



## **The Environment, Tourism and Employment**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this article we study the relationship between the environment, tourism and employment. The focus is on that tourism which respects and protects the natural world, known as ecotourism. By attaching an economic value to the environment, ecotourism can contribute to economic development, thus fostering nature conservation. Ecotourism is gaining ground as travellers and vacationists show an increasing interest for habitats which host remnants of wildlife.*

*Ecotourism is particularly promising for the livelihood of populations located in poor, rural and isolated areas. Lack of industrialization is a major cause of such areas' economic stagnation, but at the same time provides them with a comparative advantage in the ecotourism industry. For local communities to benefit from ecotourism, it is advisable that they become deeply involved in the design and management of ecotourism projects. However, local initiatives cannot succeed without global support. Likewise, ecotourism can never live up to the expectations of environmentalists and economic planners without the enthusiasm of local people. It is little wonder that the very resource on which ecotourism is based can hardly survive when its caretakers are insufficiently motivated.*

*In this work we also make a case for increasing ecotourism resources: restoring wetlands. In recent years, wetland ecosystems have received recognition for their unique biological productivity. Although many countries have legislated to prevent their destruction, wetlands continue to disappear everywhere. Thus, restoring wetlands emerges as a sensible strategy for improving the natural world and promoting ecotourism.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ecology and economics are coming closer together as a necessary condition for the survival of a world that is becoming smaller and more fragile. Big businesses are turning towards conservation to show a concern for the environment. They show eagerness to make a contribution to important causes like "saving the planet". Small enterprises are also trying not to fall behind in showing an interest for preventing pollution and preserving flora and fauna. New initiatives continue to multiply with a new commitment toward so called sustainable development. Most firms, large and small, have learned that environment-friendly economics becomes socially more acceptable and can even provide a competitive advantage in the global market.

Although the ties between ecology and economics result from a marriage of necessity, they promise to be fruitful. Demanding respect for the environment in the planning and implementation of new economic projects is slowly becoming less unpopular. Assessing the environmental impact of infrastructures is a more frequent practice today, and the results tend to be accepted without blaming environmental protection for hampering economic development and job creation. Government and businesses increasingly are taking a new approach which penalizes activities considered clearly aggressive to the natural world.

The key to this significant transformation of the public opinion and decision-making lies in people's consciousness of the environmental crisis as a reality. To the extent that the latter has received media attention, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and ecological groups alike have significantly contributed to communicate the message to the public. In this state of affairs, businesses realize the marketing value of appearing respectful with the environment. Whether the make-up for the "ecological look" is honest and coherent with the business activity is often unclear.

We should not be misled. It is not hard to observe that the ecological concerns are set aside in the every day economic operations of enterprises in the local economy. Conciliating the environment with the interest of farmers, developers and other entrepreneurs is a tough endeavour. Finding their common interest is a great challenge in which educators, law makers and economic planners have a decisive role to play.

## **II. CONCILIATING CONFLICT OF INTERESTS: CONSERVATION AS AN ECONOMIC RESOURCE**

Economic rationality is based on scarcity. Resources are limited and thus we need to allocate them for the best possible use. In other words, we have to choose between various alternatives to meet our needs. Although the notion of scarcity has always been there, we owe to Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo the idea as we know it in economic thought: to the extent that we want to satisfy our needs by using scarce resources, we have to pay a price. We used to consider air and, to a certain extent water, as perfect examples of free resources or free goods because we could use them in unlimited quantities. Today this is no longer true. Breathing polluted air is the price we have to pay for economic progress that requires fossil fuel-burning sources of energy. The air would continue as in the past to be a free resource if we used it exclusively for breathing. However, we also use the air for dumping factories' smokestacks and cars' exhausts. In return, we get acid rain and global warming.

Pollution extends to air, water and soil, affecting any form of life that needs those resources to live and survive. We see trees turning colour prematurely and dying soon afterwards, birds silently succumbing to the lethal chemical cocktail behind the plow, fish disappearing or agonizing off-shore... The problem with this nature destruction is that we are also destroying ourselves because we need trees, birds and fish to live on as well. The challenge arises: how to pursue economic growth without degrading the environment?

