics, tourism industry is growing as a whole but the eco-tourism segment is growing 3 times faster. Eco tourists spend more money than mass tourists. Eco tourism contributes more to the local economies than mass tourism. Tourism is very important for the economies of developing countries and is growing faster in those countries. Tourism is not without some serious negative impacts.

Some drawbacks and dangers in the way eco-tourism is practiced today

Eco tourism or eco terrorism?

There is widening belief that Eco-Tourism can be just as damaging as other forms of more traditional tourism. The trend towards eco-tourism holidays, presented as sustainable, nature-based and environmentally friendly, is now subject to considerable controversy.

Mega-resorts, including luxury hotels, condominiums, shopping centers and golf courses, are increasingly established in nature reserves in the name of eco-tourism - in many cases protested as 'eco-terrorism'. Such projects build completely artificial landscapes, tending to irretrievably wipe out plant and wildlife species - even entire eco-systems.

There is also a relatively obvious contradiction. Namely any commercial venture into unspoiled, pristine land with or without the "eco" prefix must generate sufficient revenue. In order to do that, one has to have high passenger traffic, which inevitably means a higher pressure on the environment.

Eco-tourism is an eco-facade.

There is a view that many eco-tourism claims concerning its benefits are exaggerated, or owe more to labeling and marketing than genuine sustainability. Not only are such projects repeatedly planned and carried out without local consent and support, but they often threaten local cultures, economies, and natural resource bases. Critics regard eco-tourism as an 'eco-facade': a tactic concealing the mainstream tourism industry's consumptive and exploitative practices by 'greening' it.

Environmentally risky

Eco-tourism may sound benign, but some experts feel that one of its most serious impacts is the expropriation of 'virgin' territories - national parks, wildlife parks and other wilderness areas - which are packaged for eco-tourists as the green option. Eco-tourism is highly consumer-centered, catering mostly to urbanized societies and the new middle-class 'alternative lifestyles'. Searching for 'untouched' places 'off the beaten track' of mass tourism, travelers have already opened up many new destinations.

Although eco-tourists claim to be educationally sophisticated and environmentally concerned, they rarely understand the ecological consequences of their visits and how their day-to-day activities append physical impacts on the environment. As one scientist observes, they "rarely acknowledge how the meals they eat, the toilets they flush, the water they drink, and so on, are all part of broader regional economic and ecological systems they are helping to reconfigure with their very activities." Nor do eco-tourists recognize the great consumption of non-renewable energy required to arrive at their destination, which is typically more remote than conventional tourism destinations. For instance, an exotic journey to a place 10,000 kilometers away consumes about 700 liters of fuel per person and emits around 1.5 metric tons of Carbon Dioxide per person into the atmosphere.

No local benefits

Diverse local social and economic activities are replaced by an eco-tourism monoculture. Contrary to claims, local people do not necessarily benefit from eco-tourism. Tourism-related employment is greatly overrated: locals are usually left with low-paying service jobs such as tour guides, porters, and food and souvenir vendors. In addition, they are not assured of year-round employment: workers may be laid off during the off-season. Most money, as with conventional tourism, is made by foreign airlines, tourism operators, and developers who repatriate profit to their own economically more advanced countries.

In some cases, the resentment by local people results in environmental degradation. As a highly publicized case, the Masai nomads in Kenya killed wildlife in national parks to show aversion to unfair compensation terms and displacement from traditional lands. The presence of affluent ecotourists encourage the development of destructive markets in wildlife souvenirs, such as the sale of coral trinkets on tropical islands and animal products in Asia, contributing to illegal harvesting and poaching from the environment. In Suriname, sea turtle reserves use a large portion of their budget to guard against these destructive activities.

Eco-Tourism often claims that it preserves and "enhances" local cultures. However, evidence shows that with the establishment of protected areas local people have illegally lost their homes, and most often with no compensation. Pushing people onto marginal lands with harsh climates, poor soils, lack of water, and infested with livestock and disease does little to enhance livelihoods even when a proportion of Eco-Tourism profits are directed back into the community. The establishment of parks can create harsh survival realities and deprive the people of their traditional use of land and natural resources. Ethnic groups are increasingly being seen as a "backdrop" to the scenery and wildlife. The local people struggle for cultural survival and freedom of cultural expression while being "observed" by tourists. Local indigenous people also have strong resentment towards the change, "Tourism has been allowed to develop with virtually no controls. Too many lodges have been built, too much firewood is being used and no limits are being placed on tourism vehicles. They regularly drive off-track and harass the wildlife. Their vehicle tracks criss-cross the entire Masai Mara. Inevitably the bush is becoming eroded and degraded".

Romantic devastation

Again, some experts feel that eco-tourism's claim that it preserves and enhances local cultures is highly insincere. Ethnic groups are viewed as a major asset in attracting visitors; an 'exotic' backdrop to natural scenery and wildlife. The simultaneous romanticism and devastation of indigenous cultures is one of eco-tourism's ironies. Given a lack of success stories, and sufficient evidence of serious adverse effects, some experts feel that the current huge investments in eco-tourism are misplaced and irresponsible.

