

Ecotourism and Cultural Heritage Tourism: Forging Stronger Links

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage is defended as an important part of ecotourism. Recent developments which have recognized cultural heritage are discussed. The author asks readers to question the direction in which ecotourism is heading and to take action in order to preserve the cultural resources of the areas in which tourism is developing.

The relationship between culture, heritage, the environment and tourism has received a great amount of attention throughout the world. Yet rarely have individuals or organizations representing these special interests worked together on a local, regional, or national basis to define their common interests and discover ways in which they can develop a strong and mutually beneficial working relationship that conserves natural, cultural, and human resources.

Today, it is not distance but culture and heritage that separates the people of the world. How do we create stronger links between historic sites and monuments, indigenous people in the host community, and those individuals seeking a quality ecotourism experience? How do we improve the life of the two hundred and fifty million indigenous people in the world through ecotourism?

Individuals interested in ecotourism tours and projects are generally professionals with a higher degree of education than the average traveler. Those people choosing to participate in adventure travel are usually younger than travelers interested in cultural travel. Most have an interest in the natural resources and culture of the area they are visiting. Most of them also want to see many species of wildlife and at the same time understand wildlife in the context of the people who inhabit the area they are visiting.

While the pace of world tourism growth slowed only slightly in 1995, international tourist arrivals were up 3.8 percent to 567 million tourists worldwide. Revenues grew 7.2 percent (\$372 billion) in 1995. Tourism is now viewed as a political and economic development necessity and is quickly emerging as one of the basic development tools at all levels of government.

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With the tourism industry predicted to grow into the next century, isn't it time to ask ourselves or the organizations we represent, how we are going to solve the issues related to human beings, tourists, and the environment?

One approach is through the integration of ecotourism with cultural heritage tourism (travel directed toward experiencing local traditions, arts, and heritage while respecting the host community and its surrounding environment). Cultural heritage tourism is an important link that should be part of all ecotourism products and tour packages. People travel to see how other people live, to experience their neighborhoods, and to understand the natural environments that define their existence. Culture and heritage sums up a community's beliefs and values—shared behavior acquired as the result of living within a group and a defined geographic area. To develop ecotourism without considering local culture is to take the humanity out of ecotourism.

Environmentalists, conservationists, and preservationists should collaborate to develop an ecotourism experience in which everyone benefits. Not only are the wildlife and the atmosphere endangered on this planet—human beings are under threat as well, especially many of the indigenous peoples. Individuals and organizations working to protect and manage forests, farmlands, and wetlands must be equally concerned about protecting archaeological sites, historic buildings, and local communities. All over the world, human resources and their cultures are threatened with destruction.

The issues are plentiful; however, we need to demonstrate through ecotourism and cultural heritage tourism that natural and cultural resources are irreplaceable and worth conserving. The threat is immense but there is hope. There is a growing global awareness of the need to protect the environment, special places, and indigenous people.

An example of this global concern was announced on February 26, 1996, when representatives from the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) signed their first cooperative accord. In the agreement they pledged to work together to promote cultural tourism and protect historical sites worldwide. The same agreement, signed by WTO Deputy Secretary General Francesco Frangialli and UNESCO Director General Federico Mayor, pledged cooperation in the fields of environmental protection and nature-based tourism. Mr. Frangialli stated:

At a time when the countries of the world are finding it increasingly difficult to fund cultural and environmental projects, tourism offers the only solution. We need to work together to make sure fees collected from visitors and some of

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the income generated from tourism goes directly to the protection and maintenance of historic monuments, as well as conservation of the environment.

People working in all areas of ecotourism need to encourage their national and local politicians to take actions which implement this philosophy.

Cooperation between WTO and UNESCO was established under terms of a previous accord signed in 1979. During the past decade, the two organizations have collaborated closely on a project to link cultural tourism and ecotourism, developing tourism packages along the famous Silk Road, the ancient caravan route linking Europe and Asia which was traveled by Marco Polo. They are also working to develop a heritage tourism package which will educate visitors about historic sites associated with the African slave trade. Historic sites in the context of their natural environment provide tangible links between past, present, and future.

Another positive event occurred on March 25, 1996, when the World Monuments Fund announced its list of the world's 100 most endangered cultural monuments, a collection of man-made sites around the globe that urgently need conservation. The announcement was made in conjunction with American Express, which committed \$4 million toward saving historic monuments from destruction. The threat to heritage sites falls into two categories: natural and man-made. Many monuments in Asia and Africa are threatened by natural elements, such as annual monsoons that threaten sites in Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. The Khami National Monument in Zimbabwe is imperiled by aardvarks, little animals whose underground tunnels are undermining the foundations of the ancient city. The greatest threat to heritage sites is from human beings: pollution, vandalism, poor restorations, sewage, war, and most of all poorly planned and developed mass tourism.

It would have been impossible to create a list of sites threatened by mass tourism ten years ago. Through modern computer technology, the World Monuments Fund is now photographing sites and making them accessible for analysis on the Internet. It is now possible to check how many heritage sites or areas are threatened by excessive tourism—the answer as of a few months ago was sixty-five.

Another significant declaration promoting the preservation of natural and cultural resources was made at the White House Conference on Travel and Tourism, held on October 31, 1995. Issue papers prepared by delegates representing all sectors of the tourism industry stated that the natural and cultural environments of many

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of the nation's tourism destinations are the most significant part of the travel and tourism industry's major assets. With this global and national support, the time has come to find ways to work together and develop integrated tourism development plans which create the most beneficial experience for everyone involved in the conservation of the Earth's resources.