Doubtless, conservation means putting a restraint on certain forms of economic growth. Nonetheless, for making economic sense, environmental and nature protection must enter the equation of decision-makers with a plus sign. This would be warranted so long as we accept the fact that conservation is a necessary condition for survival of humankind on planet earth. Starting from this principle, the question emerges as to how and to what extent conservation should be implemented and enforced.

An emblematical example of the conflict between conservation and development is the case of the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest in the United States. The spotted owl became the symbol of a bitter fight between environmentalists and loggers. The latter complained loudly about

the jobs being lost as a result of restricting or suppressing timber activity. Those who defended the preservation of old growth forests viewed them as more than just timber (wood and pulp): complex ecosystems that protect soil, nurture water courses, cleanse pollutants from the air and beautify the landscape. The initiative to save the NW ancient forest came about when it remained just a fraction, 13 per cent of what existed in western Washington and Oregon. Although trees are a renewable resource, the old growth's ecosystem vanishes with the giant trees. Only by saving the trees can the spotted owl be saved, even at the expense of timber jobs.

This case highlights the source of the conflict: a lack of understanding of alternative uses of a unique resource, that is, the old growth forest. Solving the conflict requires opening up economics to a longer run horizon and setting priorities. Also, changing mentalities and preferences, creating an ecological conscience.

Aldo Leopold in his *A Sand County Almanac*, proposes a land ethic which "... reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity" (Leopold, 1949). The land is much more than soil that can be exploited for farming; the land is a biota and this quality has to be confronted or reconciled with economics by taking into account the costs associated with disappearing ecosystems and threatened species. Farming and forestry can be carried out in alternative forms. Vast extensions of wheat fields can host a great variety of wildlife; turning those fields into irrigated land can destroy what has become a unique ecosystem by the same principle of profiting from land use.

In a broader context, we are closer to understanding that keeping air, water and soil clean has become a pressing need for our survival on planet earth. To that end, we need to protect what remains of the land, rivers and lakes that can host wildlife. The latter is an indicator of the health of the environment. We are now more conscientious of the fact that our planet is an ecosystem shared by each single form of life. This is a reality that cannot be denied. However, general principles have to be reconciled with the everyday life of people and the environment in which they live.

It is difficult to convince communities and those who decide the course of events at the local level that conservation is good and desirable.

Conservation is misinterpreted as preventing the creation of new jobs. The economic benefits of conservation are seen in the distant future and its costs are immediately experienced. Here are some more familiar actions considered to be negative for local economies: (1) Restricting building rights on sensitive lands, (2) limiting the use of pesticides and artificial fertilizers in agriculture, (3) conserving or restoring wetlands that can be claimed for farming, (4) halting infrastructure projects that can destroy natural habitats or interfere with the natural cycle of life.

People are worried about their jobs in the face of conservation. However, as long as conservation can provide people with a livelihood, they will be more willing to accept and even help conservation.

### **III. LINKING CONSERVATION AND EMPLOYMENT: ECOTOURISM**

It is hard to talk about tourism in the context of nature conservation given that great environmental damage has been caused in the name of tourism development. By making an intensive use of the environment, tourism has had very negative effects on the natural world. Some of those effects are:

- Serious modification of coastal ecosystems
- Intensive urbanization
- Degradation of countryside
- Speculative pressure on agricultural land
- Sea pollution
- Coastal erosion
- Air pollution and noise
- Excessive water consumption
- Pollution of ground water
- Disruption of wildlife habitats (Commission of the European Communities, 1993)

It is also true that these environmental problems are caused or enhanced by other economic activities different from tourism. To the extent that tourism increases human pressure on the environment, it becomes harmful and can cause irreparable damage. However, taking into account the carrying capacity of an area, tourism can be developed and managed from a different approach. The new approach is ecotourism, which has been

defined as "Tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas. (...) The main point is that the person who practises ecotourism has the opportunity of immersing him or herself in nature in a way most people cannot enjoy in their routine, urban existences. This person will eventually acquire a consciousness... that will convert him into somebody keenly involved in conservation issues..." (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1988).

