

## PARTICIPANTS IN THE ECOTOURISM ACTIVITY AND ECO-TOUR PLANNING

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*Ecotourism is a concept that evolved in the past 20 years as the conservation community, people living in and around protected areas, and the travel industry witnessed a boom in nature tourism and realized their mutual interests in directing its growth. It provides opportunities for visitors to experience powerful manifestations of nature and culture and to learn about the importance of biodiversity conservation and local cultures. At the same time, ecotourism generates income for conservation and economic benefits for communities living in rural or remote areas. The attributes of ecotourism make it a valuable tool for conservation. Also, ecotourism process embraces a huge range of participants doing different parts of the whole development stages. Of all the participants in the ecotourism activity, the tourism industry is perhaps the most important and the least appreciated by conservationists.*

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### WHAT IS ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism is a relatively new concept, and it is still often misunderstood or misused. Some people have abused the term to attract conservation conscious travellers to what, in reality, are simply nature tourism programs which may cause negative environmental and social impacts. While the term was first heard in the 1980s, the first broadly accepted definition, and one which continues to be valid "nutshell"



definition was established by The (International) Ecotourism Society in 1990:

*\*Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.*

As awareness and experience of the activity has grown, so has our need for a more comprehensive and detailed definition. Most recently (1999), Martha Honey has proposed an excellent, more detailed version:

*\*Ecotourism is travel to fragile, pristine and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveller; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights.*

However, consensus exists among organizations involved with ecotourism (including The Nature Conservancy) around the definition adopted in 1996 by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) which describes ecotourism as:

*\*Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples.*

The Nature Conservancy has adopted the concept of ecotourism as the type of tourism that it recommends its partners use in most protected area management, especially for national parks and other areas with fairly strict conservation objectives. For The Nature Conservancy, ecotourism represents an excellent means for benefiting both local people and the protected area in question. It is an ideal component of a sustainable development strategy where natural resources can be utilized as tourism attractions without causing harm to the natural area. An important tool for protected area management and development, ecotourism must be implemented in a flexible manner. However, the following elements are crucial to the ultimate success of an ecotourism initiative. Ecotourism must:

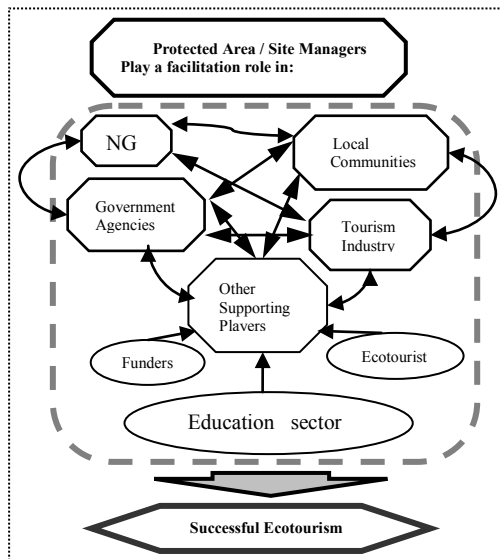
- Have a low impact upon a protected area's natural resources;
- Involve stakeholders (individuals, communities, eco-tourists, tour operators and government institutions) in the planning, development, implementation and monitoring phases;
- Respect local cultures and traditions;

- Generate sustainable and equitable income for local communities and for as many other stakeholders as possible, including private tour operators;
- Generate income for protected area conservation; and
- Educate all stakeholders about their role in conservation.

### **ECOTOURISM PARTICIPANTS/STAKEHOLDERS**

A huge range of players with varying interests and goals participates in ecotourism, some play more prominent roles than others, but almost all are represented in the development and management of ecotourism sites. A key to the success of ecotourism is the formation of strong partnership so that the multiple goals of conservation and equitable development can be met (see Figure 1). Partnerships may be difficult because of the number of players involved and their different needs, but forging relationships is essential. The key players can be classified as: protected area personnel, community organizations and individuals, private sector tourism industry members and a variety of government officials and nongovernmental organizations. Their affective interaction creates effective ecotourism.

**Figure 1.** Ecotourism participants



## **Core decision makers**

**Protected area managers.** Ecotourism involving protected areas places those in charge of the areas in a challenging position. Protected area personnel are often biologists, botanists or wildlife specialists whose job is to protect significant marine and terrestrial sites. Their key duties usually involve conducting inventories, managing wildlife populations and maintaining visitor facilities. Effective ecotourism, however, requires that protected area personnel be able to work closely and knowledgeably with local people and community leaders as well as with variety of tourism industry representatives including tourism operators, travel agents, travel guides, government tourism agencies and others. Protected area personnel must be able to guide the sometimes conflicting interests of all of the ecotourism participants so that they come together for the benefit of the protected area and its conservation goals. This task is difficult one but cannot be left to anyone else. In some cases, however, it may be useful for NGOs to assume this role, usually at the request of the protected area administration. Protected area managers and staff play crucial roles in ecotourism. As the main authorities on their protected area's plants and animals, they provide valuable input to create environmental education programs and impact monitoring systems. On the frontlines of management, protected area personnel are the first to notice natural resource changes such as environmental damage from tourism.