The addition of socio-cultural content to the ecotourism experience gives visitors greater depth of understanding. Given the public's growing concern for both cultural and natural environments, some challenges which have developed as a result of ecotourism include:

- determining the carrying capacity of the resource;
- understanding the underlying purpose for conservation of natural and cultural resources;
- identifying whose resources are being interpreted and by whom;
- questioning the need to encourage repeat visitation.

Tourism research confirms that as tourists become increasingly better educated and more affluent, they expect their ecotourism experience to be both educational and enjoyable. More and more tourists are saying that an important factor in their travel decision is the desire for an authentic experience through interaction with the local culture in its natural context.

But it is important that we recognize that all forms of ecotourism or cultural heritage tourism impact the host society. There are both positive and negative impacts. At the individual level, a positive impact might be the reinforcement of the visitors' self-concept, while a negative impact might be some loss of the host's self-image or identity. At the family level, impacts might be related to the strengthening or weakening of the family unit. At the community level, tourism can lead to the improvement of educational and social opportunities, or may instigate social disintegration.

Ecotourism can be a positive force in sustaining the natural, historic, and cultural environment when visitors are properly educated. The development of guidelines for educating visitors about environmentally fragile areas and cultural issues is paramount in any tour package. The education of employees as well as tourists about these issues is an important way of decreasing negative environmental and social impacts.

Ecotourism of tomorrow will need to become more strategic to maintain its success. It will be necessary to combine business skills with integrated planning practices in order to satisfy customers and meet competition. The tourism industry must be an active partici-

part in the continuing dialogue over conservation of natural and cultural resources. For example, Central America is one of the richest zones of biodiversity in the world. It is also home to 43 distinct indigenous/linguistic groups, a population of 4 million to 5.5 million people. Local culture contributes significantly to the ecotourism experience, but what are we doing to ensure that it continues to minimize the impacts of increased visitation? Indigenous groups must value, preserve, and develop their cultures, as expressed through their dance, music, architecture, and food. Many of the indigenous peoples' survival into the next century is questionable. Since the beginning of this century, more than ninety of Brazil's indigenous tribes have disappeared.

In Guatemala, in just the last fifteen years, 45,000 Indian women have become widows, 200,000 Indian children have been orphaned, and two million Indians have become refugees. In 1970, there were 13,000 Penan tribe members living in the forests of Sarawak. Two decades later, there were fewer than 500.

Indigenous people all over the world ask for the right to survive in a unique way. They choose to walk toward the future in the footprints of their ancestors, to maintain their inherent rights of self-determination, to decide on their own form of government, and to preserve their cultural identity. Of all resources in the world, I consider indigenous people to be the Earth's most valuable non-renewable resources.

It is time that partners in ecotourism forged stronger links to create the highest quality sustainable tourism practices. We must seek solutions to the following questions:

1. How can we work together so that tourism, as an industry, can help promote the conservation and restoration of both natural and cultural resources?
2. How can ecotourism be used to promote better understanding of the role between the host culture, its guests, and the relationship to other cultural resources?
3. How can ecotourism expand its mission to promote an accurate picture of global, regional, or national identity (i.e., values, traditions, customs), and minimize commercialization at the same time?
4. How can individuals and organizations working with natural and cultural resources develop better lines of communication and maintain collaboration with the tourism industry?
5. What are the positive and negative impacts of working together? What alternatives are needed so mutual benefits arise from such cooperation?
6. What kind of educational programs should be developed to

- foster the link between ecotourism and cultural heritage tourism? What role does each sector play?
7. How do we increase the use of new and emerging technologies that enhance a visitor's experience and that change the way the tourism and travel industry does business?
 8. How do we work together to preserve our natural, historic, and cultural resources for future generations while expanding urban and rural development opportunities that foster protection of the environment? Where is the balance?

Our natural and cultural resources are the engine that drives the tourism industry. Those working in the tourism industry have the responsibility to protect the environment, the society, and individuals being visited. As we move into the next century, the following must happen in ecotourism:

- greater collaboration between environmentalist, preservationists, and conservationists;
- development of ecotourism that does not disrupt the lives and culture of local residents;
- planning that protects visual integrity as well as natural and cultural resources;
- identification and enforcement of limits of acceptable change;
- development of direct benefits to local residents from increased visitation to their community.

Tourism is now viewed as a political and economic development necessity and is quickly emerging as one of the basic development tools at all levels of government.

It is time to take action! How you choose to act and develop ecotourism, whether you work on environmental or cultural heritage issues, will depend on your personal experiences and education. Whichever you choose, begin to forge those links with the tourism industry today.

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Sharr Steele-Prohaska has more than fifteen years of experience in consulting to the tourism industry, national, state and local governments, and indigenous peoples' organizations and communities. Her specific expertise includes sustainable tourism planning with special emphasis on cultural heritage tours, ecotourism and rural tourism development, marketing strategies, educational workshops and professional training programs. She is currently acting chair of the Tourism and Travel Administration Program at the University of New Haven in Connecticut and also serves as adjunct faculty at the George Washington Graduate School in Tourism Administration, the New York University Center for Hospitality and Tourism, and at the University of Oregon School of Recreation and Leisure and the School of Allied Arts and Architecture. She is currently completing a book on international cultural heritage tourism. She is a frequent guest lecturer and has conducted many educational workshops on various aspects of the tourism and travel industry, including international workshops in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bermuda.

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