

# **Ecotourism and its Effects on Protected Areas**

**Amanda Katz**

**December 5, 2006**

## **Introduction**

Ecotourism is a catch phrase sweeping the world. Ecotourism is a term referring to ecological tourism. This concept of tourism is being implemented around the world from Latin America to Central Asia. Ecotourism is an ecologically friendly way of exploring exotic lands. However, it is a term used often but not always accurately. When done in the right way, ecotourism is a mechanism for sustainable development. As the idea of ecotourism continues to grow in popularity it is necessary for there to be management techniques in place to avoid negative impacts on the land. It is important to understand the origins of ecotourism; it's implications around the world, as well as management strategies.

## **Origins of Ecotourism**

The term ecotourism was coined from the conservationist movement in Latin America and Africa. There is not an agreement on the exact date of this concept but it is generally described as emerging in the 1970's. In Latin America during this time, scientists and environmental activists were growing concerned at the increasingly rapid destruction of the world's remaining tropical forests. Many of the world's tropical forests are located in this region of the world and are host to vital resources of biodiversity and oxygen. Ecotourism in Latin America became viewed as a potential alternative to the

destructive industries such as logging, oil drilling, mining, and other natural resource extractive industries (Honey).

The situation in Africa is somewhat different than that of Latin America. Ecotourism first became popular in East Africa as an alternative to a failed system of a protectionist philosophy of wildlife management that separated local people from national parks. This philosophy came about as a reaction to the rampant elephant and rhino poaching. Scientists and park officials argued that the only way to protect these and other wildlife species was to give those living near the national parks a financial incentive in the parks, wildlife conservation, and tourism (Honey).

The origins of ecotourism can also be connected to the growth of the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s. At this time, tourists became discouraged from the idea of a prepackaged tourism at beach resorts and on cruise ships. People began seeking out more adventure and environmentally friendly modes of travel. Also, developing countries began to view traditional tourism as a failing development strategy. Mass tourism can have negative impacts. These direct negative impacts include currency black markets, drug use and trafficking, prostitution, and the spread of AIDS, as well as the phenomenon of “leakage” of profits back to wealthy countries. In a backlash against these trends, developing countries throughout the world recognized ecotourism as a way to promote a cleaner, safer, and greener alternative to mass tourism (Honey).

Today ecotourism is considered the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry. Besides the two regions listed above, this growing industry can be traced to four sources: conservationists, developing countries, multilateral aid institutions, tourists, and the travel industry (Honey). In 2002, ecotourism became recognized around the world as a

legitimate form of tourism. During this year the United Nations celebrated the “International Year of Ecotourism” (Wikipedia).

### **Defining Ecotourism**

Ecotourism may best be defining as not having a single definition. Generally, ecotourism focuses on local cultures, wilderness adventures, volunteering, personal growth and learning new techniques of living on the planet (Wikipedia). This term continues to be misunderstood and misused. The term that the International Ecotourism Society coined in 1990 is:

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

As more people around the world become more aware of the term, there has been a need for a more detailed and comprehensive definition (Drumm and Moore). Martha Honey, a respected ecotourism researcher defines her version below:

*Ecotourism is travel to fragile, pristine and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and usually small scale. It helps educate the traveler; 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.*

The definition adopted in 1996 by the World Conservation Union is the most widely used and accepted definition by organizations involved in ecotourism (Drumm and Moore):

*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 list of definitions for ecotourism is endless. At its core, all the definitions stress that protected area management must be linked with the economic activities of local communities. One of ecotourism's greatest strengths is that it helps to develop better cooperation between the tourism industry and managers of protected areas. The primary focus of ecotourism should be on the conservation of the natural environment and the quality of life for the local community (Honey).

### **Criteria for Ecotourism**

Some people abuse the term ecotourism to attract environmentally friendly travelers to destinations that are in reality, nature tourism programs that may actually have negative impacts on the land and the local community (Drumm and Moore). Honest ecotourism should meet several criteria that have been adopted by international ecotourism agencies (Drumm and Moore):

- Conservation of biological diversity and cultural diversity by having a low impact upon a protected area's natural resources.
- Generate sustainable and equitable income for local communities, other stakeholders as well as private tour operators.
- Involve local communities and indigenous people, ecotourists, tour operators, and government institutions in the development and planning process.
- Increase of environmental and cultural knowledge by respecting local cultures and traditions.
- Generate income for protected area conservation.

- Educate stakeholders on their role in the conservation process.

### **Stakeholders and Ecotourism**

Conservationists and local communities have both become extremely interested in the business of ecotourism but for different reasons. Conservationists became interested in this concept as protected area managers were beginning to develop strategies for conservation. The main focus for managers was to combine conservation with profitable economic development. This new way of managing was crucial at this time because it was obvious to managers that previous strict conservation practices were no longer having a positive impact on local communities (Brandon).

