

Making Ecotourism an Ally in Biodiversity Protection

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ABSTRACT

If tourism is going to successfully aid in protecting biodiversity, a realistic look at the problems confronting biodiversity preservation and what ecotour businesses can do to solve those problems is essential. The vast majority of the Earth's species live outside protected areas. If biodiversity is to be preserved, it will happen because of the efforts of local communities around the world. Ecotours have the potential of generating significant funds that can be used to support community-based conservation efforts. The biggest stumbling block to date has been that consumers are not discriminating when choosing an ecotour. If consumers can be persuaded to choose lodges and ecotours based in part on their commitment to conservation, market forces would favor conservation. Suggestions for determining which companies have a conservation ethic and which provide high quality services are provided.

An often unspoken goal of ecotourism is to preserve biodiversity. Thus, an understanding of what is necessary to achieve this is essential in implementing successful ecotour projects. Approximately four per cent of the earth's surface falls within a protected area, receiving various degrees of protection. While the protected area strategy for biodiversity preservation is both important and significant, most of the earth's species live outside these protected areas. In addition, diversity is decreasing over time in many, if not most, of these reserves, and we can only expect it to continue decreasing. Reserves cannot protect the larger hydrological and other natural cycles on which they depend. They frequently do not have the support of the people living around the area. Many reserves were formed from lands appropriated from those now living just outside their borders. Population growth is unrelenting in most places, and there is simply not enough money to create protected areas which would preserve as little as fifty per cent of the Earth's biodiversity.

With biodiversity distributed around the entire planet, we need to look to communities throughout the world for answers. When local communities become the beneficiaries and custodians of their biodiversity, they are much more likely to preserve it. There are several issues that stand out in community-based conservation. A knowledge of the basics is important to anyone wanting to implement an ecotour project that will substantially promote the preservation of biodiversity.

Land tenure is one prerequisite to providing an incentive to preserve biodiversity. Rural community members without secure tenure can often only afford to consider their own short-term inter-

ests. Land tenure seems to be the only way to consistently involve local communities in the decision-making process that otherwise leads to the degradation of habitats. Local land owners are less likely to support the large scale “development” plans such as dams and roads that are known for their disastrous effects on both biodiversity and local communities. For example, Brazil’s Pantanal wetlands are now at risk from the proposed *Hidrovia* river channelization project. A handful of rich families own most of the Pantanal, and the local citizens have little power to oppose this project.

Empowering women is also necessary in the preservation of biodiversity. The research of Dr. Deborah Tannen, a well respected sociolinguist, has shown that women are more community-minded than men, regardless of cultural differences. In many cultures, women do most of the wood gathering, cooking, child-rearing, and other jobs that support the family. However, men often work outside the home, and wield most of the power in the relationship. An educated woman is more likely to be interested in the long term welfare of her family and community, which will include a concern for the surrounding natural environment.

Well-meaning outsiders need to work with and support local participation if conservation projects are to be effective for the long term. Communities often are the recipients of short-term conservation projects run by foreign organizations, and are not actively involved in the decision-making processes that form the project plans. If community involvement is not substantial at the planning stages, the community is not likely to have any long-term commitment. Without a long-term commitment, it is difficult for the goals of the project to be realized. Projects need to support people, processes, and institutions such as farmers’ cooperatives, small, sustainable industries, and women’s groups. There are no short-term answers for the long-term protection of our biodiversity. People cannot be separated from the biodiversity with which they live. Failures in protected area programs usually result from ignoring these facts.

Ecotour projects usually fall into two categories: lodges and tour operators. While lodges receive most of the attention, tour operators who use the lodges and other services can also play an important role in the ecotourism equation. Eco-lodges are considered here to be lodges for ecotourists that observe the definition of ecotourism as stated by the Ecotourism Society or a similar definition. They are usually culturally interesting places or places with a rich natural history, and their clientele come to the lodge to experience those places. Ecotour operators are considered here to be the tour operators who observe the same definitions as noted above. Pseudo-

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ecotour operators are those who use the name but largely ignore the definition.

Eco-lodges tend to have long-term status in a community. By employing and training local citizens they can provide income and prestige. They are frequently located near protected areas, and thereby increase the effective size of that reserve. The Ecotourism Society (USA) offers a number of publications concerning the creation and construction of eco-lodges. For further information, I urge you to contact the Ecotourism Society.

Following are some observations which are relevant to this discussion.

Eco-lodges are typically small, but need to be large enough to be profitable. In most cases, they need to be able to accommodate one, or possibly two, ecotour groups simultaneously. This requires ten to twenty rooms with adequate facilities to handle as many as thirty or forty people, or one group of twenty people. Lodges that are not financially successful cannot provide positive benefits to conservation. When jobs are lost to a failed enterprise, community interest dissolves, leaving little incentive to preserve the surrounding natural habitat that had been the source of their wealth.

