ECOTOURISM : Paradise gained, or paradise lost?

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Introduction

Paradise on earth is under threat. The most inaccessible tropical rainforests, the most fragile coral reef systems, the remotest tribal peoples, are now within easy reach of the global ecotourist.

Ecotourism means all things to all parties from the tourist and the environmentalist, to the tour operator and government official. In its purest sense, it is an industry which claims to make a low impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate money, jobs, and the conservation of wildlife and vegetation.

Whether or not it lives up to its billing, it generates billions of dollars globally and is reported to be growing at a pacey 10-15% every year. Estimates fluctuate considerably, but according to the Canadian Wildlife Service over US$ 200 billion was spent on ecotourism activities in 1990 and much of this will have been spent in the South.

Many developing countries and international aid donors envision a paradise gained. In a bid to tap the world’s growing tourism markets, Southern governments have taken to marketing their natural beauty spots in a big way. For them, it provides much-needed hard currency for strapped economies, and being small scale requires less infrastructure to set up. It can also be less damaging to the environment than mining, logging and other commercial activities.

But it also threatens a paradise lost. Any tourism comes at a price. However aware the visitors, the sheer weight of numbers entering fragile environmental areas leads to severe environmental degradation, while local cultures are also disrupted. Just who owns this paradise is also critical many foreign developers are buying up land and raking in a big share of the profits.

If ecotourism is to realise its potential, observers say the industry needs to be regulated and the impact of ecotourists strictly monitored. Crucially, developing countries need to make ecotourism part of national and local development strategies, involving local communities and distributing the wealth. But many critics say that ecotourism can only help developing countries in a small way and until crippling national debts and dependence on commodities is resolved, bankruptcy and mass poverty will continue to threaten the earth’s last remaining beauty spots.
Key Facts

- According to the Canadian Wildlife Service over US$ 200 billion was spent on ecotourism activities in 1990.
- Seven million tourists in the United States are willing to pay between US$ 2,000-3,000 for an eco-tour. A survey of US tour operators showed that 63% of travellers would be willing to pay US$ 50 toward conservation in the area visited, and 27% would pay US$ 200.
- The number of visitors to Ecuador's Galapagos Islands has grown from over 10,000 in 1979 when it was declared a world heritage site by Unesco, to 47,000 in 1993. It is forecast to reach 82,000 by 1997.
- On Nepal's trails, the lodges in one village axe one hectare of virgin rhododendron forest per year mainly for fuelwood, and this results in 30-75 tons of soil erosion, triggering devastating landslides and floods.

1. THE RISE OF ECOTOURISM

"The goal of ecotourism is to capture a portion of the enormous global tourism market by attracting visitors to natural areas and using the revenues to fund local conservation and fuel economic development", Karen Ziffer, Conservation International.

Eco what?

Watching wild gorillas in the footsteps of Dian Fossey in Rwanda's misty highland jungle, trekking to the lunar-like base camp of the world's highest mountain, experiencing Antarctica's pristine wilderness - these are some of the exotic destinations packaged as ecotourism, a prefix which stands for responsible travel now occupying the fastest growing niche of the global tourism industry.

As the destinations have widened, so too have the definitions of ecotourism. It can mean all things to all parties from the tourist to the operator, to the environmentalist and government official. In its purest sense, it is an industry which claims to make a low impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to create jobs, and conserving wildlife and vegetation. It claims to be responsible tourism which is ecologically and culturally sensitive.

Ecotourism also has its flip side. Environmentalists fighting a multi-million dollar resort in Costa Rica recently said that "developers were swift in taking advantage of the fashionable terminology with the only aim of filling their pockets with money."
Whether it lives up to its billing or not, ecotourism generates billions of dollars in an unregulated industry which heads the commanding heights of the global economy. According to the World Tourism Organisation, tourism was expected to gross US$ 3.4 trillion in 1994, creating work for 10% of the global workforce. And it is growing; by the year 2020, 937 million tourist arrivals a year are expected.