**Local communities.** People who live in or near protected areas are not a homogeneous group. Indeed, even within one small community there will be a diversity of people with a range of views and experiences. But we can make a few generalizations about local residents and their relationship to ecotourism. First, some rural communities that once featured quiet living are finding themselves in the middle of an international trend. Nature tourists are invading their homelands, but they are generally just passing through the neighbourhood, not coming to meet residents. Residents have mixed reactions to this intrusion. Some want nothing to do with tourists; they want privacy and do not welcome the changes that tourism brings. Others are intrigued by tourism and are taking steps to develop it. Tourism may be particularly alluring if other employment options are limited or if residents feel tourism may help protect their precious resources. Many communities in developing countries are hosting visitors and creating ecotourism programs. Sometimes their motivation is to protect their surrounding natural resources. For others, they may see ecotourism in a more economic

perspective, as a means to gain income. Whatever their initial reaction to tourism, local residents are often unprepared for its demands. Those who do not want tourism have no means to stop it. They often cannot compete with the powerful tourism industry or the fiercely independent travellers who want to discover new areas. Those who are interested in pursuing tourism may not be familiar with its costs and benefits. Many have little experience in tourism business enterprises and are not connected to international tourism markets. The interests and concerns of local residents regarding tourism development need a special attention. Tourism touches all the other groups involved professionally, in a mostly economic sense. For members of communities, it also touches their personal lives by affecting their lifestyles, traditions and cultures, as well as their livelihood and their long standing ways of organizing themselves socially and politically. In addition, most of the other players enter into tourism voluntarily, whereas in many cases communities must deal with tourism impacts whether or not they choose to. Local residents play an important role in ecotourism for two main reasons. First, it is their homelands and workplaces that are attracting nature travellers. Equity and practicality require that they be active decision-makers in ecotourism planning and management. Second, local residents are key players in conserving natural resources both within and outside of neighbouring protected areas. Their relationship to and uses of natural resources will determine the success of conservation strategies for protected areas. In addition, local or traditional knowledge is often a key component of visitor's experience and education.

**Tourism Industry.** The tourism industry is massive. It includes a huge variety of people including: tour operators and travel agents who assemble trips; airline and cruise ships employees; minivan drivers; staff of big hotels and small family lodges; handicraft makers; restaurant owners; tour guides; and all the other people who independently offer goods and services to tourists. The complexity of this sector indicates how challenging it can be for protected area staff and local communities to learn about and form partnership with the tourism industry.

Consumers are in contact with many members of the tourism industry through their journeys. For an international trip, the traveller often first contacts a travel agent, tour operator or airline. The agent will generally contact an outbound tour operator based in the tourist's country of origin, who in turn will contact an inbound tour operator based in the destination country. The inbound tour operator is best placed to make travel arrangements such as transportation, accommodation, and guide services. Once the traveller is at the destination, many local entrepreneurs will also

become part of this scenario. One element that binds all businesses within the tourism industry is the pursuit of financial profit. There may be additional motivations for some businesses, particularly those involved in ecotourism, but tourism companies exist only when they are profitable.

Members of the tourism industry are valuable to ecotourism for many reasons. First, they understand travel trends. They know how consumers act and what they want. Second, the tourism industry can influence travellers by encouraging good behaviour and limiting negative impacts in protected areas. Third, the tourism industry plays a key role in promoting ecotourism. Its members know how to reach travellers through publication, the Internet, the media and other means of promotion, thus providing a link between ecotourism destinations and consumers.

**Government officials.** Officials from many government departments participate in ecotourism planning, development and management. These departments include tourism, natural resources, wildlife and protected areas, education, community development, finances and transportation. Ecotourism involves officials primarily from the national level, although regional and local levels also contribute to the process. Government officials have several significant functions in ecotourism. They provide leadership. They coordinate and articulate national goals for ecotourism. As part of their overall tourism plans, they provide vision for the industry. They may even propose a national ecotourism plan; in Australia, the government created a National Ecotourism Strategy and then committed AUSS\$10 million for its development and implementation (Preece et al. 1995). Government officials at the national level may also establish specific policies for protected areas. For example, government officials decide about visitor use fee systems at protected areas, and their policies outline what systems are established and how revenues will be distributed. They may also delineate private sector practices e.g., tour operators may be required to use local tour guides in certain areas or developer's property ownership rights may be regulated. Government policies direct ecotourism activities and may easily advance or hinder their growth. Additionally, government officials are responsible for most basic infrastructure outside protected areas ranging from airlines facilities in big cities to secondary roads leading to remote sites. The government generally takes the lead in all major transportation systems and issues. It may also provide other services important to ecotourism such as health clinics in rural areas. Finally, government officials promote ecotourism. Sometimes the promotion is part of a national tourism campaign. At other times, advertisements for specific nature sites are created or perhaps a

flagship species is identified and promoted. National government participation gives prominence to ecotourism destinations.