It is in the best interest of eco-lodge owners to invest in the local and surrounding communities. The more support the lodge gives these communities, the more support it will receive in return. If the goal is to preserve the natural surroundings, it is in their interest to preserve as much of an area as is possible. A successful project can finance similar projects nearby. This way it will enjoy the existing support of the community, while preserving other parts of the natural environment.

While the need to be profitable is essential to both eco-lodges and ecotour operators, it is often unappreciated and misunderstood by those outside of the ecotour business. If an ecotour business does not make a substantial profit, it is unable to financially participate in conservation projects in a substantial way. Ecotour businesses need to realize more profit than non-ecotour businesses, as they need enough profit to be successful and fund conservation projects.

It is necessary to understand the difference between an ecotour operator and an ecotour lodge. Comparatively little has been published about ecotour operators, yet it is often these operators who bring the groups to the lodges. Tour operators have a large role to play, but their potential contribution often is not recognized in the literature. While many types of tour operators exist (adventure, cultural, trekking, etc.), my experience as a nature and birding tour operator leads me to the following distinction. We are more of an inbound operator than an outbound operator; that is, we are the

“local company” with which many outbound operators contract to operate their tours. Outbound operators are tour operators in the country where the international travelers usually book their tours. They typically offer tours to many different countries. They usually contract inbound operators, who receive the international tourist in the destination country.

It is useful to take a look at some issues that affect inbound operators, both from the business point of view and the “eco” point of view. When possible, ecotour operators will choose to stay in eco-lodges. In many areas, however, eco-lodges are not located close to wildlife. Other issues may also make ecotour operators appear to be less “eco” to those without an understanding of the business. For example, while eco-lodges may prefer to use local guides, it is not always in the best interest of a company offering tours to several destinations. Natural history ecotour guides should be knowledgeable about the flora and fauna at each destination the tour visits. They should be able to talk about environmental and social issues that exist in each destination. Unfortunately, guides from nearby communities often do not possess the requisite skills and knowledge to be professional tour guides. Furthering the problem, it is often detrimental to business for an ecotour operator to train local guides if they are likely to join the competition.

Thousands of dollars and many months are needed to find “spots” where we can show our tour participants important species. More time and money is invested in getting sound recordings of animal calls. These are regularly used on birding as well as general nature tours in order to see species that would otherwise be seen only very rarely. Knowing the spots and the recordings are often what draw clients from one operator to another. There is great importance in not letting your hard-earned knowledge or recordings get into the hands of your competition. An ecotour company is a business as well as a force in preserving biodiversity. It is, therefore, preferable to hire naturalists who, although not necessarily native to each individual community, are native to the country which is being toured. It is also more desirable to employ guides who can remain with the group for the entire tour throughout the region. This allows them the opportunity to establish a better rapport with the tour participants. These guides can also answer a wider range of questions about the destination countries.

An ecotour guide will work with tour participants to collect beverage bottles and other trash generated by the tour in remote areas and transport it back to the city. Eco-lodges will almost certainly appreciate this. While there are not many true eco-lodges in the regions of South America where we operate most of our tours,

we have been able to secure the assistance of hotel staff in collecting our disposable beverage containers from the meal tables. At the same time, we have been largely unsuccessful in getting the hotel owners to encourage other tour operators to do the same.

The ecotour operator can easily do several things that are more difficult for eco-lodges. They can design tours into proper areas from an ecological point of view. With their insight, they can assist lodges in meeting the standards of the industry. Ecotour operators can also bring tourists to conservation projects and provide the opportunity to purchase souvenirs from or donate money to these projects. We provide lists of the birds and animals seen in the region, which can help eco-lodges market their product.

One of the more practical things an ecotour operator can do, whether an inbound or outbound operator, is to put a portion of tour profits into *local* projects that aid in preserving biodiversity. A common mistake of outbound operators is that they often put large amounts of their conservation budgets into the pockets of conservation organizations in their own country. While most of these non-governmental organizations (NGOs) put some of that money into some very good projects, a good portion of their budgets go to rent, salaries, and other expenses of the outbound country.

Both inbound and outbound operators who want to contribute significantly to biodiversity preservation should look for projects to support within the destination country. It is a contradiction that some NGOs from developed countries offer tour programs which specifically prohibit the incoming operator from soliciting donations to local conservation efforts while on tour (fearing a decreased donation to their coffers when the participants return home).

