

# Ecotourism

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Ecotourism is a valuable but contentious concept. The underlying idea is that under some circumstances, tourism could make a net positive contribution to conservation of natural (and cultural) environments. Since tourism is probably the only profit-making commercial industry which can make any such claim, even if rarely, this justifies the construction of the term ecotourism, even though there are no parallel or analogous terms in other industry sectors. Since conservation is important to human and planetary survival, and other conservation mechanisms are perpetually underfunded and under political pressure, any contribution which tourism can make is worth pursuing. The concept of ecotourism is hence potentially valuable.

The contentions derive from three main sources. The first issue is that many people, especially in the commercial tourism industry itself, use the term ecotourism simply to describe a particular product sector, namely tourism which relies on nature-based attractions or settings, irrespective of the impacts it may create. There has thus been endless and continuing debate over definitions.

The second issue is that even if the overall concept is accepted as above, the mechanisms are hotly debated. To make a net positive contribution to conservation, and/or to local communities, a commercial tourism venture must reduce its negative impacts, and also yield a positive impact which outweighs the negatives. Various environmental management measures and technologies, and customer education approaches, are available to reduce negative impacts; but there is considerable doubt as to how well they work, and even how to quantify impacts and assess their global ecological significance. Similarly, only a small number of commercial tourism operators have indeed generated demonstrable positive outcomes for conservation, through mechanisms such as private conservation reserves. Many tourism industry associations claim that tourism can generate indirect political or economic support for conservation, but this is rarely demonstrable.

The third issue is that even if some best-practice ecotourism operations can indeed generate localised net gains for conservation, they rely on the far larger mainstream travel and tourism sector, which generates very large-scale social and environmental impacts, including contributions to climate change associated with long-haul air travel. In addition, since ecotourism operators are themselves commercial enterprises, they must remain profitable to survive, and this can create difficulties if they are in competition with other operators offering similar products but with less attention to conservation, communities or environmental management and education.

From a research perspective, ecotourism is effectively shorthand for the many different direct and indirect interactions between tourism and environment. These range from the direct effects of nature-based outdoor tourism, a field known as recreation ecology, to the complex sociopolitical and economic interactions between tourists, tour operators, local residents, government agencies and other stakeholders, which may yield a wide range of unanticipated outcomes. So, ecotourism is far from simple, but it remains very interesting!

## Further reading

- Buckley, R.C. 2003. Case Studies in Ecotourism. CABI, Oxford UK ([Link »](#))
- Buckley, R.C. 2009. Ecotourism Principles and Practices. CABI, UK. ([Link »](#))
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