

Ecotourism Basics

Lesson Aim

Provide a basic grounding in the administrative matters behind an ecotourism venture, including safety, legal considerations and profitability.

WHAT IS ECOTOURISM?

Ecotourism is a relatively new word which does not always have a clear definition. Even though some industry bodies may have adopted a particular definition, it still means very different things to different people. The following is one way of defining it:

ECOTOURISM is the combination of two words ECOLOGY and TOURISM. Ecology relates to the study or understanding of complex relationships in the natural world. Flora, fauna, soils, air, water and yes, even people are just some of the factors involved in interacting with one another. The nature of the relationship can be positive, negative or a combination of these or in rare instances of no consequence whatsoever. Often the long term effects will not be readily obvious, it is for this reason that management principles are so important in this developing industry. The direction ecotourism takes will be primarily up to the people who are involved at all levels of its implementation. Poor management will result in lost resources and ultimately a failed industry.

Travel and tourism is world's largest industry and is also among the fastest growing economic sectors. The travel and tourism industry accounts for 10% of the world's total economic output, almost 200 million jobs and is growing fast. The industry provides many benefits to travellers and the communities they visit. Some of these include increased opportunities for employment, increased local economies, and greater cultural appreciation.

The purpose of ecotourism is to foster an appreciation of nature and culture while promoting conservation, supporting sustainable community development, minimizing tourism's negative impacts, and providing for the active, beneficial involvement of local communities. Ecotourism is also committed to sustainable operations environmentally sound practices. Ecotourism enables communities to thrive economically while preserving and restoring the resources on which the travel and tourism industry and local communities depend.

Social trends and attitudes will also influence the nature and direction of ecotourism. Tourists have always visited and enjoyed natural environments, and as societies became increasingly industrialised, the natural environment changed from being the environment in which most of the population lived and worked to something separate and apart from the society's 'important' activities, like industry, commerce and politics. Nature came to be seen as something to visit, a place of respite and ease in which to take a break from the realities of city life. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the nineteenth century, natural sites were favourite holiday spots for many European travellers, and travelling to and through places of natural beauty became very popular among the middle and upper classes.

In the late nineteenth century, the rapid encroachment of cities and suburbs into natural environments and the subsequent threat to many natural sites triggered moves to set aside large areas of the natural environment for protection from further damage. Countries such as Canada, the U.S. and Australia established national parks, and two main attitudes towards those parks arose. One school of thought saw the prime role of national parks as *conservation* of natural resources for future use by future generations. Another saw the prime role as *preservation* or protection of the natural environment from potentially harmful use. This disagreement between conservationists and preservationists has continued to the present time, though the terms are no longer so widely used. Conservation of the environment has come to include both aims: that of saving resources for future generations and that of protecting the environment from harm, for its own sake.

Ecotourism is an industry that has developed amid these kinds of ideas, and itself reflects both of the aims of modern conservation: husbandry of resources and protection of the environment. The growth and viability of this industry, still in its early stages, depends both on careful and sustainable use of resources and protection of the environments that attract visitors.

Destinations are managed with both these goals in mind. Whilst there are a number of very well known cases where the tourism has been managed poorly, modern ecotourism strives to be sustainable, so that the activities that are taking place can continue to do so.

Many people working in travel and tourism now know that their customers value the responsible, environmentally sound business practices that define ecotourism. These practices include but are not limited to water and energy conservation, recycling, and experiential environmental education opportunities for tourists.

What is negative ecotourism?

Examples of poor ecotourism abound, however. Often, it is through no fault of the people involved, except to say that they were probably unaware of the key issues involved in the activities they were promoting. Untouched wilderness areas, for example, quickly lose their pristine status if bus loads of tourists scramble all over them. The initial appeal is lost and these tourists will not feel that they have experienced anything special. Hence they are likely only to give negative word of mouth accounts of their travels and this as in any business is a major selling point. In addition and probably far more important is the changed habitat and the sequential effects that this may have on the entire ecosystem. The very thing that makes the area appealing to ecotourists can be destroyed if the area is not properly managed.