In the past, conservationists managed protected areas with little or no input or help from local communities. As situations in developing countries continue to change, approaches to conservation have also needed to adapt. Now, local communities play a large role in the development and implementation of protected area management (Drumm and Moore).

Over the past several decades, many developing countries have had an explosion in population growth. However, the economic conditions of these countries have either remained constant or have been in the decline. This combination can spell disaster for conservation efforts as local people turn to natural resource exploitation in order to meet immediate economic needs. The end result of this combination is that in areas outside of protected areas the natural resources these people rely upon to survive and that businesses need for making profits have begun to disappear (Brandon).

In developing countries, protected areas have become the last places where large amounts of land still exist with plentiful natural resources. The economic development

pressures in these areas are intensifying as farmers, miners and loggers look to use protected areas. Ecotourism has become an important tool to reconcile the conflicts between conservation and economic gain. As a result of this conflict, conservationists have realized the importance of including local people into their conservation strategies. Ecotourism offers an alternative for making money and conserving resources at the same time. Ecotourism is considered to be a sustainable income earner that does not destroy natural resources (Drumm and Moore. Conservationists and local communities must work together for mutual gain. Ecotourism is the key for this process, but it is necessary to explore the role that ecotourism plays in developing countries.

### **Ecotourism's Role in Developing Countries**

It must be understood that ecotourism in developing countries is not seen as an activity solely to finance the protection of the environment, but as a way to boost the national economy and as a way of attracting tourists (Wikipedia). The tourism industry provides 200 million jobs around the world. In 2010, it is estimated to grow to 250 million (WTTC and WEFA). Developing countries look to ecotourism as a way to earn revenue from foreign countries, especially those of the rich developed world. They view ecotourism as means of gaining economic security in a way that is less destructive, longer term, and more profitable than logging, soil extraction, raising cattle or fruit, or commercial fishing. Ecotourism is now at the core of many developing nations' economic development strategies and conservation efforts (Honey). Examples of countries where ecotourism is a significant portion of gross domestic product are: Costa

Rica, Ecuador, Nepal, Kenya, Madagascar, Bolivia, Belize, Dominica, Mongolia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Fiji, Namibia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe (Wikipedia).

The goal for ecotourism is that local tourism businesses will not destroy the natural resources of the area, but instead support their protection. Ecotourism offers a viable alternative for making money and at the same time conserve irreplaceable resources (Drumm and Moore).

According to the World Tourism Organization the top Tourism Destinations in the Americas are:

<b>Country</b>	<b>Arrivals in 2002</b>
<b>1. United States</b>	<b>41,892,000</b>
<b>2. Canada</b>	<b>20,057,000</b>
<b>3. Mexico</b>	<b>19,667,000</b>
<b>4. Brazil</b>	<b>3,783,000</b>
<b>5. Puerto Rico</b>	<b>3,087,000</b>
<b>6. Argentina</b>	<b>2,820,000</b>
<b>7. Dominican Republic</b>	<b>2,811,000</b>
<b>8. Cuba</b>	<b>1,656,000</b>

In 1997, Brazil began a \$200 million program to develop ecotourism sites in its nine Amazonian states. Other Latin American countries have invested over \$21 billion dollars in ecotourism development (Honey). The trend is looking like ecotourism will continue to flourish around the world and that international tourists continue to want to

travel in environmentally friendly ways to environmentally sound destinations. World renowned international conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, the National Audubon Society, Conservation International, Africa Wildlife Foundation, Sierra Club, and World Wildlife Foundation, all have developed ecotourism departments. They also are conducting studies of ecotourism, field projects, as well as conducting ecotours for their members (Honey).

There is no one way that is agreed upon by academics about who can and should be classified as ecotourists. There has been little statistical data collected on ecotourism. There continues to be some moves to create international standards and certificate programs. However, this movement is not warmly accepted around the world (Wikipedia).

## **Africa**

East Africa is one of the places where ecotourism first evolved. Kenya is an innovator for its early experiments with ecotourism in several of their national parks and reserves. With Kenya paving the way almost all East African countries are competing for the ecotourists dollar. Ecotourism is now the number one income earner over coffee in both Kenya and Tanzania. This region is a prime example of the promise of economic gains from ecotourism, as well as a warning for sensitive policies and practices (Honey).

Africa's national parks were created during colonialist rule. They were designated for use by white hunters, scientists, and tourists. Thousands of people in the local communities in the national parks were forced out of their homes and moved to locations outside of the parks. The philosophy at this time was that wildlife needed to be protected from Africans by the colonialists. Animosity grew in the local communities. As a result

illegal hunting, poaching and fires inside the parks became rampant. Conservationists became concerned with this situation, which led to new policies by government and park officials. Over time, the local people began to share the concern for the well being of the land and nature (Honey). And so ecotourism was born in East Africa and continues to grow as a profitable way of life.