Some 20% of international tourists arrive in developing countries. While the growth rate of arrivals in the developed countries is around 3.5% per year, the South records a growth of 6% per year.

Ecotourism is the fastest growing sector in the tourism industry, estimated to have a current growth rate of 10-15%. Its current value is difficult to assess. Britain's Economist Intelligence Unit put the worldwide ecotourism market at US$ 10 billion in 1989. Yet according to the Canadian Wildlife Service over US$ 200 billion was spent on ecotourism activities in 1990.

The South, with its profusion of natural riches and indigenous cultures, tops the country destination board. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), an international conservation organisation, estimated that of US$ 55 billion earned by tourism for developing countries in 1988, about US$ 12 billion came from ecotourism.

Today nearly half of the annual visitors to Costa Rica come to see the lush tropical rainforest. Even remote destinations like Antarctica are starting to attract the ecotourist. In the last four years, the number of visitors has grown fourfold to 8,000, with visitors paying as much as US$ 20,000 for the experience.

And things are expected to get busier. Africa received nine million tourists in 1990 and looks set to receive 24 million by the year 2000 - many of these will be ecotourists. Similar trends are forecast for South and Southeast Asia.

**Ecotourists - a personal profile**

*Age 58, retired World Bank agricultural economist*

Meet a member of the new "whoopie" club - wealthy, healthy, older people. Like many ecotourists they are from the rich industrialised countries, aged between 44 and 64 years of age, and this growing elitist club has "been there and done that."

Not for them the packed beaches of the mass tourist resort. According to a survey carried out by the US-based financial company American Express, these travellers have exhausted traditional destinations and are now in search of original, preferably pristine destinations. As the gap widens between retirement and death, and an ageing population grows, these rich people are destined to make up the core of future eco-travellers.
Age 33, teacher, partner also in work, vegetarian and eco-friendly, donates to Third World charities.

Meet the North's sensitive soul. A member of the liberal middle classes, who have grown more environmentally aware over the eighties. For these people various eco-travel operators seem to offer the exotic destination, but in a way that can help the local economy and not be too disruptive to the environment. And in a busy, do-gooding life, a laid-on tour is convenient.

Age 20, student

Meet what some observers call the "curriculum vitae builders", or "ego-tourists". Young Northerners who may be more mindful of environmental issues and who take off for longer holidays in the Third World, searching for a style of travel which reflects an "alternative" life style (1). Many will backpack, others will join tours that explore the last great wildernesses. What they have in common with all other ecotourists is the necessary capital to embark on the adventure.

However, ecotourists from the rich countries are joined by more and more people in the South as incomes increase for many and interests grow in cultural and national heritages of countries at home and abroad.

The Bank and business drive growth

The phenomenal rise of ecotourism goes hand-in-hand with the spread of private investment and the free market economy, and the growth of environmentalism. Tourism has become a major economic factor in conservation and wildlife protection projects. And key players in the international community such as the World Bank and the United States aid arm, US-AID, in alliance with international non-government organisations (NGOs) and businesses, are spreading its promotion.

Some commentators allege that ecotourism forms a range of initiatives from debt-for-nature swaps to environmental conditions on loans which form a kind of eco-structural adjustment programme. The Domestic Technology Institute (DTI), a non-profit making institution in the US, is currently planning a multinational organisation to develop low impact tourism in so-called Third World countries. A DTI spokeswoman has said: "Third World countries can be forced into establishing a natural and cultural resource policy before they can get World Bank loans." (2)

But according to the US-based Ecotourism Society, the World Bank has yet to develop a specific policy on ecotourism. A spokeswoman said that it does not yet have the inhouse expertise, nor the means to deliver small funds to low impact projects. However, it is likely that under the Global Environment Facility (GEF) - set up in 1990 by UN agencies and the World Bank to fund projects tackling
global environment problems - biodiversity projects will incorporate ecotourism schemes. The precedent has already been set in Uganda, where the GEF recently committed US$ 4 million to the conservation of the Bwindi Forest Gorilla Reserve.