Many eco-tourism claims concerning its benefits are exaggerated, or owe more to labelling and marketing than genuine sustainability. Not only are such projects repeatedly planned and carried out without local consent and support, but they often threaten local cultures, economies, and natural resource bases. Many of these projects are carried out without local consent and support and they often threaten these local cultures, economies, and natural resources. Some critics regard eco-tourism as an 'eco-facade': a tactic concealing the mainstream tourism industry's consumptive and exploitative practices by 'greening' it. Most of what is called "ecotourism" has very little "eco". A high percentage of the profits from most ecotour operations go to city based companies. This same profit is then spent within the city rather than in the ecotour environment. The rental van or car, food supplies for the lodges in the field, etc., come from that city. In most areas almost none of the profit stays with the people that live in areas rich in biodiversity.

This is not so in all cases but there are many we can find. For example, a wilderness lodge in a nature area may market on its location as an ecotourism destination when it does nothing else that is sustainable or 'eco' based and all profits go to the company owner. People often think many of the island resorts are ecotourist destinations. They may well be where ecotourists go but many can be fooled. These resorts may be doing nothing to hand back to the local community or to reduce its impact on the natural environment.

There is a developing trend to encourage ecotour companies to put some of the profit back into the areas they profit from. A lot of this money seems to go towards research, particularly of single species and is not seen as an efficient tool for conservation by most conservation groups and organisations. These groups are hoping to put more emphasis on preserving habitat first; wildlife can not exist without a habitat.

Education and ecotourism

In general, ecotourism is nature based, and emphasises both education and interpretation. Both of these can help avoid negative tourism and its damage to our natural environment. We care more about things if we value them, so one goal of education in tourism is to create a more caring attitude towards the environment. Education helps ensure that visitors, as well as site managers and tour operators, appreciate and contribute to the goals of conservation and protection during their visits (and hopefully, whenever they are in nature). Education also increases the appeal of natural sites by making visitors more aware of the special features, the history, even the prehistory of the sites. It enriches the experience by giving the visitor something that they can take away from the site without causing harm: knowledge and greater respect for the complexity, beauty and diversity of nature.

Interpretation is one aspect of education. It includes all those means by which the visitor is informed about a site, local flora and fauna, their habitats and the often delicately balanced ecosystems in which they exist. This could include pictorial or static displays, tours, information brochures, self-guided tours. Etc (Interpretation will be discussed further in the next lesson).

ECOTOURISTS: A PROFILE

Ecotourism as a practice (not as an industry, though) has a long history, as was suggested earlier. In the 19th century and earlier, many travellers to natural destinations also were amateur naturalists (people with a keen, scientific interest in nature and living things). They often collected specimens of plants, animals, rocks etc. to take home to add to their existing collections, and were often very keen to learn more about the environments they visited and the living things within them. In fact, some modern areas of natural science were first studied by amateurs and travellers with special interests in one or another feature of the environment or artists who documented various species through drawings or painting. Since travel and the collection and transportation of specimens was both time-consuming and costly, it is not surprising that many of these amateur naturalists (the early ecotourists) were from the wealthy classes.

As the middle class became wealthier in many European countries, more middle class travellers also came to enjoy the natural environments, and by the mid-twentieth century, working class people could afford to travel, at least to nearby sites, on their holidays. Not having either the free time or the wealth to become amateur naturalists, these tourists focused, for the most part, on simply enjoying nature and a refreshing change of pace, and this became the main thrust of tourism from then on.

The rise of ecotourism reflects, in part, the growing interest among many parts of society in nature as something to be protected and studied. It is, in a way, a return to an earlier attitude, but with the added influence of a more widespread and informed environmentalist attitude. The modern ecotourist is motivated by delight in nature, but also by a general attitude towards the environment that has been influenced and informed by the environmental movement. (Broadly speaking, the environmental movement refers to a social, often political movement, that took off in the 1960's with the aim of preserving, conserving, or restoring the natural, environment).