Perhaps the biggest difficulty facing the ecotour industry is that very few consumers determine whether the lodge or tour operator they choose are ecotour companies at all. Focus Tours has been in operation for over fifteen years, with the goals of using tourism for environmental education and for raising funds for conservation work. In all this time, we have had less than ten prospective clients ask us about our qualifications from an ecotour point of view. Other ecotour operators have shared similar experiences. It makes little sense to put time and money into ascertaining which lodges and operators in a given area are true ecotour companies if the consumers do not use that information in choosing a company. Most ecotour consumers are interested in conservation. At the same time, consumers seem to be much more concerned about price, comfort, and what they can see rather than whether or not the company they are traveling with is ecologically conscious. We have had outbound tour operators ask if we could reduce our price if we refrained from

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giving a portion of our profits to conservation projects. There is a proliferation of pseudo-ecotour companies that promote themselves as ecotour companies. Our tours are real ecotours. Given the reputation pseudo-“ecotours” have earned, we have chosen to not advertise our tours in this way.

Organizations interested in funding studies to determine which businesses are ecologically responsible need to channel their funding into projects which would educate consumers to be more discriminating, so they will choose true ecotours. Market forces would solve much of the ecological problem if consumers based their travel decisions on a business’ degree of ecological activism.

How might a concerned consumer find a real ecotour lodge or ecotour outfitter? It might help to ask the lodge or tour outfitter the following questions:

- 1) How would you describe your business? *An ecotour business would identify itself as that, along with talking about where it offers tours, group sizes, etc.*
- 2) What aspects of your business do you think make it qualify as an ecotour business? *Look for a portion of the profits going into destination country conservation projects, trash removal from sensitive areas, etc. Look for something beyond what you would find with any lodge or tour. For example, almost all lodges hire people from the regions where the lodges are found. Do they give them any special training that would allow workers to progress into more profitable positions?*

Ecotours usually cost considerably more than a week at the beach. The consumer can ask a number of questions to determine the nature and level of professionalism of a natural history tour. We suggest:

- 1) Who are your guides, and what are their qualifications? *Look for professional naturalist qualifications, rather than assuming that someone who lived in the area all their life would know the natural history of the region.*
- 2) What equipment do your guides use? *Binoculars will be used by all professional guides. Tape recording and playback equipment are essential to seeing many animals in forest situations. Spotlights are necessary for night and crepuscular wildlife viewing. Appropriate bird and mammal field guides should be on hand.*
- 3) Can you send a copy of your bird and mammal list for the tour areas? *They should have a tour checklist already prepared with English and Latin names.*

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- 4) What other companies or organizations use your tour services? *In most countries the major outbound operators use the same one or two inbound operators. If you can determine who those inbound operators are, you will have usually found the best company with which to work. This is because most outbound operators tend to work with the same few inbound operators as they want to work with companies that do a good job. An outbound company places its good name with an inbound operator, and has a strong incentive to work with the best.*

With “ecotourism” being the industry buzzword of the 1990s, many companies around the world are touting themselves to be professional with “naturalist” guides. Without the equipment mentioned above, you will see a small portion of the animals living at the site, and may not have a good view of what you do see. If a company cannot easily produce a list, with English names at least, they probably do not have adequate knowledge of the natural history of a given area.

If consumers who do go to the trouble of finding a real ecotour discover that a company is not professional in other aspects of its business, they will be unlikely to support other ecotourism businesses in the future. This will have a negative effect on the goals of ecotourism.

Humankind is facing an unparalleled challenge when it comes to preserving the planet’s biodiversity. Solutions that are most likely to be successful are those that will work at the community level in a decentralized manner. Ecotourism is well positioned to evolve into an important element of the total equation if the demand for real ecotourism substantially increases. The biggest problem ecotourism currently faces is the apathy of the consumer public. Those wishing to assist the ecotourism movement need to address that apathy. The alternative is the proliferation of the dangerous arm of tourism that has left its destructive mark on much of the world to date.

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Douglas Trent holds an Honors Degree in Environmental Sciences from the University of Kansas. He founded Focus Tours in 1981 while living in Brazil. He wanted to come up with a concrete means for addressing the deforestation issue, which he saw first hand long before deforestation became a concern for most NGOs. The company was established with the goals of using tourism for environmental education and raising funds for conservation projects. He is one of the few tourism professionals who is also a trained ecologist. He is also an environmental writer, ecotour consultant, speaker, and teacher. His efforts have supplied binoculars to park guards fighting poaching, generated thousands of dollars for Brazilian conservation organizations, helped support the Caratinga Biological Station, provided data on wildlife populations to the Brazilian national parks department and private reserves, provided free organizational consultation to Brazilian NGOs, and many other projects. His current ecotour project is funding a tent camp for a local family in Brazil's Pantanal wetlands. He has delivered presentations to conservation organizations and universities as well as in schools in Brazil and the USA. In addition, he is a regular speaker at international ecotourism congresses.

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