

Current directions in eco-tourism

[Sport & Tourism](#), [Ecotourism](#)



Worldwide, tourism is one of the fastest growing industries and has been described as a powerhouse in the global economy. World tourism grew by an estimated 7.4% in 2000 - its highest growth rate in nearly a decade and almost doubles the increase of 1999.

The main driving forces of the demand for international tourism are increases in prosperity in Northern countries, technical progress in areas of transportation and communication, demographic trends and changing lifestyle patterns. Tour operators and travel agents have responded to this demand by increased market segmentation and product differentiation. Eco-tourism is one of the most rapidly growing of these market segments.

Eco-tourism is a nature and culture based form of specialty travel defined by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)¹ as "responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people". According to the World Tourism Organization, eco-tourism has an annual growth rate of 5% worldwide and represents 6% of the world gross domestic product and 11.4% of all consumer spending - not a market to be taken lightly.

The growth of eco-tourism worldwide can be related with the increase of environmental awareness publicised through the media, government research and various official bodies. Research into the need for sustainable development has been highly noted in the past few years because people are beginning to realize the importance of conserving the environment before it is too late. This is supported in the WWF discussion paper on principles for sustainable tourism (1992)², "Maintaining and promoting

natural, social and cultural diversity is essential for long term sustainable tourism and creates a resilient bone for the industry."

Since eco-tourism is one of the most expensive forms of travel, it's growth could also be related to the increase of disposable income available to many people in developed countries. It has also been recognized by local people that they can sustain themselves better economically by participating in eco-tourism than by, for instance, cutting down rainforests for lumber or hunting animals for meat or the pet trade. The contemporary history of popular eco-tourism probably traces to Kenya where the country outlawed hunting and trade in wildlife products in the 1970's, so, many of the people engaged in such pursuits instead turned to eco-tourism. According to Les Beletsky (1998) 3 " Estimates were made in the 1970's that, based on the number of tourist arrivals each year in Kenya and the average amount of money they spent, each lion in one of Kenya's national parks was worth \$27, 000 annually".

The eco-tourism sector of the market is small and limited in comparison to the mass and package tourism market. The package market has degraded the natural and human (social and cultural) resource base on which it depends, through extensive visitor numbers, over construction and pollution, thereby diminishing the benefits for host societies, for tourists and ultimately the industry itself. The International Chamber of Commerce (1989)4 proposed that business enterprises should consider natural assets " in the same way as we would look at viable business... getting as much as we can from [them]... without undermining the resource base."

Research by The International Eco-tourism Society reveals that eco-tourists are likely to be higher spenders on their holidays than 'ordinary' mass tourists, and high spending, nature loving, responsible tourists are undoubtedly an attractive option for governments looking for ways of earning foreign exchange. Tourism development that is integrated into national and local strategic planning framework and which undertakes environmental impact assessments increases the long term viability of tourism.

Ecotourism is growing all over the world - from the mountains of Annapurna in Nepal where the numbers of trekkers has increased annually at a rate of approximately 18% to the national parks of Australia where visitor numbers have increased from 1.2 million in 1993 to 1.7 million in 1998, an increase of 33%.⁵

Costa Rica, with more than half a million tourist arrivals annually and about 300,000 visits of foreigners to their national parks is among the best and the most popular eco-tourism destinations in the world. Eco-tourism is seen as a stable industry for the government and individual lodge owners to invest in, due to other industries such as coffee production which vary considerably from year to year in their profitability, compared to eco-tourism which has been a steady and growing source of revenue, in recent years, eco-tourism has surpassed banana and coffee exports to grow into Costa Rica's largest source of foreign exchange, earning \$700 million last year.⁶

Perhaps one of the best eco-tourism success stories can be found in the example of 'Monteverde' - a cloud forest in the heart of Costa Rica. The

entire economy of the local area is based on eco-tourism. The residents of the area have good economic incentive to preserve their precious rainforest - their livelihoods depend upon it, from delivery services, taxis, hotels guesthouses, and restaurants to guide services. The popularity of nature travel can be illustrated through the visitor numbers to Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve -

Tamara Budowski, a co-owner of the Horizontes travel agency in Costa Rica explained how the tourism industry has changed in the last few years:

" People who have been involved in Costa Rica for many years still believe that Costa Rica is a beach destination so that we should build large resorts and so on and so forth and that the Caribbean and Mexico are our major competitors. The new generation, which I belong to, believes the opposite thing, no, we shouldn't at all imitate other places but that what we need to do is to tell people about our natural resources, which are quite unusual and a great attraction in themselves... Finally, the tourist board did finally three or four years ago all their informational materials with a slogan: Natural Costa Rica." 7

A wise growth strategy for tourism is one that integrates the economic, social and environmental implications for tourism and which spreads the benefits throughout society as widely as possible. As said by Gretchen C Daily and Brian H Walker " The transition to sustainability requires active cooperation between business and environmental science." 8 Megan Eplar-Wood also argues that future developments in eco-tourism have to be carefully maintained in order to remain sustainable " The original

entrepreneurs will reach their market through the internet with increasing efficiency. But the lack of discipline of governments and the demand for growth will undermine efforts to create sustainable eco-tourism economies that are small but beautiful."

There is some concern over the fact that there are no limitations or guidance upon the criteria that an eco-tour should involve - many tour operators bracket an eco-tour under just one visit to a national park and the term is being exploited to make people feel more environmentally conscious without bringing any benefits to the local communities or area.

In response to the demand for a regulatory tourist board in Costa Rica the CST was developed - The Certification in Sustainable Tourism Program. Which is designed to differentiate tourism sector businesses based on the degree to which they comply with a sustainability model of natural, cultural and social resource management.

James T G Ko makes it clear in his sustainable tourism report that a framework of assessment is required within the industry " In tourism, little practical methodology has been developed, and some tourism academics even argue that sustainability in tourism is generally an aspiration or goal, rather than a measurable or achievable objective." 9

In response to the need for the regulation of the eco-tourism industry, various bodies have been developed in the past few years to help set down guidelines, boundaries and in particular, guides for travelers on what companies offer genuinely environmentally friendly travel. Green Globe 21

was formed following the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and was established by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), and it has the support of major travel and tourism industry and government organizations. It provides a certification for companies and communities against the Agenda 21 based Green Globe 21 standard.

Taxation encouragements have been introduced in a few countries to help support the sustainable development of tourism - for example, the Balearic islands have implemented an 'eco-tax' of 62 pence per visitor per day to raise funds to correct the serious environmental damage done to the Balearics through the tourism boom of the last 3 decades and to protect the natural areas that are left.

A new form of eco-tourism where volunteers help in cultural and environmental conservation and research is developing. An example is the Earthwatch projects that invite members of the general public to join the experts on expedition projects, on a paying basis. Several Earthwatch projects in Australia have helped aboriginal people to locate and document their prehistoric rock art and preserve their ancient rituals.

'Conservation International' has also been developed to ensure that local people benefit from tourism and that communities receive training and support to establish and manage their own eco-tourism businesses. By creating a direct link between the economic benefits of eco-tourism and the protection of biodiversity, CI have found that communities are much more likely to protect their natural resources and look after the environment around them.

The governments of many countries have also realized the economic benefits of eco-tourism and have helped to encourage visitor numbers through legal enforcements - such as enforcing the bans upon importing or exporting live animals and outlawing game hunting in protected areas. The considerable increase in the number of visits to national parks is in part due to the establishment of a series of new parks since 1971. The number of visits to national parks in the US rose dramatically from 26.6 million in 1960 to 60.1 million in 1994.

Recognising eco-tourism's global importance, the United Nations designated the year 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, and its Commission on Sustainable Development requested international agencies, governments and the private sector to undertake supportive activities. Overall, it is clear that eco-tourism is a widely changing and expanding market, and with such a high demand for environmental sustainability, it is one of the most obvious ways forward for tourism. However guidelines are needed for both tour operators and travelers to prevent eco-tourism turning into an over-marketed buzzword.