

TOWARDS ECOTOURISM 2.0



A year since the World Ecotourism Summit in Oslo, five years since the United Nations International Year of Ecotourism in 2002, and 25 years since Hector Ceballos coined the term, Ecotourism, like good red wine, has mellowed and matured. But we should not let it turn sour. It is time to open the bottle, drink it and make space for a new generation, Ecotourism 2.0.

For the majority of its proponents and practitioners, Ecotourism, or Ecological Tourism, is a broad, worldwide movement to make Tourism more ecological, even though those uncomfortable with change are more comfortable treating it, or dismissing it, as one more a minority tourism segment. Definitions vary and evolve, as in all vibrant and dynamic movements, but there is now consensus among Ecotourism rank and file that genuine Ecotourism has normative, environmental, social, educational, and human rights elements. Any genuine Ecotourism proponent operating a hotel or tour has a duty to meet a range of criteria which generally include environmental impact

minimization, funding environmental conservation, reducing poverty, respecting human rights and promoting knowledge & understanding.

Although frequently linked to protected and other natural areas, even in some «official» definitions, in reality Ecotourism also takes place in rural and urban locations, as it deals with the journey and the impact, the means and the end. Like charity, it starts at home. You can have a far more ecological Sunday, exploring your multicultural inner city's urban jungle & parks on foot, than to ride on a 4x4 and drive 200 km to the nearest national park to take pictures. Likewise, genuine Ecotourists miss no opportunity to practice their philosophy in their daily lives, using public transport, walking, buying organic, minimizing waste, reducing, reusing, recycling, and sharing.

Yet, there are certain Gordian knots that Ecotourism must solve in order to move forward, although this time the solution should not come from one great conqueror – as great conquer-



ors are invariably short-lived – but from all of us, in a direct democratic, participatory way. Some of these are:

Participation & Representation – who is entitled to participate in the Ecotourism movement, globally and nationally, and how should be decisions reached so as to guarantee democracy and transparency. One person – one vote, or one dollar – one vote? Is it organisations (companies, NGOs) or individuals (professionals, academics, tourists, hosts) that should be given priority?

Eco Certification – who certifies whom, who pays whom and does it work? Ecological thinking is generally in favour of self-determination and decentralization, but the evidence so far is that voluntary eco-certification in tourism has only reached 1% of all businesses even in a tourism-mature region as Europe. On the other hand, environmental protection is not an option but a duty, as paying taxes, respecting labor laws and not destroying the social fabric. So, it may be time to consider some basic international environmental laws in Tourism, preferably laws

that work and that small-scale operations can also meet, not draconian ones that simply generate corruption.

Politics: As Ecotourism has become more mainstream, some justifiably mistake it for an industry rather than a movement for change. The way for proponents to strike a balance, is to beware of both neo-liberal and totalitarian one-size-fits-all approaches and build / rebuild their connection with the broad ecological movement and green parties in particular, in the context of a green economy and society. While making inroads and seeking allies in mainstream tourism, we should not forget our roots, and remain firmly in favour of small-scale operations by locals but also expats genuinely keen on helping local communities.

Funding: We should aim for appropriate, organic sources of funding, from within our ranks, and be wary of fat grants with strings attached. We should vigorously guard our financial independence or risk losing it.

Climate Change: Beyond carbon-offsetting schemes (and scams) let's tax aircraft manufacturers, airports and airlines, until they clean up their act, and use the proceeds to subsidize green forms of public transport. In the time of climate change, we must try to reduce the waste of energy and precious natural resources such as water and the loss of productive agricultural land to create giant, characterless, all-inclusive, exclusive, resorts. We must equally resist the propagation of sprawling real estate developments masquerading as tourism and the environmental destruction and social displacement they cause. And we must encourage local, organic agriculture by making it a key supplier of hotel and restaurant provisions for tourists.

Human Rights: Last but not least, especially in the developing world, beyond the 'leave no footprints' taboo, Ecotourism should play an active part in emancipating and empowering communities, and promoting basic human rights, rather than cozying up to the status-quo. Not all traditions need be preserved.

A new more potent type of Ecotourism could only come about, with political power and feasible proposals with a clear ecological message. We need an Ecotourism 2.0 that should be Green in the full, political, philosophical and practical sense of the word, rather than 'green' as in Nature Tourism, the color of money or as in 'greenwashing'.

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