Certain types of people are attracted to ecotourism type activities. To be really successful, an ecotour guide will have knowledge of the type of people on the tour, and will develop the tour with these people in mind. The majority of ecotourists are aged between 20 and 40, with the second largest group being the over 55s. Generally, ecotourists are well educated and are interested in conservation. However, the gap is widening and people from all walks of life and all ages are beginning to take an interest in ecotourism.

Most ecotourists are keen to have a nature based experience, although they may not necessarily want to know about in depth scientific principles. For example, ecotourists may want to watch whales, but they may not necessarily want a detailed lesson on whale biology. Ecotourists are on holiday, and whilst they want to learn, they are still looking for a bit of rest and relaxation, not a university field trip. On the other hand, some ecotourists want to whole absorbing experience and thrive on an excess of knowledge derived from tour leaders



ADMINISTRATIVE CONCERNS

This course is designed for people who want to be tour guide operators. Those who want to manage an ecotourism business should do further study, such as the Ecotour Management course with ACS. As an ecotour guide, however, you should know the basics of safety, insurance, what makes money in ecotourism, and what is sustainable in a natural area.

Value for money

To be sustainable in the long term, any sort of tourism business must be able to meet its costs and still be considered value for money by customers. Many ecotour operators start up their business because they are interested in nature. They tend to undercharge because they are doing something they enjoy. This approach to business is not sustainable. All costs, including personal living expenses need to be paid for from money earned from the business. Sometimes, if tourists feel something is “too” cheap, they will shy away from it, thinking it is an amateur venture. Be fair to the business and fair to the clients – if the product that is offered is worth it, the business will be viable.

Permits

Depending on where the ecotourism venture operates, business owners may need to obtain permits to take tourists into the area. For example, to operate an ecotourism venture in most National Parks, you will need to have a permit from the relevant National Parks authority.

Permits are one way that nature parks raise money for park maintenance. In some instances, however, permits can be difficult to obtain and they may have strict conditions on them regarding tourist numbers and activities allowed. Be aware of these conditions when operating as a guide, and make sure that the business you are working for has the necessary paperwork in place.

Public liability insurance

In many countries, tourism operators are legally liable for injury to members of the public. This means that if someone on your tour hurts themselves, the company you work for may be liable for this. Many National Parks and other natural areas will not issue ecotour operators with a permit unless they have the requisite public liability insurance. This varies depending on the country and the type of activity. The important thing is to be aware of insurance, and to attend to it *prior* to conducting tours.

SAFETY

Controlling participants in ecotour activities

Some types of activities are simply inappropriate and dangerous for certain types of people. There is a certain level of risk associated with any type of adventure activity, but that risk will be greatly increased if the participant does not have the physical abilities or appropriate skills to safely participate in the activity.

An ecotour leader (as well as the operator-employer) can be held legally liable for injury to participants, if the appropriate precautions are not adhered to. Consider:

- Contacts
- prior experience
- health problems
- medications being used
- any food constraints.

Precautions may involve:

- Ensuring appropriate training (eg. certification for divers, a briefing session for bushwalkers, etc).
- Having participants sign a form releasing the organisers from liability.
- Ensuring equipment is both appropriate and in good condition.
- Ensuring emergency measures are in place in case of an unforeseen incident.

Ecotour guides also need to be aware of when they should cancel an activity! Under certain conditions, it's best NOT to go ahead with an activity or tour. For example, don't go diving in rough weather; don't go rock climbing when a blizzard is approaching, etc.

