

## What is ecotourism?

### 1. History

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The increasing criticism on the negative impacts of tourism began in the 1980s. As a consequence the concept of “soft” tourism was developed as an opposite to mass tourism. After the World Summit on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the concept of sustainable development was more and more completing the contents of “soft” tourism. According to the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD), sustainable tourism has to fulfill social, cultural, ecological as well as economical criteria and relates to both present and future generations.

The increasing environmental awareness in society caused an “eco-boom” in tourism and the term “ecotourism” became very popular for promoting destinations, mostly without trying to implement the basic principles explained below. Still there is no officially recognized and standardized definition of ecotourism.

### 2. Definition

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Today one of the most popular and recommended definitions has been developed by TIES (The International Ecotourism Society). According to them ecotourism is:

*“...responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people.”*

Other definitions may vary in some ways, but generally almost all refer to two criteria, according to which ecological tourism has to be

- environmentally responsible and
- socially and culturally sound

### 3. What is Ecotourism?

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#### Ecotourism

- “...is environmentally responsible travel and
  - visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas,
  - in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any cultural features)
  - that promotes conservation,
  - has low negative visitor impact,
  - and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.”
- (IUCN, 1996)

#### Facts...

- Under the right circumstances, ecotourism is one of the most effective means to finance conservation and alternative livelihoods
- Natural beauty is an important asset in tourism promotion
- “Greenwashing” exists: unregulated development, alienation of traditional communities, subsidies favour elites, eco-opportunists

## Critical issues

- Different definitions of ecotourism
  - Are often created according to own priorities and goals
- Local communities are not involved, land rights often disregarded, and capacity to participate not built into projects
- Multinational corporations interested, profits not equitably distributed
- Not everything which is called “eco” also contains “eco”

## 4. Principles of ecotourism

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### a) Minimize negative impacts:

- Preservation of ecological carrying capacity and ecological balance, particularly of sensitive regions
  - limited number of tourists
  - delivering primarily small groups and small scale businesses
  - requiring the lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources
    - use local, fast-growing resources (e.g. specific types of wood)
- Developing environmental friendly transport alternatives
- Ensuring the acceptance of tourism development in the area
  - local people involvement
  - emphasizing the use of environmental and social base-line studies
  - background information on the topic for successful implementation

### b) Involvement of local stakeholders in all processes:

- Include local and indigenous communities in planning, development and operation
- Ensuring just and human working opportunities for local people

### c) Provide benefits for local communities and nature conservation within the region:

- Generating economic benefits for host communities, organizations and authorities
  - providing alternative employment and income opportunities for local communities, particularly for rural people
  - increasing the income of local populations, reducing foreign exchange leakages
- Directing revenues to the conservation and management of natural and protected areas > e.g. entrance fees
- Local communities can say “no” to tourism development (it is their free decision)

### d) Raise public awareness and educate tourists and local people in the field of tourism and environment:

- Increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among locals and tourists
- Interpreting the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to visitors
- Educating the local people and stakeholders on the importance of conservation

## 5. Facts and figures

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- Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries
- The WTO estimated that between 1985 and 2000 receipts from international tourism grew by almost 10% per year
- Today, nature tourism comprises around 50% of all international tourism and is increasing at a rate of around 10-30% per year, much more rapidly than the industry as a whole.
- WTO estimated that global spendings on Ecotourism is increasing by 20 % per year
- **Reason:** Increase in environmental consciousness worldwide (Nature films, publications)
  - **Past:** "sun, sea and sand" were overwhelmingly the most important features of a nature-based vacation.
  - **Present:** Nature tourists today are increasingly interested in visiting unspoiled and less-developed areas with a low tourist density, such as savannahs, rain forests and coral reefs.

### Tourism economy:

- scale and geographical scope of the tourism industry make it a major economic force
- Poorly managed tourism growth has, in many parts of the world, degraded the very resources it aimed to provide access to.
- On the other hand, sensitively designed and carefully implemented tourism can provide sustainable economic flows with less impact on the environment than alternative development options.

