

American Way, January 2003

The Accidental Ecotourist
by Barry Lynn

Can a tourist have a good vacation and do good at the same time? What qualifies as ecotourism, anyway? As the UN celebrates the International Year of Ecotourism, a new eco-seal of approval is on the way.

On Mexico's southern Pacific coast, a luxurious hotel juts into blue waters, seemingly in perfect harmony with its surroundings. Guests swim off a white sand beach, arrange dive or jungle tours, or simply sit under thatch and sip margaritas. Yet conservationists see clouds over this paradise. In building the hotel, developers killed much of the reef that once crossed the bay. Guides are just as happy to rent a Jet Ski as to lecture on ecology. And the people who for generations lived here by farming and fishing now work as maids and bellhops.



An hour to the west by car lies the tiny community of Playa Ventanilla, a few cinder block huts huddled on a palm-fringed beach. Tourists ride ponies over the sand to an estuary, where boats await to carry them among the mangroves and past crocodiles and nesting ibis. On a small island, residents proudly display breeding pens for local deer and sell coconuts and tortillas. Back in the village, anyone who wishes to spend the night is encouraged to string up a hammock on the beach or to rent one of the two second-floor rooms with no screens on the windows.

For the average traveler who wants an ecotourism adventure, neither may be the perfect destination. The hotel on the bay has great food, a beautiful pool, and iced drinks, but an observant ecotourist would not be able to shake the sense of destruction. Ventanilla gets points for restoring wetlands and protecting crocodiles, but the menu is fried fish, the colas are warm, and rooms often lack electricity.

So which destination qualifies as "ecotourism"? Can a tourist have a good time and actually help to do good at the same time? There is still no single organization that can answer these questions.

Hundreds of businesses tout their "ecotourism" credentials, and scores of organizations work to certify that some of these are actually valid, yet the uninitiated traveler has no way of knowing whether the Ecotourism Society of Saskatchewan is as effective as Australia's Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program, or whether that wonderful guide in Borneo spends his weekends poaching tropical snakes.

That may change soon, however, thanks to a project launched recently by the Rainforest Alliance and supported by the Ford Foundation and a coalition of conservation groups and tourism businesses. If successful, the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council will give people a simple way to judge how well hotels, guides, and even restaurants interact with their environments and communities.

Although it may take a while before the program develops the cachet of, say, the Michelin guide to French restaurants, at least it's a start.

“There is great value for the consumer in having a widely recognized eco label,” says Tom O’Brien, director of environmental affairs for Lindblad Expeditions, one of the biggest private companies that engage in sustainable tourism. “The consumer does not want to base his or her whole trip on environmental issues. That is not a vacation. But they do want to know they are not part of the problem, that they are not contributing to the demise of the very place they went to so much trouble to visit.”

Tour Goups Arrive

For years, birders, backpackers, hunters, mountain climbers, hikers, fishers, divers, and surfers have ventured around the world seeking new rivers and beaches and mountains. Yet the idea that a traveler who visits a pristine rainforest or savanna should somehow bring benefits to this environment, and to the people who live there, is barely 10 years old.

The term ecotourism first became common among a scattering of lodges in countries such as Costa Rica, Tanzania, and Peru. But there was little agreement as to what exactly the concept meant, and the word quickly came to be misused by groups more interested in money than in conservation. “When ecotourism first became popular, there was really no accountability,” says O’Brien, who has been in the tour business more than 20 years. “There were some great models out there, some really great ecolodges, but there was also a lot of mainstream travel that was entering these sensitive areas under the guise of ecotourism.”

Over the last decade, attitudes changed greatly. Sophisticated ecotourism certification programs blossomed in Costa Rica and Australia. Many governments realized that even mass tourism can be made more sustainable, say by getting hotels to wash linens less often. Conservationists learned to make room for tourists and, especially, local communities.

Meanwhile, the tourism industry realized that a dollop or two of green on a brochure could be a powerful attraction. Suddenly, it seemed, everybody started talking ecotourism. This is not mass tourism yet — the World Tourism Organization reports that only 4 percent of U.S. tourists heading abroad plan to participate in an “environmental or ecological excursion” — but tour operators say the percentage of travelers who want some sort of environmental “experience” is well in the double digits.

Just as suddenly, it became clear there was still no tool with which the serious tourist could make sense of it all.

What is ecotourism?

Designing a certification program is never easy, even if the goal is simply to steer motorists away from mildewed roadside hotels. When the goal is to bridge the interests of environmentalists and businesses in many nations, designing a program that works can seem nearly impossible.

“What are the measurable indicators of success, that’s the tricky part,” says Megan Epler Wood, president of The International Ecotourism Society.

At the Rainforest Alliance, the goal is not to directly certify all hotels and guides and dive boats around the globe. Rather, the aim is to create a system that can judge how well local certification

programs work. A Sustainable Tourism seal of approval, therefore, is designed to assure travelers that a local ecotourism program, be it in Sri Lanka or Bolivia, follows globally approved practices.

“It is very difficult to have a truly global certification program,” says Martha Honey, a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington and an expert in ecotourism certification. “The difference among regions is so great, you really need people with local knowledge.”

The first step, she says, is simply to define what ecotourism means. Most conservationists and governments, and a growing number of tourism businesses, accept that three criteria must be met:

It must contribute to conservation

It must benefit the local people

Tourists must learn from the experience

Beyond that, agendas diverge. The United Nations places special emphasis on helping local communities; large tour operators naturally want happy customers.

The next big challenge is to understand who will use the rating system and how. “Right now, the biggest drivers for standards are European tour operators,” says Robert Toth, a certification expert who helped design the Costa Rica system. This is not because European tourists demand it, but because the European Union requires tour operators to do so, he says.

Big challenges remain. The largest of the existing certification programs, Green Globe 21, supports the Rainforest Alliance’s effort. So too the United Nations Environment Programme, and others. But no one knows if all such parties will stay on once the details are published.

There’s also the matter of paying for certification. Such programs simply “can’t afford to waste anybody’s time or money,” says Epler Wood. “Tourism is a notoriously low-profit-margin business.”

Personal Ecology

In a pine forest in the mountains of southern Mexico, the leaders of the community Santa Catarina Ixtepeji gather in a small, poorly lit room to explain how they protect their communal lands. Running from cool wooded highlands down to lowland scrub and desert, the community’s land is home to puma, wolves, ocelots, and jaguars.

Supported by a small grant from the World Wildlife Fund, community members are clearing and marking trails, sending local men and women to study to be guides, and fixing up old lumber company cabins to serve tourists. Progress is steady, but slow.

Still, the men are clearly thrilled to relate even the smallest success. Mountain bikers ride out on weekends to grind up the old logging roads. A few American birders have come. Even a group of Italian backpackers.

Here, as at thousands of other small communities in fragile ecosystems around the world, a traveler can visit the far frontier of ecotourism, where it is the local people who work hardest to protect the environment. But how can any certification system ever identify all such programs, let alone judge their design and value?

“This may be easier than you would think,” says Tensie Whelan, executive director of Rainforest

Alliance. “Because these are the people, even more than the tourist, who most want this to happen.”

Barry Lynn, a writer based in Washington, D.C., is former editor of *Global Business* magazine, and has covered alternative fuel cars and socially conscious businesses for *American Way*.

Chad Windham incorporates his love for the outdoors on assignments for *American Way* as well as for *Travel Holiday*, *BusinessWeek*, and *Spirit* magazine.

Photo by Chad Windham