Guidelines for wilderness safety

Do the following:

- Always leave complete details of where you are going with someone (eg. the tour office, close relatives, friends or police).
- Leave details of estimated times of departure and return.
- Leave details of any special medical condition of participants (eg. asthma or diabetes).
- Be sure to notify them when you return!
- Take any equipment needed for navigation (whether land or sea) such as maps, compass, etc.
- Take appropriate clothing (including footwear).
- Take a first aid kit.
- Take appropriate emergency provisions (eg. some food, matches, etc)

Do NOT do the following:

- Do not overestimate your abilities. Do no more than the least capable member of a group can handle comfortably.
- Do not move any faster than the slowest member of the group.
- Don't divide a group - there is safety in numbers.
- Don't leave an injured person alone in the wilderness
- When lost, stop moving. Make a campsite in a visible/detectable area.
- If you are overdue to return, phone or radio ahead and let them know, if possible.

Remember that safety depends on the fitness level of the ecotour guide and skills of participants. Maintain a manageable ratio of experience to inexperience. For example: when bushwalking in wilderness areas it is advisable that there is least one experienced bushwalker for every three inexperienced bushwalkers. (Reference: Bushwalkers Wilderness Rescue Internet Page, N.S.W. Confederation of Bushwalking Clubs, 1996)

Consider some of the hazards below:

Water activities: Water can be exceptionally cold and death from cold water may be swift. If you fall in the water without protection such as a neoprene wetsuit, you have about 3 minutes in which you are able to actively help yourself before you start to be disabled by hypothermia. The water is often so silty you cannot see underwater only a few inches below the surface. Other river hazards include weather, water levels, misjudged terrain, collision, entrapment, hypothermia, drowning, and falling overboard.

Wild animals: In most parts of the world you will be exploring the habitat of wild animals ranging from poisonous snakes in Australia to the Grizzly (Brown) and black bears that are common along Alaskan rivers as they feed on salmon. You may also come across dangerous marine creatures such as jellyfish (the deadly box jellyfish in some tropical waters) and stonefish.

Insects, scorpions, spiders, and ticks are members of a group of animals known as arthropods. Several species can sting or bite, transmit disease causing organisms, cause serious allergic reactions and are considered harmful to humans. Although the most common form of wildlife encountered will probably be harmless insects it is still prudent to be well informed and plan for unexpected encounters. Mosquitoes are not only annoying when they bite, they can also transmit the disease organisms that cause malaria, yellow fever, dengue fever, West Nile virus, and encephalitis.

Exposure to weather and natural forces: In some areas of the world even in summer, exposure and hypothermia are very real hazards. More people die in the bush through lack of preparation and inadequate equipment than for any other reason. Understanding the affects of the elements on the human body as well as

the need for the best quality equipment (suited to the environment in which you are travelling) is therefore a crucial component of wilderness travel. Having the ability to find water, food and provide shelter in emergency situations can be the difference between perishing in the bush and survival. An advanced first aid certificate is a must. Wind and rain can be common, and air is colder on the water. Strong winds, landslides, glacial outburst floods, calving glaciers, and quicksand or even bushfires are some of the hazards that may be encountered.

INTERPRETIVE COLLECTION

With each assignment you will be required to prepare identification sheets containing an illustration (photograph or a drawing), together with a description of the species/type of organism.

This collection is designed to be the basis of a resource which you may use as an ongoing aid when designing and conducting interpretive activities. This resource file will encourage you to observe and understand the relationships and interactions that occur within the natural environment.

As an ecotour leader you would need to understand these processes in order to convey information to your clients.

If you are undertaking this course with full tutor support (including assignment marking), you are required to submit this collection to show that you have an understanding of localised flora and fauna.

If you are undertaking this as a self guided learning program without assignments being marked, we still strongly recommend you prepare this interpretive collection.

With each lesson you submit, you must complete details of eight living organisms as follows:

- 3 X plants
- 3 X birds
- 2 X other animals (eg. insects, mammals, reptiles etc).

This collection should include information on species that are resident or perhaps migratory in your local area. If you live in an urban area you may have to look a little harder for animal species, but be assured that they do exist. Find a local park or waterway/creek and you might be surprised with what it actually contains. Introduced species are acceptable as part of your collection, but do try to find evidence of natives, and observe how they are adapting.