### Tourism-related activities

- Make up the world's largest economic sector
- Provide over 200 million jobs
- Both domestic and international tourism have important direct and indirect impacts on many other economic sectors.

## 6. Ecotourism and sustainable tourism

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Ecotourism can be considered as a subset of sustainable tourism and nature tourism because it represents a sustainable way of travelling in natural areas.



### Nature tourism

is often used as a synonym to ecotourism, because it also contains the travel to unspoiled places.

The difference between nature tourism and Ecotourism lies in its quality: Nature tourism does not have to fulfill the principles and criteria of sustainability and does not necessarily have to be ecologically oriented.

## Ecotourism

In the view of environmental NGOs and other organizations ecotourism is community based tourism which generates benefits for local people and contributes to the conservation of natural and cultural areas. Ecological tourism includes voyages which are ecologically, economically and socially sustainable.

## Sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism is an overarching concept and a **super-orientated form of ecotourism**. It includes all types of tourism and is not necessarily related to the visit of natural sites.

*It has a long-term perspective, relating to both present and future generations, and is ethically and socially just and culturally appropriate, environmentally/ecologically sustainable as well as economically profitable and feasible.*

*According to international processes (CBD, CSD), ecotourism should be replaced by the term sustainable tourism because of the integrative aspects of sustainability.*

Sustainable Tourism follows the “Concept of Sustainable Development”, as it focuses also on the political and the administrative level. Of all economic development concepts, this is the most complex attempt concerning sustainability.

Sustainable Development is built upon 4 dimensions which are closely related and interact with each other, and need to be considered and addressed in an integrative manner.

- ❖ Ecological Dimension
- ❖ Social/Cultural Dimension
- ❖ Economic Dimension
- ❖ Political/Administrative Dimension

## Misuse of the term ecotourism

The tourism industry often simplifies the term. In their context, ecotourism is primarily advertised as being equivalent to nature tourism in the marketplace. Enterprises utilize ecotourism as a marketing tool, but do not consider ecological or cultural issues to be as important as economic considerations, if at all.

Both positive and negative impacts are not monitored deeply enough and as a consequence tourism authorities, entrepreneurs, etc are often using the term without implementing its principles in their everyday practice.

## Sustainable tourism in international processes

The **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** established the “*International Guidelines for Biological Diversity and Tourism Development*”, which fulfill the concept of sustainable tourism and should be considered by all relevant bodies as the tool for future planning and management of tourism. According to the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD, sustainable tourism has a unique role to play in educating travellers about the value of a healthy environment and biological diversity.

**The Quebec Declaration**, within the framework of the **International Year of Ecotourism 2002**, was implemented by the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), and a contribution to bring the different views of NGOs and the tourism industry into line in accordance with sustainable tourism.

**The Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD 7)** adopted Decision 7/3 on tourism and sustainable development at its 7<sup>th</sup> session in New York. This decision includes the adoption of an international work programme on sustainable tourism development and an invitation to the CBD to

*“further consider, in the context of the process of the exchange of experience, existing knowledge and best practice on sustainable tourism development with a view to contributing to international guidelines for activities related to sustainable tourism development...”.*

## **6. Tourism and Biodiversity**

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- Tourism plays a vital role in the discussion of biodiversity, which is why tourism is depending, among others, on offers and activities in nature potential and on natural features that are worth to see.
- Only if natural habitats and ecosystems are being used and protected in a way that guarantees long-term protection and sustainable use, or do have the possibility to regenerate – only then a future for both tourism and nature exists.
- **Ambivalent relationship of Nature and Tourism:**
  - Nature is the basis of tourism development
  - but at the same time tourist activities endanger biodiversity.
  - The growing market of nature orientated tourism applies growing pressure to vulnerable areas.
- **Minimizing this danger:** it is important how and in which way tourism is managed:
  - Concept of sustainability: strives to reconcile existing conflicts among goals of economic growth, environmental protection and social justice.
  - Protected areas: it is an important task to develop tourism in a sustainable way because of its great negative impact on biodiversity, in both, quantitative and qualitative sense.

➤ *These matters and principles of ecotourism, if properly understood and implemented, can transform the way of travelling.*