

Ecotourism

The first efforts to reduce the negative impacts of tourism on the environment, especially on fragile areas, were called **ecotourism**, which primarily involves travel to sensitive natural and cultural environments to observe and learn about a very different culture and environment and participate in low-impact (on nature) sports activities. The term ecotourism originally was used to label a form or philosophy of tourism that emphasizes the need to develop tourism in a manner that minimizes environmental impact and ensures that host communities gain the greatest economic and cultural benefits possible.

The foundation of ecotourism is the preservation of the environment. In addition, **ecotravelers** generally desire to mingle with the local culture and have their travel needs filled by locals in their traditional ways (such as dining on the local gastronomical delights). Compared with other travelers, **ecotourists** tend to be wealthier, college educated, and willing to spend large amounts of money on extended trips.¹⁵ They also tend to participate in active yet nature-focused sports such as climbing, canoeing, and kayaking.¹⁶ “Ecotourists are more environmentally concerned and responsible than non-ecotourists. They are also more dedicated to nature, more supportive of tourism accreditation programs, and more likely to patronize businesses with good environmental practices even at a higher cost” (p. 275).¹⁷

The seed of ecotourism was planted within the burgeoning environmental movement of the 1960s. It grew during the 1970s and 1980s, fed by increased concern for the environment, dissatisfaction with the urbanism of mass tourism, and entry into the tourism marketplace by less developed countries with nature as their primary attraction;³ and ecotourism continues to explode, having gained the designation as the fastest growing segment of tourism. Ecotourism is experiencing double-digit growth that should accelerate as concerns over the environment and global warming rise.¹⁸ The importance of ecotourism, its size, and its influence on economies, environments, and peoples were recognized by the United Nations when it declared 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism.¹⁹

There are five basic principles to ecotourism development.²⁰ The core guiding principle is that tourism should be blended with, or assimilated into, the environment and the local culture of an area. The boundary between the tourism industry and the host community should not be startling: Tourism should fit into the community and share in its ways. This blurring can occur, for example, by matching architecture to the existing local structures and using the area's natural vegetation for grounds landscaping.

A second principle of ecotourism is that the tourist experience should focus on the host community's existing scenic and activity opportunities. In other words, tourism should evolve from the area's natural and historic/cultural attractions rather than developing attractions that do not reflect the authenticity and uniqueness of the region. Third, ecotourism is associated with local ownership and management of all or most services. Tourist needs should be filled by local businesspeople and local employees rather than by foreign investors or managers. In this way, more of the economic benefits of tourism flow to the local citizens and their local governments.

To further benefit the host community economically, the fourth principle is that a high proportion of local materials should be used to fulfill tourists' needs, from construction materials to foodstuffs. For example, in Zambia, there is a unique resort called Tongabezi. The architecture of the “hotel” is a sight to behold. Most of it is built from native lumber and grasses, and many of the guest rooms are open air. One suite, called the Bird House, is built high in a huge tree, and neither the bedroom nor its private bath needs to have walls for modesty's sake. The height of the rooms alone provides all the privacy needed.

Finally, the fifth principle highlights the importance of conservation of resources. By using what are called “ecotechniques,” local utilities such as water, heat, and electricity can be stretched to accommodate the needs of both the tourists and the local population. Ecotechniques include use of solar power, rainwater collection, and bioclimatic design of structures to aid in heating and cooling.