The Dangers of Eco-Tourism Lite

The ultimate goal of Eco-Tourism should be to transform tourism into an environmentally and culturally sensitive activity that contributes to sustainable growth in developing countries. However, there is a tendency towards watering down of the true meaning of Eco-Tourism - a movement from real Eco-Tourism towards "Eco-Tourism lite".

Much of what is marketed as Eco-Tourism is simply conventional mass tourism wrapped in a thin veneer of green. Eco-Tourism lite is propelled by travel agents, tour operators, airlines and cruise lines, large hotels and resort chains, and international tourism organizations, which promote quick, superficially "green" visits within conventional packages. A sizable segment of the traveling public wants this type of tourism. In recent years, there has been a gradual trend for many eco-tourists to be less intellectually curious, socially responsible, environmentally concerned and politically aware than in the past. Increasing numbers of older, wealthier and "softer" travelers have begun opting for comfort over conservation. Eco-Tourism lite travelers are typically "entertained by nature, but not unduly concerned with its preservation".

Once some of the world's oldest and most prized nature destinations, including the Galapagos Islands, Nepal and even Monteverde were visited by only the most physically rugged and intellectually curious. Now, however, with improved air and ground transportation, better accommodations and extensive publicity, these destinations are being marketed to a mass audience. When poorly planned, unregulated and overhyped, Eco-Tourism lite, like mass tourism or even traditional nature tourism, can bring only marginal financial benefits but serious environmental and social consequences. Nowadays, some visitors reach mountain summits via what is marketed as "Eco-Tourism of the future"-and their only step upward is into a helicopter. "Helicopter treks" fly visitors to high mountain peaks, where they get out, stretch their legs, take photographs and then fly back. Such tours clearly do little to educate the traveler and do nothing for conservation or local economic development.

Mismanagement

While governments are typically entrusted with the administration and enforcement of environmental protection, they often lack the commitment or capability to manage Eco-Tourism sites effectively. The regulations for environmental protection may be vaguely defined, costly to implement, hard to enforce, and uncertain in effectiveness. Government regulatory agencies, as political bodies, are susceptible to making decisions that spend budget on politically beneficial but environmentally unproductive projects.

What are our responsibilities?

Understand, make others understand and raise awareness about the need to strengthen certain aspect of eco-tourism as it develops:

Regulation and accreditation

Many environmentalists have argued for a global standard of accreditation, differentiating Eco-Tourism companies based on their level of environmental commitment. A national or international regulatory board would enforce accreditation procedures, with representation from various groups including governments, hotels, tour operators, travel agents, guides, airlines, local authorities, conservation organizations, and non-governmental organizations. The decisions of the board would be sanctioned by governments, so that non-compliant companies would be legally required to disassociate themselves from the use of the Eco-Tourism brand.

Some experts suggest a Green Stars System, based on criteria including a management plan, benefit for the local community, small group interaction, education value and staff training.- Eco-tourists who consider their choices would be confident of a genuine Eco-Tourism experience when they see the higher star rating.

In addition, environmental impact assessments could be used as a form of accreditation. Feasibility is evaluated from a scientific basis, and recommendations could be made to optimally plan infrastructure, set tourist capacity, and manage the ecology.

Guidelines and education

An environmental protection strategy must address the issue of eco-tourists removed from the cause-and-effect of their actions on the environment. More initiatives should be carried out to improve their awareness, sensitize them to environmental issues, and care about the places they visit.

Tour guides are an obvious and direct medium to communicate awareness. With the confidence of eco-tourists and intimate knowledge of the environment, they can actively discuss conservation issues.

Small scale, slow growth and local control

Large scale eco-tourism lacks sustainability. Therefore, the need is for small scale, slow growth, and locally based Eco-Tourism. Local peoples have a vested interest in the well being of their community, and are therefore more accountable to environmental protection than multinational corporations. The lack of control, westernization, adverse impacts to the environment, loss of culture and traditions outweigh the benefits of establishing large scale Eco-Tourism.

Natural resource management

Natural resource management can be utilized as a specialized tool for the development of eco-tourism. There are several places throughout the world where the amount of natural resources are abundant. But, with human encroachment and habitats these resources are depleting. Without knowing the proper utilization of certain resources they are destroyed and floral and faunal species are becoming extinct. Eco-Tourism programs can be introduced for the conservation of these resources. Several plans and proper management programs can be introduced so that these resources remain untouched. Several organizations, NGO's, scientists are working on this field.

Is it a good thing? Should we promote it or abandon it?

Before drawing some conclusions, it is worthwhile noting the irony that as eco-tourism picks up, so will its contribution to global warming. This is because airlines contribute about 2% of global carbon emissions. For example, a round trip journey between London and New York emits 1.5 metric tons of carbon dioxide per passenger.

Overall, there is no doubt that approached properly and seriously, eco-tourism is a good thing as it creates a win-win situation for all the stakeholders. However, as we have seen, the greed in human beings that is motivated by excessive profits is likely to create an industry that is far from the ideals and principles that it set out to abide by.

As responsible members of our society it is the duty of all of us to raise awareness and strive to put in place the mechanisms that will prevent eco-tourism from going against its own principles.