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Ecotourism: Tripping with Mother Nature

Jill Barnard

Traditionally, tourism and environmentalism have been at odds. A week of vacation often meant a week of lavish living void of worries about conservation and practicality. The priority rested in being pampered, at all costs.

Times have changed, and people are beginning to look at our changing earth and realize that perhaps our natural resources are limited. Even large resorts are taking notice and enacting recycling programs, minimizing waste, examining their use of toxic sprays for pest control, and protecting dunes and other unique areas.

The Florida Hilton hotel chain serves as a good example. According to an article in the *Orlando Sentinel*, the hotels recycled 25% of their waste in 1992, compared to none in 1990. More and more, the tourist industry is reaching the conclusion that many consumers prefer to support environmentally friendly companies rather than those that do not make efforts to preserve our environment. Hence, the emergence of *ecotourism*, a rapidly growing new facet of the tourist industry.

It is difficult to assign a single definition to the term *ecotourism* because of its young age, but it generally involves education about nature as well as its preservation. "It denotes tourism that is environmentally, culturally, and socially aware" (Bangs, 1992). A similar interpretation of ecotourism can be found in the December, 1991 edition of the *Estuarine Research Federation* newsletter.

Ecotourism should encompass those activities that intimately involve the nature tourist, not just with a particular species of interest or a habitat that supports natural populations, but with the incentive to contribute to the continued protection of natural areas and their resident and transient populations (*Estuarine Research Federation*, 1991).

Essentially, this combination of ecology and tourism should result in an educational experience for the traveler coupled with an attempt to preserve the visited environment. This might involve something as simple as contributing to the economy of an impoverished country by purchasing souvenirs from the natives, or it might entail a 50 mile hike through a fragile ecosystem rather than a 50 mile drive, to prevent the release of automobile emissions into the air. It may be a festival on the Eastern Shore of Virginia organized in part to capitalize on the potential economic benefits of ecotourism that also is resulting in environmental preservation (see related article in Fall 1994 issue of *Virginia Wetlands Report*). Whatever the situation, nature is the prime ingredient and its preservation is imperative.

The ecotourism experience is intended to invoke in participants a respect for nature and a bond so strong that they become compelled to assist in its preservation. They not only observe their sur-

roundings, but actively become an essential part of the travel experience.

Although ecotourism is relatively new, the concept is becoming increasingly popular among travelers. The number of environmentally conscious consumers appears to be skyrocketing, and the tourist industry's concerted effort to become more earth friendly than it has been in the past, is becoming more and more evident.

National Audubon Society Guidelines

The National Audubon Society has had a paramount role in the creation of ecotourism. The Society conducts tours throughout the nation and has compiled the following list of guidelines to be followed during ecotours:

- wildlife and their habitats must not be disturbed
- Audubon tourism to natural areas will be sustainable

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Commonwealth's Declared Policy:
"to preserve the wetlands and to prevent their despoliation and destruction..."

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- waste disposal must have neither environmental nor aesthetic impacts
- the experience a tourist gains in traveling with Audubon must enrich his or her appreciation of nature, conservation and the environment
- Audubon tours must strengthen the conservation effort and enhance the natural integrity of places visited
- traffic in products that threaten wildlife and plant populations must not occur
- the sensibilities of other cultures must be respected (Whelan, Tensie 1991)

The Major Tenets of Ecotourism

The National Audubon Society's guidelines are appropriate not only for their own tours, but for nature tourism in general. The list is representative of the major tenets of ecotourism which according to the book *Nature Tourism*, are:

- (1) increase awareness of nature
- (2) maximize economic benefits for local people
- (3) encourage cultural sensitivity
- (4) minimize negative impacts on the environment (Whelan, Tensie 1991).

Benefits of Ecotourism

Several benefits of ecotourism that should be considered are highlighted in the book *Nature Tourism*. One benefit is the maintenance of biodiversity. In some areas, species and ecosystems are protected primarily to attract tourists. A secondary result is the preservation of the original biodiversity of the ecosystem. In many cases, there are several watershed values as well. For example, measures are taken to control erosion and reduce local flooding. Perhaps the most important is the educational value of ecotourism. Many people have their eyes opened to the plight of the environment through ecotravel, and not only observe, but adopt an active role in preserving it that far exceeds the single week of vacation and, in fact, may permeate their entire life. The

advantages of ecotourism are numerous, and those listed are merely representative of a much larger category which is illustrated in the following chart:

Benefits That Accompany Nature Tourism

1. Watershed Values
 - Erosion control
 - Local flood reduction
 - Regulation of stream flows
 2. Ecological processes
 - Fixing and cycling of nutrients
 - Soil Formation
 - Circulation and cleansing of air and water
 - Global life support
 3. Biodiversity
 - Gene resources
 - Species Protection
 - Ecosystem diversity
 - Evolutionary processes
 4. Education and research
 5. Consumptive Benefits
 - Timber
 - Wildlife products
 - Nontimber forest products (e.g., edible plants, herbs, medicines, rattan, building materials, rubber)
 6. Nonconsumptive benefits
 - Aesthetic
 - Spiritual
 - Cultural/historical
 - Existence value
 7. Future values
 - Option value
 - Quasi-option value
- (Dixon and Sherman, 1990)



Pristine wetlands are a "natural" tourist attraction.

Research in Ecotourism

Because ecotourism is relatively young, there is a significant need for further research and development in the area. There is minimal structure and organization in the field of ecotourism and hardly a widespread understanding. Programs need to be monitored and guidelines for change established. Increased community participation is essential for the success of ecotourism, as is responsible tourist behavior. Each needs to be promoted, implemented, and finally, enforced (Miller, Marc L., et al., 1991).

Elizabeth Boo, of the World Wildlife Fund writes of the beginnings of this research in the two volume work *Ecotourism: The Potentials and Pitfalls*. The study in which she was involved included research in five countries: Costa Rica, Belize, Dominica, Ecuador, and Mexico. Members of the study group conducted surveys among tourists in each country to acquire a general idea of the average degree of interest there was in the natural resources, how much money each visitor spent, and the kinds of transportation they utilized during their vacation, among other things. Interestingly, the study indicated that "people who said that the country's natural areas were the main criterion in selecting the destination spent more money than any other group" (Boo, 1990). This is one of many factors that could be influential in the increased popularity of ecotourism in the future.

A Closer Look at Specific Examples of Ecotourism

Ecotourism in Belize

Belize provides a prime example of the business of ecotourism. Not only do visitors enjoy exotic festivals such as the Cashew Festival and the Coconut Festival, but also they have the opportunity to visit rare wildlife reserves. Animals like the jaguar, manatee, and the black howler monkey live in sanctuaries created especially for their preservation. In addition, tourists can see remnants of ancient history through the study of

Mayan ruins in the country. The majority of the activities in Belize include a significant amount of local participation, and therefore the natives reflect a genuine interest in the preservation of these rare and wonderful resources.

Ecotourism in Virginia

Closer to home, it is obvious that Virginia also possesses many invaluable resources. Managed correctly, these resources can be used to promote ecotourist activity, and eventually the economy and the environment could benefit as a result.

Cruising Virginia's Waterways

The Chesapeake Bay, as well as several other Virginia waterways, are prime areas for ecotourist activity. There are eighty-eight rivers in the state which are now or soon will be designated, in whole or in part, as scenic rivers under the 1970 Scenic Rivers Act (Virginia Outdoors Plan, 1989). As of 1989, the Chesapeake was considered to be "the largest and most productive estuary in the United States" (Virginia Outdoors Plan, 1989). Whether one prefers to travel on a larger vessel with 100 other passengers, or charter a sailboat just for the family, there seems to be something to suit everyone who is interested in seeing more of Virginia's natural resources. However, large ships have a greater potential to harm the environment than private four to ten passenger sailboats. There are companies that pride themselves on engaging in environmentally friendly travel. Occasionally, statements are included in the advertisements and brochures attesting to the group's respect for the environment, and their quest to minimize their impact on nature. Often, scientists or historians accompany passengers on these more formal outings and provide vacationers with educational seminars based on the particular area of travel. On a smaller scale, dolphin watching trips run throughout the summer, as do whale watching trips during the winter months, primarily from ports in the Virginia Beach area. The vessels used for these excursions are relatively small to minimize the effect of human presence on the animals.

