



According to Oliver Hillel, UNEP's tourism programme coordinator, 'the first ever ecotourism summit signalled that ecotourism, in practice, can contribute to poverty alleviation and environmental protection.'

There is still confusion about what ecotourism really is, and some of the confusion is deliberate. For a cable news network, ecotourism recently was about 'hotels that do not change their guest towels'. For some national tourism organisations, it is something that necessitates reprinting all your tacky promotional literature on recycled paper, and rewriting those exuberant passages just adding the magic prefix 'eco'. The more politically inclined and less cynical see it as a movement, or at least a tendency, for environmental and social reform in the tourism sector. What is certain is that mainstream tourists, and many self-proclaimed ecotourists, have a nebulous perception of the meaning of the term.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as emphasising environmental conservation and educational parameters over social change. Intergovernmental bodies like UNEP favour other related 'tourisms' such as sustainable tourism. Perhaps the truth is that you know it when you see it, but it is hard to describe.

ECOCLUB, an international ecotourism network, recently devised four ecotourism criteria. Ecotourism is achieved by a lodge or a tour, if it:

- is as little a burden as possible on the environment
- financially contributes to conservation
- promotes environmental and cultural education
- involves the nearest local community

These four criteria are normative rather than descriptive, and they emphasise intent over measurement, but they speak of changes that should concern the tourism sector as a whole on both environmental and social fronts.

The 'eco' is hollow unless it includes both human and animal rights. The effects of forgetting one of these sets of rights is shown by an event reported in the UK press. An anti-poaching gang operating in Kenya had orders to shoot to kill local poachers who did not comply with protected area legislation, such protected areas being the lucrative playground of mass nature tourism.

On the other hand, tourism that passes as sustainable or community-managed can also be environmentally destructive and backward-looking. Ecotourism makes a sensible proposition,

by arguing that environmental conservation need not imply social conservation. Poverty around or inside a protected area may look rustic in the eyes of a tourist, but it is just poverty for the people involved.

Hence, a bird watching walk conducted in the grounds of a mega-resort is not ecotourism. Nor is being ferried by air-conditioned bus into a remote community to buy souvenirs and watch a stage-managed event. Nor is travelling in little vans to visit one of many African parks, nor spending thousands on a cruise liner to go and freeze in places bereft of humans, occasionally of animals, but increasingly not of rubbish.

Readers must now be wondering if there are any examples of genuine ecotourism. There are a few! One of the best examples is Posada Amazonas in the Peruvian Amazon (<http://eco-club.com/perunature>). Award-winning Posada Amazonas, an ecolodge in the fullest sense of the term, is owned by the local community, and the backbone of the project is a 20 year management contract signed by the community members and the company, Rainforest Expeditions, in 1996. This contract defined the participants, proportions in the profit (60 per cent for the community) and decision-



making (50 per cent for each associate), the management and financial responsibilities of each participant, the land use terms, the obligations and rights of both participants, and conflict resolution procedures.

But one does not have to travel that far to engage in genuine ecotourism. A realistic proposition is that, like charity, ecotourism begins at home, and begins with you. You can engage in ecotourism in your own city, at weekends. Next time you are in a neighbourhood, why not opt for the local, traditional option. Visit the ethnic part of your town, this time not as a bargain hunter. Explore the destination and not the resort, consider not renting a car, take the bus, smile, ask for directions. Close the camera and open your eyes. Consider buying the locally made guidebook even though it lacks an index. Do not bake in the sun and you will need much less imported solar protection cream. Buy local clothes and wear them, dress as your hosts dress, no need to brag through your T-shirt that you went to LSE. Ecotourism, the true tourism, is not just about that nexus 'the Environment', it is also about opening borders, minds and hearts. ■

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The sustainable tourist

Ecotourism should always be separated from sustainable tourism – the first is tourism focusing on nature and ethnic groups; the second tries to make all tourism (including in cities and on beaches) more sustainable. The risk of the first is that it is too focused on perceptions of nature that do not support local development, and that it may take attention away from the more important and widespread changes necessary to normal tourism.

Sustainable tourism aims to support tourism that is considerate to local people, protective of their landscapes, as well as to enable a form of economic development that can provide benefits well into the future. Boom and bust tourism, as witnessed on the east coast of Spain during the 1970s, or on the polluted beaches of Pattaya in Thailand, is definitely not sustainable tourism.

Some examples of tourism development show how sustainable, or considerate, tourism is needed. The Kandalama Hotel in Sri Lanka, for example, was alleged to have appropriated a reservoir used by local people, and to then have threatened violence against local communities. When the Lake Rara National Park was established in Nepal it also involved the forced resettlement of many hundreds of local people. Today, many thousands of tourists visit Myanmar (formerly Burma) each year without realising that forced labour has been used to build the tourism infrastructure, and that the fees paid for tourist visas help support the government that does this.

So, how can sustainable tourism be created? Research by the London based campaigning group, Tourism Concern, has suggested that two things need to be done. First, tourists need to be made more aware of the potential problems of tourism development, and its impact on local people. Secondly, there needs to be greater cooperation between tourism companies and local governments to create less damaging forms of tourism development.

Educating tourists is both challenging and difficult. On the one hand, many tourists are interested to learn that their dollars may contribute to oppressive political regimes, and therefore boycott Myanmar in favour of other locations. On the other hand, however, few tourists choose beach and city holidays on the basis of whether their hotel recycles waste products or consults local people.

Forging greater cooperation between companies and local authorities has greater potential for changing tourism practices. Many well-established tourism companies want to see restrictions on

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smaller companies that break rules or encourage tourism development that spoils locations. Greater cooperation also means ensuring that locations remain popular with tourists for longer. But some official industry led initiatives for regulating tourism development have also been controversial. The Green Globe organisation, established by the World Travel and Tourism Council, praised the Kandalama Hotel (mentioned above) because of its environmental achievements. Critics have therefore suggested that there is a conflict of interest if programmes like Green Globe are funded by the companies they assess.

Establishing sustainable tourism, therefore, is a combination of educating tourists to be more aware of tourism's pitfalls, and developing new forms of business regulation that can engage successfully with local authorities and international investors. Yet, the need for sustainable tourism – focusing on all forms of mass tourism as well as nature based or ecotourism – is growing all the time. Environmentally friendly forms of tourism need not be limited only to exotic holidays in fragile ecosystems: we need to be more aware of the impact of all forms of tourism development. ■



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