Of the making of catchwords there is no end. Despite their marketing success, terms such as “ecotourism,” “nature-based tourism,” “heritage tourism,” “responsible tourism,” “ethical tourism,” and “sustainable tourism,” are a sign to many environmentalists that unspoiled natural areas are about to be opened up to the public. Almost as often it is a signal that communities in economic decline will be redeveloped and commercialized. Do such endeavors really lead to incorporating environmental protection and social responsibility? Or does the notion of altruistic tourism define a tiny minority of the privileged class, who like the Knights of the Crusades are seeking what they cannot find?

ECOTOURISM IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

The term “ecotourism,” like “sustainable development,” and “no net loss of wetlands,” has beguiled both idealists and industry opportunists with its ambiguity. Like the Delphic Oracle’s pronouncements, these terms are open to highly subjective interpretation. Because they vaguely imply—but carefully leave undefined—voluntary moderation and restraint, some have seized on the notion of ecotourism in the hope that they could promote conservation by making it pay. By offering economic incentives to local inhabitants, they hope to protect the world’s last wild places and motivate everyone concerned to defend environmental values. Others simply borrow these terms as window dressing for business as usual. Comprehensive action to deal with environmental problems has been the main casualty on this semantic battlefield.
THE MOTE AND THE BEAM

“And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” Matthew 7: 2-3

This conference poses the question “How can ecotourism be successfully designed and implemented by effective policymaking and management?” We would like to turn this question around and ask “How can ecotourism exert economic and political influence on corporate behavior and public policy for conservation?” We will not discuss specific technical methods to measure the impacts through the design and operation of ecotourism facilities, since they are the shared impacts of the biological, physical, and chemical destruction that accompany human activity. Environmental impacts are not uniquely immune to the entire cycle of infrastructure development and use for ecotourism. However, they may be controllable because they are still in the early stages. Basic principles for living within our environmental means apply. Ecotourism should not be considered as an isolated, even quaint phenomenon, as if it were immune to the universal ailments of pollution, patterns of excessive consumption, social inequity, and the economic pressures to wheedle “just a little bit more” expansion to meet market demand. To devote all our attention to refining and measuring the limited impacts of ecotourism is to indulge in an idle parlor game of “Let’s Pretend,” while the environmental assets that support ecotourism remain at ever-increasing risk.

THERE IS NO AWAY—ECOTOURISM BENEFITS MUST BEGIN AT HOME

Some economists tell us that tourism is increasingly the number one industry in many parts of the world. If you concede that sprawl and consumption are devouring the good green Earth, tourism can then take more and more credit for environmental problems and cultural decline around the world. We should continuously remind ourselves that many of today’s least natural tourist destinations would once have qualified as “ecotourism” destinations, before they succumbed to over-building. Buried beneath the steel and concrete of many of the world’s population centers are sites once noted for their remarkable natural features.

One of the authors started thinking about ecotourism from experiences gained working in Puerto Rico. Atlantic States Legal Foundation is primarily involved in dealing with toxic chemicals and water pollution. Puerto Rico has plenty of that, and we have had a long and active program working to clean up this jewel of an island in the Caribbean. In the course of that anti-pollution work, we...
began to see that despite the abuses, there was still lots of natural beauty in the diverse ecosystems on the island. Here is an island where millions have been coming for years—mainly for the sun, the resorts, and the casinos—and missing some of the best parts. In recent years the Old City of San Juan has been restored and has become a very civilized urban environment. Now more and more travelers are visiting the mountains and caves that make up the natural Puerto Rico. The infrastructure is here. Let’s take some of these tourists and show them the natural areas and build a constituency for restoring more of the island to what it once was.

REDISCOVERING THE NEW WORLD

Nowhere is the destructive effect of tourism more evident than in Florida, but there are indications that the environmental ethic of ecotourism may be gaining recognition. Growth in the state’s tourism industry is mainly associated with “niche” markets that stress a “sense of place” incompatible with urban sprawl and environmental degradation. A recent issue of a business magazine declared that the views of Florida residents and small, local interests are in tune with emerging trends of the global tourist market. The state receives over 600 requests a week for literature about nature trails. Ethnic heritage maps and wildlife viewing guides are selling like hotcakes, while the number of visitors to theme parks and non-place attractions has been declining in the 1990s. The writer concludes that this pattern of consumer preferences suggests that the only way to save Florida tourism is to save or restore Florida itself.