**Nongovernmental organizations.** Nongovernmental organizations are valuable players because they provide a forum for discussion and influence regarding ecotourism. They offer a means of communication with great numbers of interested individuals. These organizations can serve as vehicles for bringing together all the elements of ecotourism. NGOs can play many different roles in ecotourism implementation: directly, as program managers or site administrators; and indirectly, as trainers, advisors, business partners with ecotourism companies or communities and, in exceptional circumstances, as providers of ecotourism services. There are several different types of nongovernmental organizations. Among them are for-profit tourism associations consisting of private tour operators, airlines and hoteliers; ecotourism associations such as those in Belize, Costa Rica, Ecuador, etc., that bring together groups from all the sectors involved; and other trade organizations that handle travel issues. These NGOs often have members who meet regularly and communicate industry concerns through publications such as newsletters. Members are often asked to subscribe to certain principles or “codes of ethics”. These associations and organizations are effective at keeping the industry informed about current trends and events. Another set of nongovernmental organizations involved with ecotourism includes the private, non-profit groups that focus on conservation and development or may be dedicated specifically to ecotourism. Their focus may be local, national or international. Frequently, these organizations serve as facilitators between protected areas, communities and all other players in ecotourism, sometimes providing financial and technical assistance or directly managing ecotourism sites. Some of these NGOs have constituencies that enjoy nature and would be interested in ecotourism education and promotion.

### **Supporting players**

**Funders.** Many different groups can fund the development of ecotourism through loans or grants: financial investment organizations; bilateral and multilateral donor agencies such as the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank; private investors; venture capital funds such as the EcoEnterprise Investment Fund; NGOs; and private banks. These contributions are often critical for protected areas that pursue ecotourism. Typically there are studies to carry out, facilities to build, infrastructure to create and people to train. With protected area budgets so

limited, outside funding is necessary. Several international NGOs based in the United States and Europe provide funding and/or technical assistance to ecotourism projects in developing countries. Many of them use funding provided by government agencies such as USAID, GETZ and DFID, the governmental foreign aid departments of the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom, respectively. The Nature Conservancy, through its USAID-funded Parks in Peril program, has helped many local NGOs develop ecotourism projects connected with protected areas. The recently created EcoEnterprise Fund also provides funding on favourable terms for sound ecotourism projects proposals.

Financial institutions do not generally participate in planning for ecotourism or in decisions about what is appropriate for a particular protected area. In this regard, they may be considered a second-tier player in ecotourism, but they are important nonetheless. For anyone that wants to develop ecotourism, access to funds is often the biggest obstacle confronted.

**Academics.** Academics at universities is another group that plays a secondary, though valuable, role in the planning and daily functions of ecotourism. It is a group that helps to frame the issues of ecotourism and raise questions to ensure that ecotourism meets its stated goals. Researchers and academics facilitate learning by asking such questions as: Who exactly is benefiting from ecotourism? How do we measure benefits? How does ecotourism contribute to our existing knowledge about conservation? What are the links between ecotourism and tourism? Academics can focus on the big picture and help us understand how ecotourism interacts with other concepts and global trends. In addition to helping shape the hypotheses, academics conduct research. In coordination with NGOs governments and local communities, they may:

- develop and execute surveys, e.g., of visitor preferences, willingness to pay, etc.;
- produce data about tourism patterns;
- inventory flora and fauna;
- document tourism impacts and share results to develop a good base of information;
- provide material to guide us in our discussions and conclusions about ecotourism; and
- facilitate the sharing of this information and conceptual thinking through conferences, publications, the Internet, etc.

**Travellers.** Travellers have a unique position as players in ecotourism. They are the most vital participants in the industry and provide motivation for everyone else's activities, but few participate in

formal meetings about ecotourism. Nevertheless, the choices they make when they select a tourism destination choose a tour operator or travel agent and, ultimately, the kind of tour in which they wish to participate, have a tremendous impact upon the eventual success or failure of ecotourism projects.