**Exhibit 1**

**DEFINITION OF ECOTOURISM**

<i>DESCRIPTION/ACTIONS</i>	<i>VALUES/RESULTS</i>
-Nature-based tourism	-Alternative tourism
-Natural history tourism	-Responsible tourism
-Cultural travel	-Ethical travel
-Adventure travel	
-Experience travel	
-Value-added travel	

*ECOTOURISM*

Planned approach:	-Motivation
	-Behaviour
	-Impact
	-Benefits

Source: K.A. Ziffer. Ecotourism: The Uneasy Alliance. Conservation International, 1989.

Exhibit 1 contains some of the fundamental features of ecotourism. Unlike conventional tourism, ecotourism is nature-based and thus seeks to preserve its very unique resources. Ecotourism is an ecologically sound activity. It is much more than tourism in ecologically sensitive areas. It is an holistic approach to tourism that implies the planning, management and sustenance of natural resources. Thus, making a contribution to conservation is key to the concept of ecotourism.

One may think that only remote, less industrialized regions of the world, like the Amazon or the Galapagos Islands, for instance, can qualify as places for the ecotourism industry. However, the concept can be expanded to include regions of Europe or North America where, despite development, ecotourism can be a meaningful approach to tourist development.

The problem is that already there is not much to preserve, save for remnants of wilderness in narrowly confined locations. Increasing population and the need to take over land for agriculture or urbanization has left little space for the natural world. However, there is still room for hope to the extent that land restoration is possible and becomes a principle to be supported. Certain areas that have diminishing interest for the ecotourism industry can still be recovered by restoration. Restoring efforts could face more resistance than conservation, in addition to becoming more costly. However, the future of ecotourism in developed countries like Spain hinges on conservation of what remains of the natural world as much as on restoring degraded ecosystems.

To convince people that it is worth giving up jobs created by environmentally harmful activities requires the ability to give them something in return. It is necessary to make a strong case in favour of conservation and restoration as ways to create economic value. Because extensive parts of forests, bird species and pristine coastlines do not exist anymore, the economic value of what remains as well as any possibility of recovering what existed should be emphasized.

The economic value of nature can be increased by providing the goodness of clean air and the joy of songbirds to people who are willing to pay for it: ecotourists. Therefore, ecotourism consists of trading economic value for conservation. In this way local people can protect or rescue the vanishing beauty of their countryside and the uniqueness of remaining wildlife in exchange for a means of livelihood. They can get double benefits: living in a healthy environment and taking the jobs associated with managing that environment. Thus, ecotourism has the potential to build a bridge between conservation and employment with the added feature that ecotourism can be promoted in less economically developed areas. We can expect local communities to prefer ecotourism instead of smoky industries or an overbuilt landscape.

The first question we have is: Where are the jobs? The jobs are in the ecotourism industry, which is a labour intensive activity. However, to the extent that developing ecotourism means changing the use of the land, re-training workers becomes a priority in order to provide them with the required skills. For example, one may think of retraining loggers to serve as ecotourist guides. In making the transition from farming or logging to the ecotourist industry, people can profit from their previous knowledge, although with a different vision in the use of the land.

Because ecotourism is more likely to be developed by small businesses, which are more labour-intensive and require less capital, the opportunities for job creation are higher. Moreover, small firms offer more warranties of conservation because in their interaction with the environment they tend to be more sensitive to the area's natural conditions.

Overcoming the seasonal variations in the demand is one of the great challenges of the tourism industry. Workers of the tourist sector suffer low seasons the most since employment declines significantly. Furthermore, employment interruptions make it more difficult for enterprises to train their employees. Lack of training poses an obstacle for workers' progression in their professional life. To the extent that ecotourism can overcome the problem of seasonal variations in demand, it can provide better jobs. Employees of the ecotourism industry require skills that can only be obtained by continuous, cumulative experience in the same or related job.

The second question we have is: What kind of new jobs can be created by ecotourism? To the extent that the resource for ecotourism is nature, keeping and increasing its attractiveness is a job in which many people must be involved. On the one hand, managing nature requires monitoring the state of fauna and flora, as well as of water, soil and air. This task can only be properly carried out by highly qualified persons. On the other hand, providing information about the natural world to visitors requires continuous study and diffusion of knowledge about the issues of interest. This also demands qualified labour.