Like many Caribbean countries, Florida is learning that tourists may choose destinations based on cost considerations alone. Tourists are not aware of the obliteration of natural beaches and vegetation by resort structures interchangeable with those anywhere else in the world. Business and government must take strong stands on issues like urban sprawl and environmental degradation if they are to cash in on the ecotourism trend. While all this points to the possibility of major positive impacts from ecotourism, Florida is simultaneously caught up in the costly and prolonged nation-wide struggle over property rights on both private and public lands. One manifestation of this is that land use planning and coastal zone management were hastily jettisoned in the panic to rebuild after Hurricane Opal.
**THE TYRANNY OF SMALL DECISIONS**

What an earlier generation may have regarded as annoying but gradual encroachments, can now be quantified under the heading “cumulative impact.” The transformation of dynamic barrier islands into Fire Island, Atlantic City, Ocean City, Maryland, and Miami Beach all began with a handful of summer cottages. Key West was a fishing village only decades ago. Seafood and beach sand can no longer be taken for granted at any of these locations. Coastal water pollution from non-point sources diminishes coral reefs and estuarine productivity. Coastal erosion and hazards are exacerbated by shoreline armor.

If we keep repeating the destructive history of the New York Estuary or San Francisco Bay, vicarious ecotourism may be the wave of the future. Bits and pieces which now make up the Gateway National Recreation Area or the San Francisco National Wildlife Refuge are but vestiges of these once-great natural wonders. Modern visitors may glimpse past glories only through historical accounts and interpretive exhibits—a form of nostalgic, retrospective ecotourism, long after the tradeoffs have been made irreversible.

**REINVENTING ECOTOURISM**

Niagara Falls offers important lessons in ecotourism. At this site, the waters of the Upper Great Lakes hurl down the Niagara Escarpment on their way to Lake Ontario, creating one of the grandest waterfalls on the planet. People visit waterfalls (Victoria Falls in Africa, Iguazu and Angel Falls in South America, and the numerous falls of the Yosemite) because they instill a sense of wonderment. Alas, a visitor to Niagara now carries away a vision not of the Falls but of the ravages of ill-planned industrialization and abandonment. In recent years, New York State has begun drawing up a master plan for the Niagara Reservation. The new planners have recognized that the parkways are a detriment and have begun to remove them. Still, the overall impression of the area can only be described as honky-tonk. A place where the lover of nature and the natural will not wish to linger. Perhaps Niagara can again become a major ecotourism destination if people visit while conscientiously reducing their consumption of fuel and other diminishing resources. A major ecotourism goal should be to make visiting the wonders near home worthy of our scarce recreation and recovery time.

*Business and government must take strong stands on issues like urban sprawl and environmental degradation if they are to cash in on the ecotourism trend.*
COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS

It would seem too late for similar places all around North America, but the scraps and leftovers of nature inspire environmental advocates to keep trying. Last month, 300 people attended a conference in Ocean City, Maryland, to launch the Coastal Bays Program, one of EPA’s newest additions to the National Estuary Program. There are now 28 of these officially threatened estuaries where communities are developing comprehensive management plans to restore living resources and quality of life.

The centerpiece of the Mayland Coastal Bays meeting was a report on three years of studies that revealed serious declines in water quality and living resources at this estuary. This confirmed the unease of many long-time residents about the changes in their environment and quality of life. Conferees (local officials, state and federal agency representatives, scientists, and a sprinkling of ordinary citizens) spent two days wrestling with the conflicting demands of an ever-increasing population, including large numbers of seasonal vacationers and transitory retirees. Breakout discussions dealt with the need to balance amenities and improvements, residences, golf courses, and marinas—with the costs of failing septic systems, cleanup of pesticide-laden sediments, and congestion. Repeatedly participants invoked ecotourism or heritage tourism as a means to fend off permanent urbanism. Self-inflicted wounds have brought this community to a realization that it must collectively change course, and the vision that ecotourism conjures up appears to offer salvation. This is only the first step, however, in the arduous process of reaching agreement on new environmental ground rules.