In contrast to developing countries, Australia's government also has been experimenting with ecotourism. Tourism is one of Australia's largest and fastest growing revenue earners.

### **Australia**

Australia is a country rich with wildlife and natural resources. The tourist industry is heavily dependent on Australia's natural environment. Australia's government considers the health and welfare of biodiversity when deciding on the expansion of the tourism industry. There are numerous policy documents calling for an integrated approach consisting of conservation and the development of tourism. Many states have acknowledged the idea that tourism based activities need to channel a part of the revenue received from using natural resources back into management and sustenance of those natural resources (Preece and Oosterzee).

The profiles and preferences of tourists is an area that has yet to be well analyzed or understood by policy makers and managers. Australia recognizes that this is an area that needs more research and attention (Preece and Oosterzee). Throughout the world more precise information needs to be collected on all tourist related issues.

Australia studies the links between tourism and the need for environmental management by analyzing benefit-cost studies. Australia has gained enormously from

tourism activities that use natural resources, but there is also a recognition that tourism has to be ecologically sustainable. Ecotourism has grown in popularity in Australia because it helps to contribute to the long term maintenance of ecosystems and species that are so prevalent in Australia (Preece and Oosterzee).

Australia's investigation on the impacts of tourism have revealed that impacts include damage to coral reefs, over fishing, damage of shorelines from boats, water and soil pollution, and disturbance to wildlife. Many of these problems result from a lack of awareness and understanding on the part of the tourism industry. Australia's Department of Tourism has funded an Ecotourism Education consultancy to improve understanding of these issues (Preece and Oosterzee).

Australia is a prime example of how it is not only developing countries that face the challenge of balancing profits from tourism with conservation. Many well developed nations have neglected their environment in the face of economic profits. In the United States, the National Forests continue to be used for industries such as mining and logging. Ecotourism is a movement with importance around the world.

### **Effects of Ecotourism**

Proponents of ecotourism emphasize the gains from the industry. They point to the fact that the industry is a vehicle to benefit conservation efforts and it provides income for local communities. However, critics of ecotourism are quick to point out that there is a potential for destruction of wildlife due to large numbers of people visiting wild places (Ecotourist). Many of the destinations sought out by ecotourists visit areas that are extremely sensitive to environmental impacts from human use (Wikipedia). The presence

of people is seen to have an impact on the behavior of wildlife such as affecting reproductive success, feeding and social behaviors (Ecotourist).

Ecotourism has been seen to effect flamingos in Yucatan, Mexico. Tour boats are often used in this area, and have resulted in a decreased feeding time and increased alert behavior of flamingos. Megallanic penguins have also been affected by ecotourism. Visitations to nesting sites are popular but result in changes in the penguin's behavior in both adults and chicks. These changes are lower hatching rates of eggs, increased abandonment of nests, and higher mortality rates (Ecotourist).

The income generated from ecotourism can create an unbalanced distribution of income. This can lead socio-economic problems in developing countries. This problem exists because the tourism industry consists of a few leading tour companies that work with lodges and tour groups. As a result, local communities are not benefiting directly from the revenue. This may lead to negative behaviors such as poaching to compete with the tourism industry (Ecotourist).

Some argue that conservationists and their efforts may conflict with the interests of the local people. The problem results because many local governments do not have adequate guidelines and regulations that help to protect natural resources from the negative impacts of ecotourism (Ecotourist). It is essential for there to be proper planning and guidelines for ecotourism. As with all industries, ecotourism does have its fair share of negative effects. However, the benefits of ecotourism greatly out weight the negative impacts. Tourism is too profitable of an industry to be ignored. Ecotourism is a pathway for tourism's sustainable future.

### **Ecotourism in Protected Areas**

In many protected areas, ecotourism is a part of the management strategy. If done correctly, the management plan should be the result of a comprehensive evaluation of the area's natural and cultural resource base. Ecotourism continues to become a management strategy for protected areas. If done properly, ecotourism is designed to (Boo):

- Have minimum impacts on the ecosystem.
- Economically provide for the local communities.
- Be respectful of local cultures and customs.
- Involve all stakeholders in the planning process.
- Monitor in order to detect positive and negative impacts.

There are numerous opportunities for ecotourism in protected areas. Such opportunities are revenue generation, user fees, employment creation, justification for protected areas, healthier economies, environmental education, and improved conservation efforts. Government funds for protected areas around the world are in decline. Ecotourism provides an important revenue source for protected areas. There are several ways to generate revenues such as entrance fees, user fees, and donations (Boo).

Ecotourism also creates employment in protected areas. Jobs created include guides, guards, researchers and managers. In local communities jobs are gained in services such as tour guides, taxi drivers, lodge owners and other tourism activities. Job creation is often described as the largest gain from ecotourism (Draper).

