

Material 3

Text 1:

Ecotourism.

Another way to see the world

The world has shrunk dramatically over the past 60 years, because people can travel farther, faster, and cheaper than ever before. Distant destinations that once took weeks to reach by ship are a few hours away by airplane. Exotic places that people used to only dream of or read about in books are as close as the nearest travel agency or online booking service. Luxurious locations on the Mediterranean are affordable. Exciting adventures in the Amazon Rainforest or in the Himalayas are possible. Cultural immersion experiences for sightseers and globetrotters are available, all because of one of the world's largest and fastest-growing industries: tourism.

1

Year	Number of tourists (millions)	Revenue generated, excluding airfare (\$ billions)
1950	25	12.5
1980	277	200
1990	435	262
1996	592	423
2000	675	475
2005	797	679
2010	939	919
2020	1,560 (projected)	2,000

Source: World Tourism Organization

Despite the dips and swings caused by political turmoil, economic downturns, and natural disasters, tourism's growth rate is not about to slow down. The number of tourists traveling every year has exploded from 25 million in 1950 to 939 million in 2010. For 2020, the World Tourism Organization estimates 1.56 billion international arrivals and an annual growth rate of 4 percent. Growth rates in increasingly popular developing countries are projected to surpass 6 percent a year through 2020. South Asia's annual growth rate has already reached 6.2 percent, and by 2020, Asia is expected to be second only to Europe as the most popular tourist destination.

Making up 11.4 percent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2005, tourism has become a major economic player for developed and developing nations alike. In France and the United States, international tourism's top two destinations, tourism accounts for 6 percent and 2.7 percent, respectively, of those countries' GDP. For countries such as Mexico, Malaysia, Thailand, Egypt, and Kenya, which depend heavily on tourism for employment and development opportunities, as well as for revenue and foreign investment, tourism can constitute 10 percent of GDP. For small Caribbean and Pacific islands, tourism can account for as much 40 percent of GDP. Smaller and poorer countries depend on tourism as a major source of employment and as their only means of economic diversification.

The future of the fourth-largest global export activity (after fuels, chemicals, and automotive products) looks bright for travelers, airlines, commercial tour operators, hotel chains, hospitality businesses, and governments – but what about the future of coral reefs, sandy beaches, national parks, and the pristine natural treasures that attract experience-hungry tourists by the thousands? The red flags are already appearing: quaint fishing villages turned into sprawling tourist playgrounds, shorelines ribboned with high-rise hotels, agricultural fields plowed under and converted into golf courses, coastal waters polluted with sewage, beaches littered with garbage, and noisy streets plagued by traffic congestion. To make way for airports, roads, and tourist complexes, forests have been cleared, fragile ecosystems destroyed, wildlife dispersed or decimated, and indigenous peoples displaced and dispossessed.

If tourism's growth is unstoppable, can it continue on an upward path, or must it take a gentler, more sustainable course? Is there a different kind of tourism that lets everyone have their cake and eat it too?

2

An offshoot of the environmental movement of the 1970s, ecotourism has come into its own over the past two decades. Thanks to an increasing awareness of environmental issues such as climate change, combined with a high demand among European and North American travelers for unspoiled locations, authentic cultural experiences, and recreational challenges, ecotourism is growing at a rate of 20 percent annually, making it the fastest-growing sector in the tourist industry. The International Ecotourism Society defines *ecotourism* as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and the welfare of local people”. The International Union for Conservation of Nature characterizes ecotourism as economically sustainable, ecologically sensitive, and culturally acceptable. Closely related is the concept of sustainable tourism identified in *Our Common Future*, the Brundtland Commission's report to the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development: development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

3

Ecotourism's principles clearly distinguish it from conventional mass tourism. Instead of classic tourist meccas, ecotourism seeks out remote locations with strict environmental protections and operates on a small scale. Tourists, businesses, and local residents are encouraged to minimize their impact on the environment by recycling materials, conserving energy and water, safely treating human waste and properly disposing of garbage, using alternative energy, and building in a manner that fits in with natural surroundings. The financial benefits from ecotourism are passed on to the community through conservation projects, employment, partnerships, and local participation in the development and management of local resources. Synonymous with “green” tourism, ecotourism promotes cultural sensitivity and respect for traditions and customs in order to avoid the kind of exploitation that has turned tribal ceremonies into sideshows and relics into souvenirs. Last but not least, ecotourism plays a political role in its support of human rights and democracy.