This example from the United States illustrates how the ecotourism concept can effect positive change in a democratic system that can also afford to underwrite research, public education, and consensus building. Yet without these luxuries, the most successful tourism projects have been those in which local people have been the initiators, entrepreneurs, and beneficiaries. They are also the projects where the local economy has been transformed from resource exploitation to one of sustainability. Examples often cited are villages in Trinidad or on the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. In the Yucatan, poachers nearly extirpated the nesting sea turtle population. When this destructive activity was ended by an international ban on turtle capture, visitors began coming to observe the turtles and enjoy the lifestyle of the village, including eating in locally owned restaurants and purchasing locally made goods. Poachers, who knew the habits of turtles most intimately, have been converted to stewards of this creature now that the foundation of the local economy had been transformed.
A less uplifting example comes from Ecuador. A few years ago European biological researchers and investors combined their resources to establish a lodge and base for natural history expeditions into Indian lands formerly set aside as the Cuyabeno Faunistic Reserve. Government permits were obtained and construction began. Building materials and workmen were brought in by boat. To the local inhabitants this amounted to no less than an invasion of their territory and hunting grounds—deforestation without representation or jobs. The bitterness and hostility of the indigenous people finally forced a renegotiation. Ironically, trip descriptions from U.S.-based companies now place great emphasis on friendly relations with the Indians employed at the facility (not so much emphasis on the fact that this was rightfully their territory anyway and that their hostility could cause problems).

ECOTOURISM AS A WEAPON OF DEFENSE

Should success be measured by comparing what has happened to a particular environment and rejoicing because something worse has not happened? We live in a world where Yellowstone Park is threatened by a giant gold mine, and the Galapagos National Park has been held hostage to international fish processors. The question is whether the economic power and political will generated by ecotourism can withstand these forces. Cuyabeno’s ecotourism facilities are surrounded by large tracts of the Reserve undergoing oil exploration and development. The lodge has been expanded, more trails have been cleared, and additional overnight huts have eaten still more into the forest. But how much does that matter so long as oil exploitation so far has been restricted to areas out of sight and sound? And just how precarious is the future of this comparatively small piece of flooded forest set aside for tourism?

RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM
OR ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST

Care and attention to construction and operation of tourist facilities, management of tourists, and provision of interpretive services are all essential, but to focus on these alone as the mainstay of a successful ecotourism venture is to court disaster. A sizable tourism industry has grown up in Patagonia and other locations in the Southern Hemisphere. This industry is based on penguin nesting grounds. In recent years, the numbers of penguins arriving to breed at Punta Tumbo in Argentina has dropped dramatically, due to oil spills, entrapment in fishing nets, and other causes unrelated to the tourism industry’s disruptions of the colonies. Many Argentine ecotourism operators have not adequately addressed their own
impacts, much less the larger environmental problems. Similarly the coastal ecotourism industry in Delaware Bay, which relies on massive spring migrations of shorebirds, must pay heed to over-fishing of horseshoe crabs by Maryland-based travelers as well as its own state dredging projects. The crabs lay their eggs at a critical time when the birds are making their first stopover from South America.

An industry dependent on natural cycles and healthy ecosystems surely cannot afford to remain aloof from environmental activism, but it can take many forms. Engagement paid off for innkeepers in California’s Mendocino County, who waged and won a massive political campaign by enlisting their guests to flood Congress with cards and letters calling for a ban on offshore oil. Likewise, swamp tour operators in Louisiana have sued the federal government to prevent a proposed channelization of the West Pearl River that threatened to disrupt the aquatic ecosystem on which their business depends. In another example, violent confrontations about migration policy, over-fishing, and pollution in the Galapagos, have brought about an alliance of outbound and inbound tour operators, along with scientists and conservationists, to begin a constructive policy discussion with the Government of Ecuador. The goal is to reach consensus on a new public policy for the management of the Islands that will address migration control, fisheries management, tourism limits, and administrative reform. The challenges vary and the solutions must arise locally.

