

Ecotourism and Its Impact on Forest Conservation

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Article highlights

Ecotourism creates an impact on natural ecosystems but more importantly, it offers a way to

- promote conservation in ecologically fragile regions
- benefit the economies of local communities
- provide the public with a nature-based education experience
- introduce visitors to local culture

Our planet's natural communities are shrinking rapidly. Ecotourism's impact can be good or bad. A new century of environmental consciousness is dawning. Under the pressures of explosive human population growth, our planet's natural communities are shriveling rapidly. They are shrinking on all sides because of the expansion of agriculture, urbanization, damming, forest fragmentation, contaminants into water tables, road building, and even more indirect human impacts such as the invasion by exotic species and the distribution of genetic crops.¹ In Nepal, ecotourists flock to hike one of the remaining wilderness regions on the planet, but these hikers have stripped the landscape bare of sticks and twigs for fuel and left trash that spoils the experience for future visitors. In the Galapagos, the burgeoning number of visitors strains these sensitive and fragile islands. The impact of these visitors, manifested by disease, fire, and theft, has altered the natural balance of the island ecosystems. In the last decade, approximately 20 of the 230 species of plants face immediate extinction, and another 10 are thought to be extinct.² In contrast, I have witnessed the salvation of exploited tropical regions by the interests of conservation and the economy of ecotourism working collectively.

What is ecotourism?

Ecotourists learn about natural as well as cultural history. Ecotourism is loosely defined as nature-based tourist experiences, whereby visitors travel to regions for the sole purpose of appreciating their natural beauty. As early as 1965, *responsible tourism* was defined:³

- respects local culture
- optimizes benefits to local people
- minimizes environmental impacts
- maximizes visitor satisfaction

The first formal definition, coining the term "ecotourism," was published in 1987: "traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas."^{4,5} Subsequently, many other definitions have arisen.⁶⁻¹¹

Ecotourism probably had its foundations in the ethics of conservation, but its recent surge has certainly been due to its economic benefits as developing countries begin to recognize that nature-based tourism offers a means of earning money with relatively little exploitation or extraction of resources. It is this economic incentive, perhaps more than the consciousness of human ethics, that has given rise to the global expansion of environmentally responsible tourism activities. A variety of educational experiences is possible. The objectives of ecotourism are to provide a nature-based, environmental education experience for visitors and to manage this in a sustainable fashion. As forests become logged, as streams become polluted, and as other signs of human activity become ubiquitous, the requirements of a true ecotourism experience are increasingly difficult to fulfill. To compensate for the “invasion” of human disturbance, ecotourism has promoted the educational aspects of the experience. Examples include opportunities to work with scientists to collect field data in a remote wilderness (e.g., Earthwatch) or travel with a naturalist to learn the secrets of a tropical rain forest (e.g., Smithsonian Institution travel trips). Environmental education serves to provide information about the natural history and culture of a site; it also promotes a conservation ethic that may infuse tourists with stronger pro-environmental attitudes.