Faced by fierce competition in the tourism industry, business is keen to open up the ecotourism market. As it exploits the environment as a product, the natural habitat and wildlife become commodities that need to be protected as future investments. This has driven some independent tour operators to manage private conservation areas in developing countries.

In some developing countries, like Costa Rica and Belize, considered the pioneers of ecotourism, observers say that the arrival of foreign operators in the late eighties led to the mushrooming of local firms who realised the rich opportunities. US-AID has also pumped funds into local organisations and infrastructure. "Our commitment to ecotourism is strong and steadfast.....We are unwavering in the protection of our environmental treasures," said Costa Rica’s Minister of Tourism and the Environment. Many environmentalists in the country would beg to disagree. But clearly, ecotourism has emerged as a cornerstone of many tourism development strategies in the Caribbean.

**From specialist operators to transnational corporations**

Eco-safaris, eco-treks, eco-cruises, eco-adventures - specialist tours are growing by the minute and offered by a range of operators. At one end of the market is a multitude of medium and small, independent operators which are predominantly foreign-owned and staffed by expatriates. Many of these are straight commercial ventures. However, many operate strict codes of ethics and practices in a bid to limit environmental and cultural impact, and donate funds to local job and conservation schemes. Some co-operative tour operators own their own piece of tropical forest and farm it organically - visitors may stay in traditional housing and be given the opportunity to plant a tree. And others like the Toledo Ecotourism Association in Costa Rica, are managed and run by villagers, but this is the exception rather than the norm.

Among today’s big players are the giant transnational corporation (TNC) hotel, leisure and travel companies. Many TNCs are running day eco-tours and are likely to expand as margins in the mass tourism market are squeezed. Environmentalists are concerned that the big corporations will pay lip service to ecotourism. While the multi-million dollar Sheraton hotel group donates to conservation schemes, reports say a new 204-room five-star hotel in the Cook Islands, built on tribal land sacred to the local people, left a bill of over US$ 1 million for environmental destruction. In reply the company has said the development is environmentally sound and will create jobs. Already in countries such as Thailand and Costa Rica, NGOs allege that unscrupulous developers and politicians, are building massive resorts under the label of ecotourism.
Mass versus small scale

Costa Rica, bordering Panama and Nicaragua, is a country which faces a trade-off. Like many other developing countries its economy is now heavily dependent on international tourism. Today, over 40% of its one million tourists come to experience its natural tropical beauty. Revenues are booming - over one-fifth of the country's foreign exchange earnings come from tourism.

Other developing countries are keen to follow in Costa Rica's path. Some have little option but to exploit their natural beauty. Debt-ridden, dependent on agricultural commodities, and tied to the global economy, they need to earn whatever foreign exchange they can. For many governments, ecotourism seems to avoid the pitfalls of mass tourism which often degrades landscapes, local cultures and wildlife habitats. As a responsible, low impact form, ecotourism seems to offer sustainability, and other economic advantages.

- Being small scale and sometimes based on family businesses, facilities and infrastructure are simpler and less expensive than those of mass tourism. For some developing countries ecotourism is a good financial option, though it still requires a good infrastructure.
- Locally owned businesses can be free from TNCs' strict controls over everything from labour to materials. Local ownership can give much more of a boost to the local economy.
- The potential is there to retain profits in local communities rather than seeing them take off to the rich countries.
- Well-managed, it is less harmful to the environment than other development activities like logging, mining, and forms of intensive agriculture.

2. ECOTOURISM AND ITS IMPACT A PARADISE LOST?

"Tourism can be as dangerous and destructive as a wild bull in our fields" Toledo Ecotourism Association, Belize.

