

Ecotourism and Conservation



Photo credit: Llanos, Venezuelan, Josh Thomas/TNC

As never before, parks and protected areas are under threat. While some are altered by mining, farming or resource removal, others are loved to death by excessive use or unmanaged visitation. Yet tourism, one of the world's largest industries, does not have to cause harm to the natural and cultural systems upon which it depends. In fact, ecotourism can serve as an incentive for nature conservation while supporting the well-being of natural areas and local people.

As a distinct form of tourism differing from traditional nature tourism and adventure travel, ecotourism provides funds for preserving land and water resources and the biodiversity they support. It minimizes environmental impacts, incorporates ecologically sensitive architecture and land use design, and offers local people opportunities for compatible economic development. True ecotourism is a conservation strategy that goes beyond traditional forms of protected area management to secure a healthy future for a variety of natural and cultural assets.

The Nature Conservancy's Ecotourism Program works with conservation organizations, communities, the private sector, and protected areas managers around the world to advance tourism that:

- Serves as a source of financing for conservation
- Reduces threats to protected areas
- Offers rural communities opportunities to develop sustainable businesses

Conservation Finance

Making tourism pay its way

Over the long term, the future of national parks and other protected areas depends on their ability to be financially self-sustaining. Funds are needed for the management of conservation lands and waters as well as for ensuring the health and well-being of nearby populations. The Conservancy's Ecotourism Program helps partners design and implement a range of financial mechanisms that support on-site management of protected areas and provide incentives for landscape and national level conservation.

Through consultations with park service staff, conservation organizations, communities and tourists, we work with partners to develop and test strategies for using tourism as a source of funding for conservation. Entrance fees, dive fees, tourism concessions and tourist donation funds are examples of revenue-generating strategies that are proving successful. As a critical complement to developing these initiatives, we work to ensure that the funds are well managed, and that collection and distribution are equitable.

Photo credit: Eduardo Avaroa National Fauna Reserve, Bolivia, Steffen Reichle/TNC



Testing the Park Entrance Fee Concept

Sometimes called Bolivia's Yellowstone, Eduardo Avaroa Reserve is a landscape of hot springs, geysers and fumaroles surrounded by volcanoes and 16,000-foot mountains. Its fresh water and saltwater lakes host year-round flocks of pink flamingos and other birds, while nearby 23 types of mammals and almost 200 species of plants flourish in the desert-like environment. With over 40,000 visitors per year, the park is Bolivia's most-visited.

When a conservation planning initiative determined that tourism was a major threat to the reserve, we worked with the Bolivian National Park System to develop a visitor fee system. The program, which has generated over half a million dollars in new funds, will allow the Reserve to address these tourism-related threats. Together, we are now extending this system across the Bolivian Park System. It is estimated that the national protected areas system could generate more than \$3 million per year in new income for conservation.

Threat Reduction

Managing tourism for nature's benefit

In many protected areas, tourism is a major activity that occurs without much forethought or preparation. Beach hotel developments near sea turtle nesting areas disrupt breeding, and large numbers of visitors unwittingly disturb local community life. To ensure that the benefits of tourism outweigh the costs, careful planning and management of tourism impacts are needed.

The Conservancy's Ecotourism Program assists partners in producing tourism management plans that consider location and construction of buildings, land use zoning, education and interpretation, and guidelines for visitation. We also develop tools and resources for managers, operators and local organizations to measure tourism impacts in protected areas, and offer technical assistance through workshops, training courses and field assessments.



Building Park Capacity to Manage Tourism

While many protected areas have management plans, these plans often do not include measures that ensure tourism takes place in a sustainable manner. Therefore, we have worked with our partners to develop improved tourism management plans at national park systems around the world.

As a part of this work, we produce training manuals and publications on ecotourism management about topics ranging from green-guidelines for tour operators to programs for monitoring tourism impacts. These practical resources include a two-volume handbook titled “Ecotourism Development: A Manual for Conservation Professionals,” which is available in four languages and, like all our publications, is accessible on-line and has served as a valuable tool for park staff and conservation managers worldwide.

Community-based Ecotourism

Benefiting Local Residents

One of the basic tenets of ecotourism is to engage local communities so they benefit from conservation, economic development and education. While nearby inhabitants are those most directly affected by the establishment of parks and protected areas, they also stand to profit the most by their conservation. By bringing residents into the business of ecotourism, not only can local people meet their economic needs, but they also can maintain and enhance the “sense of place” that is critical for guaranteeing long-term conservation.

The Conservancy’s Ecotourism Program works closely with indigenous and other local groups to establish community businesses, provide tourism training and marketing assistance, and develop compatible economic activities such as handicrafts production and tour guiding. This focus on people reflects the Conservancy’s commitment to work across landscapes, incorporating a concern for human populations as well as for the natural world we inhabit

Helping Communities Develop Ecotourism Businesses

Rural communities are often rich with local knowledge and a strong appreciation of their natural and cultural heritage. To help them earn income, we offered guide training programs in Ecuador, Bolivia and Belize. In southern Belize, former gill net fishermen now share their intimate knowledge of life in the Caribbean with visiting anglers and marine enthusiasts. The lore and legends fascinate visitors, and fish populations are conserved in the process.

In Ecuador’s Condor BioReserve, we are working with residents of a traditional Andean community, Oyacachi, to encourage ecotourism business development. Perched at the gateway between the Andean highlands and the Amazon, the village hosts a variety of attractions including thermal springs, cloud forest habitats, spectacled bears, and a tradition of wood carving. These assets, when managed with care, can become important attractions and provide additional income to residents.

Photo credit: Cofan guide and tourists, Ecuador, Andy Drumm/TNC.



Sharing Lessons Learned



Photo credit: Corales De Rosario, Colombia, Aurelio Ramos/TNC

Throughout its work, the Conservancy's Ecotourism Program develops and shares tools and strategies that can be used by a variety of people and organizations to improve tourism management. As a cross-cutting program of the largest conservation organization in the world, we are able to exert a positive influence on ecotourism practices beyond the places we directly work.

In addition to the ways described above, other ways we promote sustainable tourism in and around protected areas are to:

- *Provide assistance to governments developing policies for generating income from protected areas*
- *Facilitate dialogues between the tourism industry and resource managers*
- *Provide training, technical assistance and informational resources to tourism practitioners at regional and international forums*
- *Help local businesses and conservation partners reach international markets to promote ecotourism practices*
- *Develop partnerships with international conservation organizations, such as with the UNESCO World Heritage Center, to apply our work at a large scale*

While we have accomplished a great deal in a short time, there is still much to be done. We must continue to promote ecotourism best practices and share what we learn with partners in priority conservation areas. We invite you to join us and support our effort to make sure that sustainable tourism will reach its potential in our mission to save the last great places on Earth.

contact information

Ecotourism Program
The Nature Conservancy
4245 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 100
Arlington, VA 22203-1606
(703) 841-5300
www.nature.org/ecotourism