CONCLUSION

1. JUST AS LIVING THE SIMPLE LIFE IS NOT THAT SIMPLE ANYMORE, THE WORLD NOW OFFERS FEW “REMOTE” PLACES. APPLICATION OF ECOTOURISM PRINCIPLES MUST BEGIN AT HOME.

Disposable wealth, increased education levels, and an older population may mean more tourist travelers, but it need not mean that they all descend on the remaining wilderness. Travel in search of new scenes and experiences can be directed toward natural areas that already have some infrastructure if those areas have been adequately protected so that they retain their distinctiveness and are given the recognition they are due. Travel as an escape from the pressures of life at home and at the workplace may only spread environmental and social discontents. We would probably greatly improve our overall quality of life if all our communities would undertake a citizen-led debate about what they want their part of the world to be like in the year 2000 or 2020, and decide what would best fit their own distinctive geography. Positive impacts from

The potential impacts of genuine ecotourism go far beyond its ability to titillate the adventurous bourgeoisie with remote destinations and rarefied environmental perfectionism.
ecotourism can only occur in the context of coming to grips with environmental constraints and not by disregarding them in an “exotic” setting.

2. POLLUTION PREVENTION MUST BE THE MANTRA FOR DEVELOPING NEW DESTINATIONS WITHOUT DESTROYING WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO PRESERVE.

There are really no new destinations. The globe is overrun with human activities and the remotest locations get additional footprints every year. Still there are ways to minimize impact and there are positive steps that can be taken to make visitation less threatening to the environment. Some of these are obvious and have been stated and restated in the many lists of do’s and don’ts that professional organizations dispense. Not all are applicable to all situations and none is all-encompassing but environmental and social: responsibility requires experimentation. Show some restraint and do not build the hotel right on top of the scenic feature. Remember that the lure of visible profit draws in impoverished populations from other locales, so that as tourist centers grow they attract squatter communities and slums grow. Approach the natural area from a central locale that may be a small town with a ready-made work force. If the water is unsafe, resist the idea of abandonment for new ground—correct the problem if at all possible. Do not be seduced by economies of scale.

3. THE RIGHTS OF LOCAL RESIDENTS INCLUDING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ RIGHTS AND CULTURE MUST BE THE NUMBER ONE CONCERN.

No one should be creating openings for outsiders without their early participation and agreement, preferably as initiators and definitely as beneficiaries. This can be extremely difficult, as it is usually not a simple matter to determine legal rights and even community consensus.

4. ABOVE ALL, THE TOURISM INDUSTRY AND ITS CLIENTS MUST EXERT THEIR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STRENGTH ON BEHALF OF A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT.

All of us must be aware of the connections linking corporate behavior, public environmental policy, and our own direct interests. We cannot ignore the mobility of pollution, and the futility of drawing an imaginary line around a special place. The interdependence of tourism and the environment does not permit us the luxury of shrinking into secure enclaves, isolated from global problems. The potential impacts of genuine ecotourism go far beyond its ability to titillate the adventurous bourgeoisie with remote destinations and rarefied environmental perfectionism.
REFERENCES


VIVIAN NEWMAN
A Board member of Atlantic States Legal Foundation, Vivian Newman served as Chairman of the National Coastal Committee of the Sierra Club from 1985 to 1995. In 1990 she co-chaired the international conference on Ecotourism and Resource Conservation in Miami, co-sponsored by the Sierra Club and the Association of State Wetland Managers. In 1989 she participated in an evaluation team sponsored by USAID to assess ecotourism potential in the Amazon Basin in Ecuador and make recommendations for the newly developing nature-based tourism industry. In 1991 she represented the Sierra Club on a panel at the World Tourism Congress in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She serves on boards of a number of other environmental organizations, including Coast Alliance and the Maryland Conservation Council, and has published articles on coastal and wetlands issues. Educated at Wellesley College and the University of London, England, she has lived in Panama and Canada and traveled in Europe and Central and South America.

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