Prospects for sustainability

Any tourism comes at a price, and more so if that destination is a paradise on earth. Enter the most eco-sensitive tourists into virgin tropical rainforest, or a fragile coral reef system, or the home of wild gorillas, and the inherent conflict with nature could end in disaster.

To help make ecotourists aware and reduce environmental impact, various codes and practices often accompany the itinerary and air tickets. With the more bona fide tour operators the drill usually continues on arrival and during the tour with
trained guides on hand to give advice. The codes are written by foreign tour operators or environmentalists, though in Nepal official codes are also found on the back of menus in the trekking lodges.


And so it goes on. Environmentalist Bernadette Vallely, in her book 1001 Ways to Save the Planet, lists 41 ways to save it while on holiday. These include strictures on how to approach whales and how not to scare deer from their water sources. Other don'ts are not to run after snakes, not to throw plastic in the wilderness, and not to hunt.

Guided tours and codes are needed, say conservation organisations, and the onus is on the industry, though some NGOs also help in informing tourists. But just because visitors choose an eco-tour holiday does not mean that they religiously follow the rules. Observers point out that one year they are in Antarctica and the next in a Kenya game reserve so they may care little about the long-term impact of their tours. Many travellers feel they have paid a lot of money for what they perceive as a great adventure and can feel they have some inalienable right to see and do what they want.

Though the real ecotourists are prepared to forego the comforts and eat local food as part of the experience, many want to satisfy their own Western tastes. In Nepal's Sagamartha National Park everything from crates of beer to toilet rolls touchdown on a precarious airstrip less than five trekking days from Everest base camp, and half a day from a luxury five-star hotel. And although trekkers and mountaineers can be fined if they do not bring non-biodegradable materials back to the capital, debris litters the crowded mountain trails.

A 1992 study found out that each visitor to the Manuel Antonio National Park in Costa Rica produced 40 grams of garbage, while the hotels, restaurants and shops for tourists generate from 76 to 400 grams per visitor per day. The vendors scrambling at the doors of the park produce 53 kilograms a day. And 67% of all that is non-biodegradable.

And the pressures increase. Even the smallest hotels or lodges generate daily waste and sewage, while making demands on local fuel including wood, and energy. On Nepal's trails the lodges in one village axe one hectare of virgin rhododendron forest per year and this results in 30-75 tons of soil erosion, resulting in devastating landslides and floods (3).

The sheer weight of numbers leads to further environmental degradation. Coral reefs from Belize in the Caribbean to the Maldives in the Indian Ocean are now showing signs of wear and tear. In Belize's Hol Chan Marine Reserve, reports
say killer algae is attacking broken coral. Meanwhile in building coastal resorts mangrove swamps have been cleared, and filled in by shaving top-soil from the wetland savanna areas inland, so disrupting two main eco-systems (4).

In this way, ecotourism can be a form of self-destructive ecocide. For it has the potential to destroy the very natural resources on which the well-being of the industry depends.

**Tea with the locals**

"The sensibilities of other cultures shall be respected," is the last commandment. But walking into a village of a remote hill tribe can take its toll. Observers say trekking can influence the nature of the Thai hill tribes in terms of dress, consumer goods, village life and resident expectations. Elsewhere the spread of tourism and the appropriation of communal lands has turned traditional hunter-gatherers into souvenir hawkers.

But some observers say cultural differences need not be a "shock" for any of the "sides" involved. It is said openness and interest in the many fascinating things that one can discover when speaking to someone from another culture can even turn these differences into assets. But the ecotourist and the local inhabitant seldom speak the same language. In Indonesia, Brazil and Costa Rica, groups of Germans and other nationals are landing up with guides from their own countries or from the capitals, whose only other language is English.

In some cases ecotourism can help revive cultural activities. The Toledo Ecotourism Association - made up of indigenous people from the rainforests of southern Belize - has created a renewed interest in traditional music and the making of local instruments. This revival is now catching on. But the dilemma, say observers, is how do you keep it small and ensure local say and control.

**Where do the green dollars go?**

For countries like Ecuador and Belize tourism is the star performer pulling in much-needed foreign exchange. Just what percentage comes from ecotourism as opposed to mass tourism is difficult to fathom. What is clear however, is that the industry brings hefty profits to foreign airlines, tourist operators and developers who repatriate them to their own rich countries.

Foreign airlines do well out of the deal. Out of any tour, air travel takes the lion's share. It is estimated that before ethnic genocide broke out in Rwanda in April 1994, international airlines were making US$ 10 million annually from visitors to the Mountain Gorilla Project alone.

And with the liberalisation of world trade, many Southern governments are concerned that they could lose out further. At a recent seminar on liberalisation
and tourism, Kenya's Director of Tourism reportedly said that liberalisation is leading to more foreign-owned hotels and tour operators, so that little economic benefit is retained within the country.

Other major haemorrhages are through anything from foreign-owned car rental agencies which import four-wheel drive vehicles, to tour companies. And this includes the purchase of freehold property. Take Belize: English-speaking and less than two hours' flying time from Miami in the US, the country has become a green mecca for US visitors. But it has also become a mecca for expatriate tourist operators and US-based developers building luxury resorts with golf courses and marinas. Observers say that 65% of the members of the US AID-initiated Belize Tourism Industry Association are expats mainly from the US (5).

Foreign investment in that playground can also drive up land prices, property prices, and in some cases, food prices. Despite restrictions on foreign landholdings in Belize it is estimated that 90% of all coastal development is now in foreign hands. Luxury villas built on freehold land are now sited at prime resorts. It is unlikely that such properties will be bought back by local people.

Yet in the Caribbean island of Dominica, packaged as an ecotourism resort from the mid-seventies with the opening of two national parks, the experience appears quite different. The Alien Land Holding Act gives Dominicans greater control of land: on the island, deemed unsuitable for mass tourism, hotels are small-scale and over 62% of facilities and 70% of units are fully-owned by local people. However, a recently announced "economic citizenship" programme, along with plans to build an international airport, may jeopardise local ownership and control, and the "small is beautiful" policy (6).

Local spending and jobs

Wherever eco-tours spring up there will be winners and losers at the village level. In the Annapurna trekking region of central Nepal, the World Wide Fund for Nature say a mere 20 cents out of the US$ 3 spent by an average trekkper per day ends in the holey pockets of the local economy. While percolating into the village, a greater share of this is likely to end up in the hands of the better off such as the lodge owner rather than a subsistence farmer or herder.

The local economy also loses out to central government which controls fees and revenues from national parks. Schemes are now being devised to retain money locally, though these are still hard to find and have their own problems. Many critics allege that ecotourism creates only menial service jobs and helps to undermine traditional jobs on the land.

Despite the leakages, outside money coming into a poor, non-market economy can have a considerable impact. Though comprehensive studies are lacking, this would appear to be true of Rwanda and the Mountain Gorilla Project. Park
guards, whose numbers tripled over the course of the eighties, received four times more than the average wage. Guides also benefited from tips which were often more than half their salary. Another spin-off was that the success of the project also attracted foreign donors who pumped aid into forest conservation and rural development.

The case of the Galapagos Islands

Having landed in 1835, Charles Darwin could be said to be one of the first ecotourists to the subtropical Galapagos Islands in Ecuador. It was, goes the story, this enchanting landscape of smoking volcanoes, endemic fauna, mammal, bird and marine life, which inspired his theories of evolution. The number of visitors has grown from over 10,000 in 1979 when it was declared a world heritage site by Unesco, to 47,000 in 1993. It is forecast to reach 82,000 by 1997. Attracted by the economic bonanza of ecotourism, national residents in Galapagos, who were only 1,346 in 1950, are now more than 12,000.