PLANTS

To prepare plant specimens:

1. Find an area where you can legally collect, sketch or photograph plants. You might find these plants growing on your own property, or you might visit another local to area to find them.
2. You need to photograph or draw a plant, or obtain a photograph or copy a photo (perhaps from a book or magazine).
3. To the best of your ability, write down the plant's full name, including the family it belongs to, its genus, species and if you can, a common name.
4. Write down any other information pertaining to the plants collected. This might include:
 - Distinguishing characteristics –flower, leaf, bark, etc.
 - Uses – edible, craft, scent, cut flower, bird attracting, food for animals, etc.
 - Height and Width...How big it grows in your locality, and how big elsewhere?
 - Flowers...What colour and when does it flower?

- Hardiness...Is it frost tender? Will it survive full sun or does it need shade? How does the wind affect it? Will it tolerate all types of soils? ...etc.
- Environment –Where is it most likely to occur?
- Pest and Disease...List any pests or diseases which are particularly bad with this plant.

ANIMAL/BIRD/INSECT SAMPLING OPTIONS

Again, include an illustration such as photograph or sketch.

Try to research information the following for each species you decide to include in your collection:

- Name, including scientific name if possible
- Breeding habits - How prolific; What time of the year?
- Movement habits - When is this creature active? How does it get around?
- Feeding habits - .What does it eat? How does it get its food? Are there alternatives?
- Interactions - How does this creature fit into its local environment? Does it affect other organisms by its actions?
- Habitat. - Where does the creature normally live? Does it appear to stay in a certain environment?
- Points of interest - Indicate how this creature seems to be coping with adapting to its present environment? Also any observations that are of interest to you!

SOME DIFFERENT WAYS YOU MIGHT FIND SPECIMINS

- The easiest might be to look through books, magazines or newspapers for photos/drawings and information relating to different animals and plants
- Visit a botanic garden or zoo and take your camera with you.
- Obtain some local field guides to plants and animals, and visit a wilderness area. When you find something attempt to identify it using the field guide.
- Join a wilderness society, bird watching club, native plant society or some other relevant group and attend their meetings.
- Search for information using the internet.

COLLECTION SHEET EXAMPLE

PLANT SPECIMEN

Illustration

Plant/Animal Family

Genus

Species

Common Name

Distinguishing

Characteristics

Size

Habitat

Other comments

.....

.....

ANIMAL SPECIMEN

Illustration

Family

Genus

Species

Common Name

Breeding habits

Movement habits

Feeding habits

Interactions

Habitat

.....

Points of Interest.....

.....

SET TASK

Think of a hypothetical ecotourism venture in your locality. It may be one you are interested in setting up yourself. Research the demand for the venture in your area. Then determine whether any permits are required, and what sort of insurance is needed. In order to do this, you might telephone a couple of other ecotourism operators in the area and ask them about their operations (tell them you are a student, not a competitor). You might also consider telephoning the people who manage the land (for example, National Parks and Wildlife, State Forestry Department) and asking them about their requirements for operators in the area.

Assignment 1

Question 1

In your own words, define ecotourism.

Question 2

Write a 500-600 word report on your set task.

Question 3

What safety concerns should be considered by the ecotour guide who is leading a group for the hypothetical business venture you researched in your set task? Does the guide need any specific training? Submit ½ to 1 page.

Question 4

Prepare a brochure/leaflet designed to promote the ecotourism venture you researched in your set task. In addition to perhaps distributing such a brochure like this, how else might you market such an ecotourism activity?

Question 5

Don't forget to submit your interpretive collection for this lesson.

TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THIS COURSE PLEASE VISIT

<https://www.acsedu.co.uk/Courses/Ecotourism-and-Adventure-Activities/ECOTOURISM-TOUR-GUIDE-COURSE-BTR301-337.aspx>