Government officials and local residents support protected areas because of their potential ability to attract tourists. It is a difficult process for government officials to

declare an area protected. There are always competing interests between those that wish to conserve land and those that need to exploit the land for business. Both of these interests vie for protection by the government. Protecting protected areas also requires a long term perspective, which is hard for government officials that must deal with short-term financial gain (Draper). However, as ecotourism continues to provide economic gain, government officials continue to become motivated to designate land for as protected areas (Boo).

Ecotourism naturally boosts the economy of a country at the local, regional and national level. Ecotourism brings more jobs that in turn give the people more money to spend in the community. Ecotourism can also boost the economy of the country itself because the tourists are not limited to protected areas (Boo). When people travel long distances for a vacation, they often take time out to visit other sites in the country.

Ecotourism also provides for environmental education. Visitors are generally people with a keen interest in wildlife and their habitats. They are eager to learn about local habitats, animal behavior and issues surrounding conservation. Nature guides, visitor centers, printed materials and videos are all ways to provide ecotourists with an environmental education. As a result of education, conservation efforts usually increase as well. Residents and visitors become interested in conserving protected areas and it may lead to a change in the ways they interact with the environment (Draper).

Ecotourism brings a range of both opportunities and threats to protected areas. Ecotourism has the ability to reduce the problems presented by traditional forms of tourism through income generation, user fees, employment creation, justification for

protected areas, healthier economies, environmental education, and improved conservation efforts (Draper).

### **Management Planning**

There are circumstances where income received from ecotourism in protected areas disproportionately impact local communities. This in turn can create resentment towards the park, creating controversy with the protected area. Getting and maintaining local support is essential for any protected area planning initiative. Planning and management of protected areas is not for the faint of heart. The process is done in a highly charged political environment. The goals of preservation and use are ongoing and never ending. The most important task of a manager is to gain public support of their management plans, and successfully implement those plans (Wood and Engeldrum).

What is an ecotourism management plan? It is a tool that is used to outline the development of tourism in a protected area by synthesizing and representing the desires of all involved including the conservation interests. The end product should be a plan that represents the recommendations of all stakeholders of a particular protected area. Creating the management plan is a step by step process involving protected area staff, the local community, tour operators, government agencies, NGOs, and scientists (Drumm and Moore).

Most planners agree that the process is more important than the results. The process is a way of getting all stakeholders on board while obtaining the results needed to write the final document. It is essential to have all stakeholders take an active part in the planning process. If they feel they are an important player, they will be more committed

in its implementation (Boo). Four steps need to be taken for an ecotourism's management plan (Drumm and Moore):

- There must be a general management plan that outlines broad guidelines.
- Staff must be on board and committed to the principles of ecotourism.
- Funding/support must be available when needed.
- It must be agreed upon that ecotourism is appropriate in a protected area.

The general management plan should include the need to use ecotourism as a way for low-impact revenue generating industry. The protected area's staff must be committed to manage tourism's impact on the land. This means they must agree to work with local communities and tourism organizations to reduce the likelihood of abuse or misuse of ecotourism. Carrying out a management plan can be expensive, so it is important for the plan to include adequate funding in order for the stakeholders to believe in the plan. The managers of protected areas must analyze all of these factors to determine whether or not ecotourism is appropriate for a certain area. Once that has been determined, the plan allows for effective management of the protected area.

## **Conclusion**

The tourism industry is quickly becoming the most profitable industry in developing countries. Ecotourism is becoming a revenue substitute for industries such as logging and fishing. Ecotourism is a revenue earner with an emphasis on conservation. However, the term is often misused to attract tourism dollars. In order for successful ecotourism to flourish around the world, there must be management practices in place. Governments and protected area managers have begun to develop the framework for positive ecotourism practices. There will never be a perfect solution between

conservation and use, but ecotourism provides an alternative to extractive and exploitive natural resource practices.

### Sources

1. Borrie, William T, McCool, Stephen F, and Stankey, George H. 1998. *Protected Area Planning Principles and Strategies*. [www.forestry.umt.edu](http://www.forestry.umt.edu).
2. Drumm, Andy and Moore, Alan. 2005. *Ecotourism Development: A Manual for Conservation Planners and Managers*. Arlington, VA: The Nature Conservancy.
3. [www.ecotourist\\_adr.tripod.com](http://www.ecotourist_adr.tripod.com)
4. Honey, Martha S. Honey. 1999. *Treading lightly? ecotourism's impact on the environment*. November 15, 2006. [www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com).
5. Preece, Noel and van Oosterzee, Penny. 2004. *Two Way Track: Biodiversity Conservation and Ecotourism: an investigation of linkages, mutual benefits and future opportunities*. Australia. [www.deh.gov.au](http://www.deh.gov.au).
6. [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecotourism](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecotourism).