

Megan Epler Wood

ECOTOURISM:

PRINCIPLES,

PRACTICES &

POLICIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY



Key 1/2

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Foreword

Ecotourism has been growing rapidly over the last decades. Yet, while ecotourism has the potential to create positive environmental and social impacts, it can unfortunately be as damaging as mass tourism if not done properly.

Typically located in pristine, fragile ecosystems, ecotourism projects run the risk of destroying the very environmental assets on which they depend. The loss of biodiversity and wildlife habitats, the production of waste and polluted effluent in areas that have little or no capacity to absorb them are just some of the worries. Furthermore, serious concerns about ecotourism exist as regards the degree of social fairness involved, and that of stakeholder involvement and control.

Recognizing the global importance of the issue, the United Nations designated 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, and the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) mandated the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization to carry out activities for the Year. Its goal is to review the lessons learned in implementing ecotourism, and to identify and promote forms of ecotourism that lead to the protection of critically endangered ecosystems, sharing the benefits of the activity

"Putting tourism on a sustainable path is a major challenge, but one that also presents a significant opportunity".

KLAUS TÖPFER, UNEP Executive Director.

with local communities and respecting local cultures.

The last three Conferences of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity's have dealt with tourism's contribution to the sustainable use of biodiversity. They have also stressed that tourism generates significant revenues, and that as a growing percentage of the activities are nature-based, ecotourism does present a significant potential for realizing benefits in terms of the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable use of its components.

As a contribution to the International Year of Ecotourism, UNEP and the International Ecotourism Society have jointly prepared this guide that should act as a basic resource book for governments and practitioners who want to develop environmentally and socially sound ecotourism practices. It includes background data and reference sources as well as practical guidelines. Case studies illustrate how these guidelines can be applied. The document has benefited from inputs by academia, and a broad range of experts coming from NGOs, inter-governmental agencies and ecotourism practitioners at both the international and local level. UNEP

hopes it will provide useful insights to readers and we will welcome all comments or suggestions for another edition.

Putting ecotourism on a truly sustainable path is a major challenge, requiring partnership and cooperation between the tourism industry, governments, local people and the tourists themselves. With your help, we can achieve

We would like to acknowledge our technical reviewers, whose useful comments helped us generate a better publication. We are deeply indebted to Patricia Barnett (Tourism Concern), Sylvie Blangy, Ken Chamberlain, Claude Martin (WWF International), Michael Meyer (ETE), Laura Meszaros (UNEP/DEC), Nina Rao (Equations and the CSD-7 Southern Tourism Caucus), Wolfgang Strasdas, Niclas Svenningsen (UNEP/ROAP), Frank Vorhies (IUCN), Eugenio Yunis and Gabor

the ambitious goals set for the International Year of Ecotourism.

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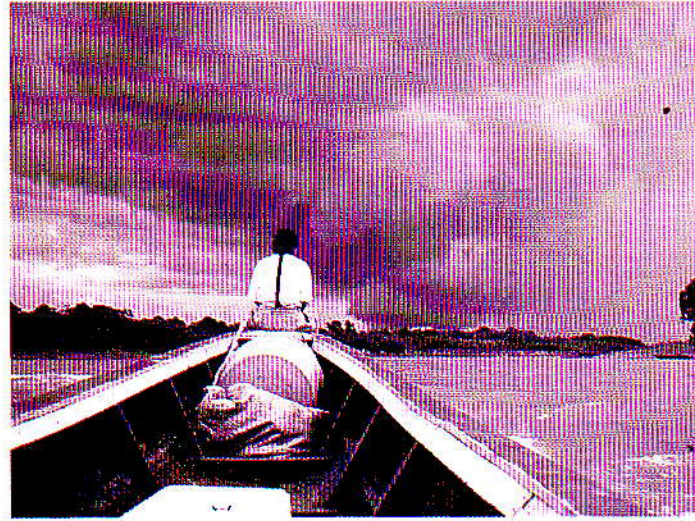
Albert Teo: *page 38.*

Kingfisher Bay: *page 53.*

Introduction

Travel and tourism are among the world's fastest growing industries and are the major source of foreign exchange earnings for many developing countries. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) reports that receipts from international tourism grew by an average annual rate of 9% between 1988-1997. The number of international tourist arrivals reached more than 664 million in 1999 (well over 10% of the world's population), and international arrivals are expected to reach 1 billion by 2010. The increasing economic importance of tourism has captured the attention of most countries. However, the global growth of tourism poses a significant threat to cultural and biological diversity.

Ecotourism is a growing niche market within the larger travel industry, with the potential of being an important sustainable development tool. With billions of dollars in annual sales, ecotourism is a real industry that seeks to take advantage of market trends. At the same time, it frequently operates quite differently than other segments of the tourism industry, because ecotourism is defined by its sustainable development results: conserving natural areas, educating visitors about sustainability, and benefiting local people.



Entering a national park by boat, Bolivia

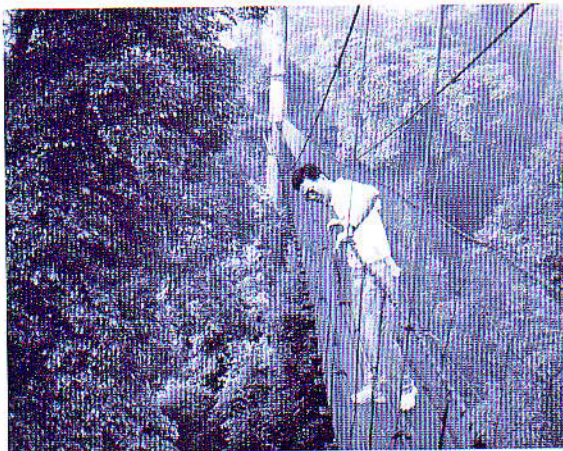
Market research shows that ecotourists are particularly interested in wilderness settings and pristine areas. According to the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, ecotourism has a unique role to play in educating travelers about the value of a healthy environment and biological diversity. However, proper planning and management are critical to ecotourism's development or it will threaten the biological diversity upon which it depends.

In the last 10 years, travel experiences in fragile natural and cultural areas have benefited from a variety of innovative small-scale, low-impact solutions offered by ecotourism – some of which will be documented in this package. These approaches have had an influence on the larger tourism market, but ecotourism will never transform the tourism industry, nor can it be a perfect model in every instance. Like all forms of sustainable tourism, it is a dynamic field, with new techniques and

approaches evolving every year. A wide variety of stakeholders must be involved in its implementation – including business, government, non-governmental organizations and local communities. Responsible businesses must be encouraged to manage tourists properly with guidelines, certification and regulation. And local destinations must be ready to properly fund ecotourism management, or they will risk damaging their natural and cultural resources and, ultimately, their position in a rapidly growing international market.

Local communities have the most at stake, and therefore the most to lose, in the emerging international ecotourism marketplace.

As globalization makes local economic control increasingly difficult, ecotourism seeks to reverse this trend by stressing that local business owners and local communities must be vitally involved. Opportunities to involve rural communities in tourism have attracted attention and raised many expectations, but the risks are great unless proper preparations are made. Local people must be informed in advance of all the possible consequences



Rain forest canopy walkway, Malaysia



Local ecotourism project, Belize

of tourism development, and they must formally consent to development in their areas.

The underlying concepts and principles behind ecotourism have helped set new standards for the tourism industry, and these standards continue to evolve. Many aspects still need to be fully addressed during implementation, and as answers to some of these questions arise from the field, the quick global dissemination of results is a priority. This document provides a short introduction to ecotourism, providing a look at the progress made in the last decade, and what will be needed to make it sustainable in the future.

This report is not intended to be academic in format or style. References used are catalogued in the list of resource documents at the end of the book along with a list of resource organizations.

What is Ecotourism?

Ecotourism has been defined as a form of nature-based tourism in the marketplace, but it has also been formulated and studied as a sustainable development tool by NGOs, development experts and academics since 1990. The term ecotourism, therefore, refers on one hand to a concept under a set of principles, and on the other hand to a specific market segment. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (previously known as The Ecotourism Society (TES)) in 1991 produced one of the earliest definitions:

“Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people.”

IUCN (now called the World Conservation Union) states in 1996 that ecotourism:

“is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.”



Jaguar Preserve, Belize

Ecotourism as a Concept

Ecotourism is a sub-component of the field of sustainable tourism. *Figure 1* offers a reflection of where ecotourism can be placed within the process of developing more sustainable forms of tourism. This figure also provides a demonstration of how ecotourism is primarily a sustainable version of nature tourism, while including rural and cultural tourism elements.

Ecotourism aspires in all cases to achieve sustainable development results. However, it is important to clarify that all tourism activities – be they geared to holidays, business, conferences, congresses or fairs, health, adventure or ecotourism – should aim to be sustainable. This means that the planning and development of tourism infrastructure, its subsequent operation and also its marketing should focus on environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability criteria.

Components of Ecotourism

- Contributes to conservation of biodiversity.
- Sustains the well being of local people.
- Includes an interpretation / learning experience.
- Involves responsible action on the part of tourists and the tourism industry.
- Is delivered primarily to small groups by small-scale businesses.
- Requires lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources.
- Stresses local participation, ownership and business opportunities, particularly for rural people.

The strong orientation of the ecotourism field toward the evolution of principles, guidelines, and certification based on sustainability standards gives it an unusual position in the tourism field. Over the years, discussion in conferences has provided a general consensus on the components of ecotourism (as seen in box above).

Ecotourism as a Market Segment

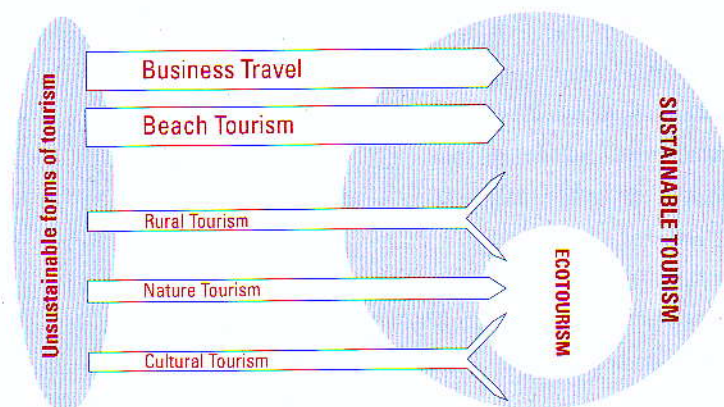
Ecotourism is a small but rapidly growing industry working within a niche market that is governed by market forces and regulations. Ecotourism is primarily

advertised as being equivalent to nature tourism in the marketplace. Some countries, companies and destinations have social and environmental policies and programs, while others do not. This has led to confusion worldwide about the meaning of the term ecotourism as it is applied in the marketplace. Further discussion of guidelines and accreditation systems relating to sustainability criteria for the ecotourism industry can be found later in this chapter.

Figure 2 provides a reflection of how ecotourism fits into the larger tourism marketplace. Both adventure

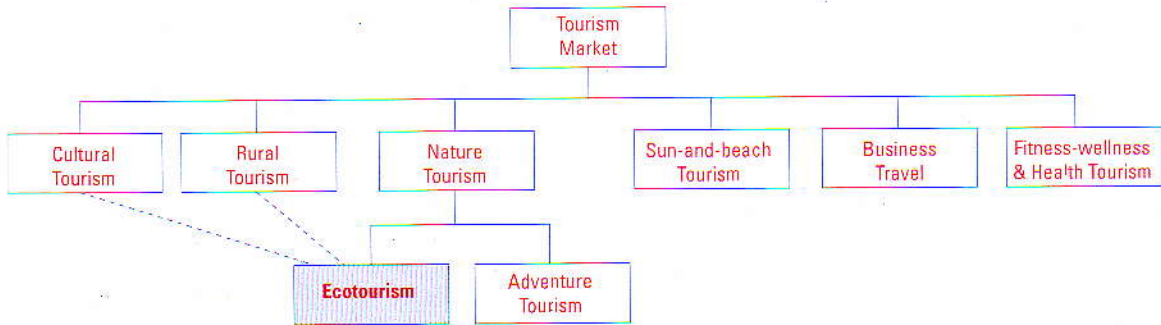
Figure 1

ECOTOURISM AS A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT



Strasdes 2001 (drawn by M. Meier)

Figure 2
ECOTOURISM AS A MARKET SEGMENT



WTO, modified by Strasdas 2001

tourism and ecotourism are shown as subcomponents of nature tourism, while ecotourism has stronger links to rural and cultural tourism than adventure tourism.

In ecotourism the prime motivation is the observation and appreciation of natural features and related cultural assets, whereas in adventure tourism it is rather the physical exercise and challenging situations in natural environments.

From a functional viewpoint, ecotourism in the marketplace is mostly individual or small-scale tourism (tour groups up to 25, and hotels with less than 100 beds) that is operated by small- and medium-sized companies in natural areas. It represents a segment of the marketplace that concentrates on leading and accommodating small groups in natural areas in an educational manner using interpretive materials and local specialist guides.

The Roots of Ecotourism

With a history deeply rooted in the conservation movement, ecotourism has provided a highly strategic source of revenue to natural areas that need protection. Ecotourism began as an untested idea that many hoped could contribute to the conservation

of natural resources worldwide. Research undertaken in Kenya in the 1970s (*Thresher 1981*) demonstrated that the economic benefits of wildlife tourism far surpassed hunting – an activity that was banned in Kenya in 1977. In the early 1980s, rain forests and coral reefs became the subject of both innumerable studies by biologists interested in biological diversity and of a plethora of nature film documentaries. This interest helped launch a wide variety of local small businesses specializing in guiding scientists and filmmakers into remote zones. As these small businesses quickly began to prosper in countries such as Costa Rica and Ecuador, a more formal industry soon evolved to meet the needs of small tourism groups that were primarily composed of birdwatchers and committed naturalists. In many areas of the world, pioneer entrepreneurs created special field visits and studies for adult travelers, students and volunteers.

International nature-based businesses began to thrive in the 1980s with the growing interest in outdoor travel and the environment, spurred by excellent new outdoor equipment for camping and hiking, and events such as Earth Day. These companies began to realize that they could take the initiative to conserve the environment by sponsoring



Tourists enjoying tea house, Nepal

local conservation groups in the destinations they visited or by raising funds for local causes. They soon learned that training and hiring local people to run their businesses was the best way to manage their operations, and an excellent way of creating significant benefits for local people. Tour operators selling trips to the Galapagos Islands, Costa Rica, Kenya and Nepal were some of the early players in this movement. Some of these companies argue that, in fact, they had already been using ecotourism principles for some 20 to 30 years.

Because so many individuals with unique ideas and creative approaches are involved, it is rarely carried out the same way twice. Ecotourism is a business and can be profitable, but it should be a responsible business that aims to meet higher social and environmental goals. As such, ecotourism is highly dependent on the commitment of individual business owners who must be willing to apply a unique set of standards to their business approaches – standards that have only evolved in the last 10 years. The fact

that no international regulatory body exists, and that standards in the field of ecotourism are quite difficult to measure, has allowed businesses and governments to promote ecotourism without any oversight. Many travel and tourism businesses have found it convenient to use the term “ecotourism” in their literature, and governments have used the term extensively to promote their destinations, all without trying to implement any of the most basic principles explained in this document. This problem of “greenwashing” has undermined the legitimacy of the term ecotourism. Some greenwashing, though certainly not all, is the result of a lack of understanding of the underlying principles of ecotourism. International conferences, workshops and publications have made some advances in educating governments and businesses about ecotourism, but the misuse of the term remains a problem worldwide.

Many people often ask why ecotourism should be viewed differently from other forms of sustainable tourism. In essence, ecotourism must be planned and managed to successfully offer its key social and environmental objectives. This requires:



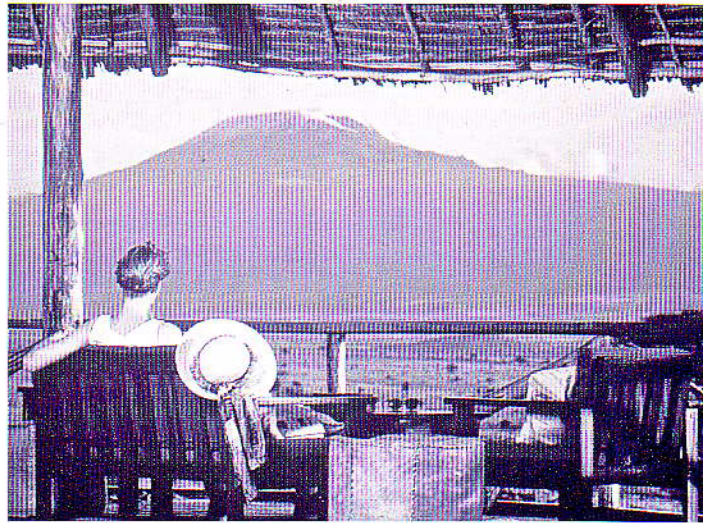
Birdwatchers in wetlands, Philippines

1. Specialized marketing to attract travelers who are primarily interested in visiting natural areas.
2. Management skills that are particular to handling visitors in protected natural areas.
3. Guiding and interpretation services, preferably managed by local inhabitants, that are focused on natural history and sustainable development issues.
4. Government policies that earmark fees from tourism to generate funds for both conservation of wild lands and sustainable development of local communities and indigenous people.
5. Focused attention on local peoples, who must be given the right of prior informed consent, full participation and, if they so decide, given the means and training to take advantage of this sustainable development option.

Principles of Ecotourism

Because ecotourism was originally just an idea, not a discipline, many businesses and governments promoted it without an understanding of its most basic principles. Establishing internationally and nationally accepted principles, guidelines and certification approaches proceeded throughout the 1990s but at a modest pace, because the process involves stakeholders from many regions, disciplines and backgrounds. Each region affected by ecotourism should develop its own principles, guidelines and certification procedures based on the materials already available internationally. This process of creating international certification guidelines is far from being completed.

The International Ecotourism Society has tracked the results of stakeholder meetings since 1991 to develop the set of principles on page 14, which are being embraced by a growing constituency of NGOs,



Tourist viewing Mt Kilimanjaro, Kenya

private sector businesses, governments, academia and local communities.

Once principles have been agreed upon, specific guidelines can be developed that help define the market's best possible performance. Guidelines offer practical approaches to achieving sustainable development results, as gleaned from survey research on best practices and stakeholder meetings among researchers, the private sector, NGOs and local communities. International review finalizes the guidelines process, helping to assure that a wide variety of viewpoints are incorporated.

As ecotourism guidelines are being developed, it is important to consider some issues that may not be fully addressed by practitioners globally, such as:

1. The amount of control that traditional/indigenous communities retain when ecotourism is developed in natural areas that they manage or inhabit.
2. The efficiency and social fairness of current concepts of protected areas (which are central

Power

Principles of Ecotourism

- Minimize the negative impacts on nature and culture that can damage a destination.
- Educate the traveler on the importance of conservation.
- Stress the importance of responsible business, which works cooperatively with local authorities and people to meet local needs and deliver conservation benefits.
- Direct revenues to the conservation and management of natural and protected areas.
- Emphasize the need for regional tourism zoning and for visitor management plans designed for either regions or natural areas that are slated to become eco-destinations.
- Emphasize use of environmental and social base-line studies, as well as long-term monitoring programs, to assess and minimize impacts.
- Strive to maximize economic benefit for the host country, local business and communities, particularly peoples living in and adjacent to natural and protected areas.
- Seek to ensure that tourism development does not exceed the social and environmental limits of acceptable change as determined by researchers in cooperation with local residents.
- Rely on infrastructure that has been developed in harmony with the environment, minimizing use of fossil fuels, conserving local plants and wildlife, and blending with the natural and cultural environment.

to ecotourism) for long-term conservation of biological and cultural diversity.

3. The risk that unregulated tourists contribute to lowering genetic capital and traditional knowledge belonging to traditional communities; i.e. biopiracy.
4. How to balance the needs of medium- and large-scale investors, often outsiders to local communities, with local expectations in participation with small-scale efforts for community-based tourism.

Ecotourism Guidelines for Nature Tour Operators was published in 1993 by The International Ecotourism

Society, setting a standard for this sector of the industry. These guidelines have been distributed worldwide, and reprinted by dozens of organizations in numerous languages. Evaluation forms reveal that they have widespread acceptance from the industry, NGOs and academics. TIES will publish guidelines for ecolodges and marine ecotourism in 2002.

The Association for Ecological Tourism in Europe published recommendations in 1997 for environmentally oriented tour operators, and many local organizations, such as Alianza Verde in the Guatemalan region of the Peten, have developed ecotourism guidelines for all stakeholders with a local approach. Development of guidelines around the world has been a useful step to help local stakeholders address questions of how to develop ecotourism in local communities, ecosystems or in specific sectors of the industry, such as accommodations or tour operations. This can help to solve the problem of greenwashing, but ultimately, certification will be a fundamental tool to ensure businesses are meeting ecotourism standards.

Efforts to certify ecotourism are in their infancy. Certifying ecotourism industries involves gathering data from companies on their environmental and social performance, and then verifying these data. As ecotourism further defines itself through its stakeholders and in the marketplace, many questions remain about how well ecotourism can be certified, given that ecotourism businesses are small, highly dispersed and regional in character. Many are found in developing countries, where monitoring services and even communication systems may not be available. Ecotourism enterprises

Nature Tour Operator Guidelines

- **Prepare travelers.** One reason consumers choose an operator rather than travel independently is to receive guidance: How can negative impacts be minimized while visiting sensitive environments and cultures? How should one interact with local cultures? What is an appropriate response to begging? Is bartering encouraged?
- **Minimize visitor impacts.** Prevent degradation of the environment and/or the local culture by offering literature, briefings, leading by example and taking corrective actions. To minimize accumulated impacts, use adequate leadership and maintain small groups to ensure minimum group-impacts on destination. Avoid areas that are under-managed and over-visited.
- **Minimize nature tour company impacts.** Ensure managers, staff and contract employees know and participate in all aspects of company policy that prevent impacts on the environment and local cultures.
- **Provide training.** Give managers, staff and contract employees access to programs that will upgrade their ability to communicate with and manage clients in sensitive natural and cultural settings.
- **Contribute to conservation.** Fund conservation programs in the regions being visited.
- **Provide competitive local employment.** Employ locals in all aspects of business operations.
- **Offer site-sensitive accommodations.** Ensure that facilities are not destructive to the natural environment and particularly that they do not waste local resources. Design structures that offer ample opportunity for learning about the environment and that encourage sensitive interchanges with local communities.

The International Ecotourism Society, *Ecotourism Guidelines for Nature Tour Operators*, 1993

Proposed Guidelines for Successful Ecotourism Certification

- **Indicators** for sustainability must be arrived at by research of appropriate parameters based on current best practice.
- **Indicators** for sustainability must be reviewed and approved via a stakeholder process.
- **Indicators** for sustainability must be arrived at for each segment of the industry, e.g. hotels, tour operators, transportation systems, etc.
- **Indicators** for sustainability will vary according to region and must be arrived at via local stakeholder participation and research.
- **Certification** programs require independent verification procedures that are not directly associated with the entity being paid to certify. University involvement is ideal for this process.
- **Certification** programs, particularly for the small ecotourism business sector, are unlikely to pay for themselves through fees, and will need national, regional or international subsidization.
- **Certification** programs can be given to the operating entity, but should specify the products or locations that fulfill relevant criteria as certified.
- **Certification** should be ground tested before full-fledged implementation to ensure all systems are properly in line, due to the difficulty of verifying appropriate performance standards without advance testing.

Epler Wood and Halpenny, *Ecolabels in Tourism*, 2001

Ecotourism Certification – A Case Study from Australia

Australia's National Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP) is an industry initiative of the Ecotourism Association of Australia, with funding from the Office of National Tourism. NEAP was revised and relaunched in March 2000 with a new sub-program for nature-based tourism. Its accreditation now has three levels: nature tourism, ecotourism and advanced ecotourism.

A performance-based accreditation program, NEAP requires that products of program participants achieve specific goals that are classified under specific categories: natural area focus, interpretation, ecological sustainability, contributions to conservation, work with local communities, cultural component, client satisfaction and responsible marketing. To attain the ecotourism accreditation level, the product must meet all core criteria in each category. Achieving advanced ecotourism status requires that the product meet 80% of bonus criteria.

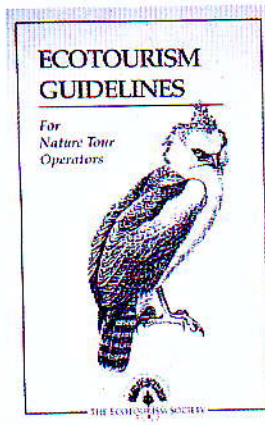
The tourism operator or facility owner must complete an extensive form that addresses each criteria. In its first phase, NEAP was entirely dependent on the honesty of the applicant. But the new program launched in March 2000 will develop mechanisms for random auditing of products. The greatest limitation of the NEAP program, according to research, is the poor consumer recognition of the program and its labels; as of January 2000, Australia had accredited 237 NEAP products. This program only certifies products, not tour operators or facilities.

Adapted from Buckley, *Ecolabels in Tourism*, 2001

are operating on a small scale and are probably best evaluated using criteria designed for their style of enterprise.

Efforts to certify ecotourism businesses have been led by Australia, which established a research program in 1994 and launched a federally funded initiative in 1996 that is the only ecotourism-specific certification program in the world.

Regardless of whether global certification programs are developed for ecotourism or for more general sustainable tourism, international guidelines detailing how to develop and manage such certification programs are urgently needed. The proposed guidelines for ecotourism certification, seen on page 15, were developed for a publication on ecolabels by TIES staff and for circulation to leading researchers worldwide for further comment.



TIES Guidelines.