## **ECO TOUR PLANNING**

### **How should be plans created?**

Points to consider in planning tour programs:

Will products be competitive?

Eco tours are supposed to be products that highlight the attractions of the area concerned.

Products must therefore be unique and utilize characteristic elements of the area.

True competitiveness is achieved by providing exclusive products rather than pursuing low prices.

Will Risk management measures be taken?

Programs must ensure safety and a reasonable level of comfort.

All concerns must be addressed in advance, including the emergency skills of the staff, instructor abilities, contingency systems, liability insurance, response plans for bad weather and availability of backup equipment.

Will measures to reduce environmental burdens be taken?

Naturally, eco tours are organized for small groups because interpretation activities are difficult to conduct when dealing with large groups.

Also, in using resources themselves, the appropriate number of participants and methods of use must be considered.

It is also important to win participants' trust as well as reduce environmental burdens by taking measures to reduce energy costs, minimize waste and more.

Will measures to increase customer satisfaction be taken?

To enhance customer satisfaction, personalized services that meet customer needs are important, in addition to the messages and entertainment values carried by the programs.

Unlike mass tours, eco tours make communication easy, thereby allowing providers to explore customer needs and tendencies and thus provide not only conventional but also special services.

Services filled with hospitality and provided from customers' viewpoints impress customers and subsequently attract repeat customers. It is integral for providers to have an image of such service in advance.

Does the program have entertainment elements?

Demand for eco tours will not be aroused unless their entertainment, not just educative, aspects can be portrayed to customers. In addition to "raw materials" (i.e. existing local resources), interpretation skills, various unpredictable surprises, programs organized with an emphasis on a story, a consistent theme that gives the tour depth as well as overall enjoyability and interestingness are important and comprise the value of the product.

Does the program have a message?

It is important that eco tours lead to the establishment of a system by which local resource can be protected and economic value can be created using such resources. If tourists understand the preciousness of local communities and resources, they will understand the meaning of eco tours. Such customers are likely to come back. It is necessary for interpreters themselves to firmly understand the value of local resources and convey these messages to customers.

## DEVELOPING PROGRAMS

**Figure 2.** Project missions



### Explore the market

We should pay attention on some couple of activities which will guide us toward good planning of the eco tour:

- Number of inbound tourists: Overnight and day visitors and their fluctuations
- Seasonality: High and low seasons
- Tourist types: individuals, families, married couples and schools
- Tourist flow: Places they drop by and travel through.

### **Looking for raw materials**

- Discover local attractions such as nature, culture and history and turn them into products.
- Focus on regionality rather than rarity
- Highlight attractions using expertise

### **Messages to be valued**

Typical messages that we can disseminate with our eco tour and invoke interest are:

- Would like to do “XXX” using both local and tourism resources,
- Would like to protect local resources,
- There are things about our area we would like to convey to the people.

Protection of local resources is an important principle for tour guides.

### **Roles of Interpreters**

- Highlight local attractions and turn them into products,
- Tell people about local attractions and their importance (realize the above mentioned messages).

### **Messages that increase satisfaction**

- Messages define guide outlines, invoke the sympathy of customers and increase trust and a sense of security
- Interpretation is about “conveying” rather than “talking”.

If we use this kind of practise, product value increases.

### **EVENT PLANNING ELEMENTS**

When we start the planning process we should be aware of these elements:

- Event outline
- Event content
- Operational plan

### **Event outline**

- Date
- Time
- Maximum number of participants
- Fees
- Targets
- Deadline for booking
- Event content
- Schedule

### **Pricing methods**

Should be:

- Based on profitability
- Based on market prices
- Based on strategic prices

### **Program structure**

When we work on this activity in the planning process we should prioritize:

- Aim of the program (what do you want to convey to the customers?)
- Strategic aims (marketing)

### **Operational plan**

Should define particularly:

- Advertising methods
- Sales target
- Profitable number of customers  
Minimum level (Break-even point)  
Profitable level (Target gross profit point)
- Staff

## **Tour review**

Controlling and checking up conducted tour is giving us chance mistakes to be seen, give us ideas for the new tours, and be permanently in touch with the needs of the customers and conditions on the market. We can check out if our tour was made correctly as planned, through analyzing these parts:

- Were there any problems with the operation?
- Was customer satisfaction high?
- Were target sales achieved?
- Is there anything that should be improved for the next tour?

## **REFERENCES**

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## **ENDNOTES**

1. At present, the advantage for quality tourism is on behalf of the regions with protected natural environment and authentic characteristics.
2. Planning ecotourism process is difficult, complicated, emphasizes all of the stakeholders and complex networking between, and it takes time to be implemented properly. It should be market targeted and as a new trend it takes time to evolve in every area as it is made for.

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