This indicates that, apart from the standard services generally associated with tourism --hotels, transportation, etc.-- there are new jobs which incorporate more human capital. To the extent that ecotourism depends on the natural world, there is a clear need for specialists in every field related



to conservation. Managing conservation of protected areas, e.g., national or natural parks, can employ many people. As an example, we can consider the Environmental Agencies (Agencias del Medio Ambiente) in Spain, which employ many people and generate additional work for a variety of businesses. Although this employment is not directly generated by ecotourism operators, ecotourists consume a great deal of what these agencies are supposed to produce. They are in charge of improving resources that are used by ecotourism.

Other types of jobs associated with ecotourism are those generated by the design, construction and management of ecolodges. The ecolodge provides a type of accommodation that fits the natural surroundings as a consistent requirement of ecotourism. As reflected in Exhibit 2, there are fundamental differences between the ecolodge and traditional accommodation. The ecolodge has a low impact in the landscape and takes advantage of natural resources as sun, wind and other design features in order to become a bioclimatic construction. This requires new skills and increased use of natural materials.

#### Exhibit 2

### TRADITIONAL ACCOMMODATION VERSUS THE ECOLODGE

#### *TRADITIONAL*

1. Luxury
2. Generic style
3. Relaxation focus
4. Activities are facility based, e.g., golf, tennis, etc.
5. Enclave development
6. Group and consortium ownership
7. Profit maximization based on high capacity, services and prices
8. High investment

#### *ECOLODGE*

- Comfortable basic needs
- Unique character style
- Activity and educational focus
- Activities are nature and recreation-based
- Integrated development
- Individual Ownership
- Strategic design, location, low capacity, services and prices
- Moderate and low investment

Source: The Ecotourism Sourcebook. D. E Hawkins et al. (Eds.). The Ecotourism Society, 1995.

#### **IV. THE MARKET: LOCAL INITIATIVES NEED GLOBAL SUPPORT**

The market for ecotourism can only be created by promoting projects that are viable, coherent and lasting. Moreover, local people have to be the primary actors in the development of ecotourism. Although this is a necessary condition for putting local resources to the service of local development, it is very likely that local people do not have either the entrepreneurial skills nor the financial capital for implementing their projects. Here is where global support becomes a key to the success of local initiatives. Global support means the joint effort of public administrations, financial institutions and environmental organizations in setting common goals in conservation and ecotourism.

Promoting local initiatives means relying mostly on small enterprises. Although small entities, as family ecolodges (hotels) for example, can be more consistent with nature-oriented tourist resources, they tend to face more problems in the early stages of developing their projects. As compared to large existing firms, new and small businesses run a higher risk of failure and need a longer term to become profitable. It is therefore more difficult for any project to start out having obtained the necessary financial capital. Also, small entrepreneurs tend to have a poorer grip on the market and often do not know where to get the necessary information.

Therefore, the need for global support is paramount: support in training, building networks, marketing and, particularly, in obtaining the necessary capital. A better preparation gives entrepreneurs a better chance of obtaining financial resources, in the form of bank loans for instance. Who is responsible for providing support to business in the ecotourism industry? It is clear that the public sector has the means to give information. Accurate information can be more useful than any other form of help, as subsidies for example. Central, regional and local governments as well as Non-Governmental Organizations are in the best position to take up responsibility in improving local conditions for entrepreneurial initiatives.

Any organization interested in protecting the environment should be concerned with helping local people benefit from ecotourism. If local residents become unsatisfied and frustrated with the economic results of protection, they will be the first to look for alternative uses of their resources. Rarely are the yields of ecotourism assured and, therefore, uncertainty can discourage potential operators.

Taking account of the interaction between the different actors is fundamental in establishing the necessary conditions for tourism development. Although tourists and tour operators can be easily identified on the demand side of the market, those on the supply side are more diverse and often play a small but decisive role. This is the case of real estate developers. Their interaction with accommodation suppliers is important to determine the type of construction and its costs. On the supply side there are many other operators as those providing complementary services to ecotourists. Cooperation and coordination between the different actors on the supply side can prevent contradictions in planning and management.

