

ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism refers to travel that is consciously planned to support ecosystems and local cultures. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) states that ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”. This intent distinguishes it from most tourism because it emphasizes small scale, non-intrusive values and discourages the construction of hotels, resorts and highways which would be destructive to the wildlife, land and local cultures in the long run. Simply being out in nature or in a remote area of the world does not, by itself, constitute environmentalism.

Ecotourism began as a concept in the 1970s and during its first two decades most participants were citizens of Western Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States. This, however, is rapidly changing and an increasing number of participants are from Asia, South America and Africa as these regions gain prosperity.

The first ecotourism destinations were in Africa and involved photographic expeditions. Observation and experience, not luxury or the purchase of trinkets, were promoted. Since the nineties ecotourism has become a thriving business and governments have an increasing awareness of its importance to their economies. Belize, Nepal, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dubai, Canada, Ecuador and Kenya all have booming ecotourism sectors. There are good companies that go to all of these locations.

However, it is important to be aware of the environmental impact of air travel. It leaves an enormous carbon footprint so consider other, more local, options. Travel by public transportation if possible. Journeying by bicycle, camping or stopping at hostels along the way, is a fun and environmental way to travel. Hostels tend to be more environmentally conscious than hotels or motels and there is a spirit of sharing and community that is inspirational. Friendships are formed in hostels that last a lifetime.

Ecotourism in the United States is on the rise. Lengthy mountain ranges, dramatic coastlines, and an enormous diversity of wildlife species present opportunities for sustainable tourism, education and adventure. The United States has a number of different ecosystems, from tropical to arctic and the fact that it is closer to home is also a draw. Alaska, with its vast animal populations and spectacular terrain is currently the most active state in promoting environmentally conscious tourism.

In any discussion of ecotourism the dangers of “greenwashing” must be explored. Greenwashing is the use of misleading advertisements to suggest that an activity is good for the environment when objectively it is not. Wildlife theme parks, underwater hotels and motorized tours into fragile ecosystems strive to portray themselves as environmentally positive (or neutral) but they are not. True ecotourism builds environmental awareness while emphasizing human rights and local control over resources and development. It is not solely about animals but also about the humans who live there, and have lived there in the past, often for thousands of years.

If you are considering an environmentally responsible trip you need to be aware of this greenwashing phenomenon. There are usually reviews online that will help you discern the intent of the individuals promoting the trip. Are they genuinely respectful toward indigenous cultures

and the environment? Does a portion of the proceeds go to protect habitat? Ask questions. If they are just about the money, honey, then don't go.

There is no international organization which reviews and rates the true environmental impact of ecotourism companies and their promotions. However, there are quite a few national or regional organizations that undertake this task. Costa Rica, for example, runs the Certification of Sustainable Tourism (CST) program which focuses on a company's interaction with natural and cultural resources, the impact of its operations upon quality of life within local communities, and its economic contribution to other programs of national development. It utilizes a 0 to 5 grading system that rates a company upon the sustainability of its operations.

If you are interested in this subject as a career, then your best resource is The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) which offers an ecotourism master class and awards a certificate in sustainable tourism management.

Resources:

Ecotourism - Wikipedia

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecotourism>

The International Ecotourism Society - Wikipedia

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_International_Ecotourism_Society

Ecotourism by David Weaver (book)

<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/4991933-ecotourism>

Impacts of Eco-Tourism: Alaska Native Science Commission

<http://www.nativescience.org/html/eco-tourism.html>

Greenloons Ecotourism Blog

<http://greenloons.com/ecotourism-blog/introduction-to-ecotourism/ecotourism-101-which-countries-are-most-dependent-on-ecotourism-revenue.html>