A Wealth of Wetlands

"Over the past 23 years, the Division of State Parks has continued its efforts to acquire and protect significant natural resources while providing opportunities for meeting recreational needs" (Virginia Outdoors Plan, 1989). A significant portion of this conservation combined with recreation has taken place on Virginia's wetlands. Several sites within the Chesapeake Bay wetlands system are considered to be "wetlands of international importance especially as wildlife habitat." There are approximately eight Virginia state parks designated as such, among them York River State Park in James City County, and Seashore State Park in Virginia Beach. "The Virginia State Park System alone is currently generating about \$80 million annually for the state travel industry" (Virginia Outdoors Plan, 1989). This impressive figure could be expanded simply through the utilization of a closely monitored balance between protection and recreational use of still untapped resources such as False Cape State Park and Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge. With careful management, False Cape and Back Bay could benefit from the symbiotic relationship between wildlife and recreation that is characteristic of ecotourism.

Earth Watch

Although Earth Watch does not correspond directly with the conventional definition of tourism, many people enjoy spending their vacation time and money on Earth Watch sponsored trips. The unconventional nature of the pastime is due to the work expected of the vacationers. They are not there merely to see nature, but actually to help save it. Participants accompany scientists from all over the world and assist in their research. In this area, the "Earth Watcher's" destination is the Chesapeake Bay. Both Old Dominion Univer-

sity and the College of William and Mary (Virginia Institute of Marine Science) conduct research on the Chesapeake Bay and invite travelers to accompany them on their outings. Dr. James Perry III and Sharon Dewing organize the trip for the VIMS group. Participants accompany them in the field for a week to assist in the gathering of data. The group is able to see a great deal of diverse plant and animal life through visits to wetlands in Taskinas Creek, Goodwin and Catlett Islands, and finally Sweethall Marsh, all located within the York River drainage basin. All types of people have been attracted to the Earth Watch project according to Dewing and Perry. Earthwatchers of past excursions have included artists, biochemists, students, and teachers, along with other occupations.

Gone to the Birds on the Eastern Shore

The first annual Eastern Shore Birding Festival was held October 9-10, 1993, and was, according to the intentions of organizers, a precursor of many more to follow. Avid birders as well as first timers came from all over the state to witness the movement of thousands of neotropical migratory songbirds through Virginia's Eastern Shore on their way down the coast to their Central and



The City of Norfolk has combined tourism promotion and nature education at its Monkey Bottom facility off I-64 in Willoughby.

South American destinations. Participants spent their time in lectures and on educational tours, learning about the birds and their habitats, and the invaluable resources of the Eastern Shore. The birders were not disappointed with the sightings of 175 different species of birds within the two-day period. The purposes of the festival, according to the registration brochure for the 1994 event are :

- Raise public awareness of the importance of local habitat within this bird migration corridor.
- Raise national awareness of the Eastern Shore as a birding "hot spot."
- Provide educational and recreational opportunities for the citizens of the Eastern Shore and beyond.
- Highlight Natural Resource Areas as showcases for natural resource protection in concert with appropriate and compatible recreational activities.
- Raise local awareness of the economic potential that the area could derive from nature tourism.
- Provide a forum for other related local industries such as artists and craftsmen, farmers, nurserymen, fishermen, and retailers of outdoor equipment.

Organizers hope to make nature tourism a significant source of income as well as a means of environmental preservation for Virginia's Eastern Shore.

SECOND ANNUAL

EASTERN SHORE



BIRDING FESTIVAL

OCTOBER 8 - 9, 1994

Conclusion

Tourism is currently a primary source of revenue for the state of Virginia. Unfortunately, in the long run the tourist industry which is so lucrative at this point, could literally destroy itself. Pavement, pollution, clearing land to build new attractions, and other intrusive activities have the potential to ruin the very natural resources which now draw visitors to our home state. Ecotourism is a viable alternative to the often harmful practices of traditional tourism.

Ecotourism is not however, always the route to take to reach economic growth and environmental preservation. In some cases, minimal human activity in a fragile ecosystem is detrimental, and in these instances alternatives should be explored. Consumers need to use careful judgment when choosing an ecotour, a mere label does not automatically insure the tour is environmentally friendly. Preservation and education are essential elements of ecotourism and their absence indicates something other than nature tourism.

Although there may be flawed imitations of ecotourism, there are of course reputable organizations that deal with ecotours. Pairing equally, environmental preservation and low impact tourism, these groups could be the future of the tourist industry in many areas, including developing countries.

For developed areas, the importance of ecotourism lies in its recognition of natural areas and their ability to generate income from the tourist dollar. Thus, there is an economic incentive to preserve, and restore these habitats even though they may not presently exist in a pristine condition. Ecotourism may thus contribute materially to efforts to maintain local and regional ecological systems.

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