In preventing those contradictions, collaboration with municipalities cannot be overlooked. Often, municipalities are forced to deal with environmental problems without a clear program regarding ecotourism development. Given the frequency with which environmental issues are the cause of conflicts at the local level, municipalities can incur with contradictions that thwart the potential for ecotourism in a region. To minimize this risk, the ecotourist strategy must be global and receive global support.

Exhibit 3 shows some key factors for success in ecotourism projects. After the integrated approach discussed above, one must emphasize the need for a business and land use plan. The business plan must take account of the land as a fundamental component of tourist operations. In addition, the planning must be inspired by an ethical use of land, assuring respect for the region's biota as well as fostering its preservation and improvement. One has to keep in mind that tourism often may be the only source of income for some local communities. Lacking an adequate plan can frustrate the use of such a resource for ecotourism. The plan should anticipate costs and benefits for private operators, the local community as a whole and the ecological balance. At the same time, a slow start is critical for timely correction of potentially negative effects.

### **Exhibit 3**

## **KEY SUCCESS FACTORS IN ECOTOURISM PROJECTS**

### **1. Integrated approach**

Input from all major players(Particular attention to local people)

### **2. Planning and slow start**

- Business plan
- Land management plan

### **3. Education and training**

- Customers
- Tour operators
- Local guides

### **4. Maximize local benefits**

- For conservation
- For economic development

### **5. Evaluation and feedback loop**

- Mechanisms for modifying growth

Source: K.A. Ziffer. Ecotourism: The Uneasy Alliance. Conservation International, 1989.

## **V. A CASE FOR INCREASING ECOTOURISM RESOURCES: RESTORING WETLANDS**

A good deal of ecotourists are bird-watchers, but birds of many species are losing ground as their habitats disappear all over the planet. One of the richest habitats for birds and other forms of life are wetlands. But wetlands have been drained with profusion because they were considered unprofitable and even noxious. In most countries, and more particularly in Europe, only a small fraction remains of what in other times were vast wetlands. The waterfowl associated with these ecosystems have dwindled and some are endangered or threatened species.

Having said this, it is clear that there is an enormous opportunity for ecotourism in areas rich in wetlands that were claimed for agriculture. Despite drainage, some of those ecosystems have not disappeared completely and tend to recover their appearance in rainy seasons. Restoring a wetland, as long as water is available, is a relatively easy task. Recovering a good part of the biota that existed before transformation for farming may require a more careful control of many related conditions.

Today, wetlands are considered a national resource in many countries and the law has slowed down the process of their destruction. However, the critical issue lies in their restoration. Restoring some wetlands means returning the land to its primitive use so long it is possible. This poses an interesting conflict of interests between ecology and agricultural sectors, which in the past was resolved in favour of the latter. Today, the priorities have changed and ecology has a better chance. Wetlands are included among the richest ecosystems on earth, from which people can benefit in many ways. Wetlands are particularly beneficial for regions subject to long periods of drought. By taking this into account, one can find cases in which using drained wetlands for agriculture is inefficient from the economic point of view. Moreover, missing wetlands and the farming that replaced them create ecological imbalances which can cause long-lasting environmental problems.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

Ecotourism is an offered promise not yet fulfilled. There are experiences that point to certain forms of ecotourism as dangerous for the environment. Exceeding the carrying capacity of a region can create problems similar to those associated with traditional tourism. This is even more grave when highly pristine areas of the planet have been commercialized in the name of ecotourism. One may argue that conservation was better warranted without promoting the latter. In the Galapagos Islands, for example, ecotourism development has meant more per capita income, which attracts more people and, therefore, increases pressure on the biota by fishing and hunting.

Ecotourism becomes a more advisable strategy when it can compete with or replace traditional tourism. It makes even more sense when it becomes an alternative to other economic activities which use the same

environmental resources at greater risk of their demise. By combining economics and ecology it becomes clear that, in the long run, ecotourism can be more profitable than other alternative uses of natural resources. It should also be pointed out that conservation and ecotourism can be compatible with other forms of land use, as for example, organic farming.

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