4

When it adheres to its principles, ecotourism can be a win-win situation for all involved. Ecuador's 15,000-acre Maquipucuna Reserve hosts an ecolodge, employs local staff and tour

guides, and supports a project to protect local bears. Home to the rare and unique lemur, the island of Madagascar invests its tourist revenues in safeguarding its world-famous biodiversity and reducing poverty, while keeping tourist numbers small and manageable. The province of Palawan in the Philippines, where ecotourists can visit three bird sanctuaries, twelve national parks, six mangrove forest reserves, and twenty-four watershed forest reserves, has been designated a fish and wildlife sanctuary and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Visitors to Chitwan National Park, another UNESCO Natural Heritage Site in Nepal, can explore jungles on the backs of elephants that are raised in a scientific breeding center and cared for in a sanctuary.

A shining model of what can be achieved without sacrificing quality, comfort, and convenience for its guests is the Sí Como No resort near Manuel Antonio National Park in Costa Rica. Belonging to Greentique Hotels, Sí Como No runs on solar power, conserves water, and practices recycling and environmental gray-water management. The staff is trained in environmental awareness, and time and money are invested in programs that benefit the environment and the community.

5

There is another side, however, to the ecotourism success story. Because tourism is the least-regulated industry with no universal standards or formal accreditation programs, any company can slap a “green” label onto its operation and cash in on the trend. Developers and governments are particularly guilty of “greenwashing” projects that appear to be environmentally aware on the surface but destroy ecologically sensitive areas during large-scale construction. Although ecotourism has motivated governments to establish national parks and preserves, poorer countries cannot afford the costs of managing these areas and either neglect them or turn to private investors, who may be committed to conservation – or interested in getting their hands on valuable property for their own gain.

The popularity of ecotourism is a problem in itself. The original ecotourists were small in number, deeply committed to conservation and actively engaged in cultural exchange. At one time, they were willing to rough it and go off the beaten path, but now so-called ecotourists travel en masse and expect the comforts of home packaged in a pretty setting. In the process, nature, once an honored treasure, has become a commodity and a photo opportunity. Larger numbers of ecotourists consume more resources and leave a larger impact on the environment, and eco-operators require more land to accommodate demand. As ecotourism spreads to more sensitive corners of the earth, it could end up defeating its original purposes.

6

Ecotourism can be achieved only if steps are taken in the right direction. In 1993, British Airways led the way as the first airline to implement a systematic environmental policy. The International Hotels Environment Initiative (IHEI) has more than 8,000 members from 111 countries. In cooperation with the United Nations Environment Program and the International Hotel & Restaurant Association, the IHEI developed an “Environmental Action Pack for Hotels” in 1995 to promote environmental management, energy and water conservation, and waste and emission reduction. In 1996, the World Tourism Organization, the World Travel and Tourism Council, and the Earth Summit Council drafted *Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry*, recognizing the interdependence of tourism, peace, development, and environmental

protection. The year 2002 was declared the United Nations International Year of Ecotourism, with an ecotourism summit held in May.

7

Whether initiated by trade or intergovernmental organizations, blueprints and agreements can be meaningful only if governments are proactive. Belize and Costa Rica, for example, have established national policies and strategies to further ecotourism. Brazil, Indonesia, Namibia, and Nepal integrate small-scale, community-oriented approaches into their tourism programs. While progress continues to be made on many fronts and by many players, it is the individual traveler who will keep ecotourism on track. Tourists can make informed choices about travel destinations and tour operators, as well as conscious efforts to reduce their individual impact on the environment and to practice cultural sensitivity toward local peoples. They can participate in volunteer conservation projects and gain skills and knowledge in the process. They can pressure governments to pass and enforce laws that protect the environment. Ultimately, they can spend their money where it is put to green use. Nature is counting on them.