Not everybody is happy about the mass arrival of visitors and immigrants. Fishermen whose families go back to Darwin and beyond, have little time for tourism when they are being blamed by the government for declining marine life. "We are tired of being told we are responsible for everything that happens in these islands," fisherman Galo Cedeno told Panos journalists. "If the government does not lift the fishing ban we are even willing to burn all the natural areas to finish this tourism craziness. We see nothing of the millions of dollars that this business leaves to others."

Tourism in the Galapagos Islands injects tens of millions of dollars into the Ecuadorian economy yearly, but critics allege that only a tiny slice of that is directly invested in environmental conservation. Meanwhile islanders have seen the cost of living rocket to four times the figure for the rest of the country. And they still lack the most basic public services like clean drinking water and a proper sewerage system.

Inflation and devaluation of the local currency has also eaten into government funds which support the Galapagos National Parks Service (GNPS). This has jeopardised protection measures - boats patrolling the Marine Reserve had to stop operations. The squeeze on funds prompted many skilled people to leave the GNPS to become tourist guides earning 10 times their previous salary (7).

The big questions that remain unanswered are how does one guarantee that the tourists - and the migrants that go with them - will not destroy the environment? Many islanders now encroach on national park land. And how does one put the millions of dollars to work for conservation and the local people? But therein lies another dilemma. The more money that is pumped into the community, the more poor people will be attracted from the impoverished mainland. Some observers are now calling for a moratorium on ecotourism.
3. WILDLIFE, PEOPLE, PRIMATES AND CONSERVATION

"Attempts by outsiders to impose wildlife preservation schemes on Africa are imperialist and futile" - Richard Dowden, Africa editor, The Independent newspaper, UK.

Safari hunting - ecotourism's new trophy?

Both barrels of the pro-hunting lobby were trained on conservationists at a recent Wildlife Society Conference sponsored by transnationals and some foreign donor agencies. The pros argue that killing animals is an essential part of conservation. But for many conservationists and ecotourism operators, hunting is unethical and should be banned. However, as conservation policies are increasingly linked to community development, hunting tours - more profitable than photo-safaris - are now becoming part of Africa's fast expanding ecotourism industry.

Safari tourism is big dollar tourism across Africa. Kenya alone pulls in US$ 350 million a year from tourist receipts. Wildlife, then, equals pots of money. Taking this a step further, the lifespan of an elephant is worth US$ 900,000.

Many conservationists claim that until local people can place a value on a live elephant, or any other wildlife, and see some benefit from it, they will continue to kill and poach to help their income. "It is absurd to think of not using wildlife," says Stephen Edwards of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). "We have to protect wildlife, but the best way is to show the people that they have economic value. If the people don't think wildlife can be a source of income they will kill the species because they need the space for agriculture, cattle or trees."

All too often however, indigenous people including Kenya's nomadic pastoralists, the Maasai, have been driven from traditional grazing lands as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries were mapped out. Hunting and fuel gathering were banned as a kind of total preservation order was imposed by donor nations who have long ago destroyed much of their own wildlife.

Such preservation moves have put pressure on villages bordering parks. Meanwhile, illegal poaching perched on the back of war, political instability, bankrupt governments, and festering corruption has taken a mammoth toll. There are signs however, that although "total preservation" may be appropriate in some African contexts, giving villagers a stake in protecting wildlife, and sometimes buying meat, is a better way to help conservation.

Local rights to hides and meat
Campfire Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources is a radical project in Zimbabwe now operating in 23 districts involving local people in managing wildlife and their environment while growing subsistence crops. Here villagers live on barren land and crops often fall prey to erratic rainfall, or the large herds of mammals like buffalo and elephants that roam the area. Villagers who were dependent on food aid for several years, now have "ownership" over wildlife on their lands. They generate funds from activities such as controlled safari hunting which makes three times the returns from cattle ranching by charging daily rates and a trophy fee.

In Nyaminyami district around the southern shore of Lake Kariba, sustainable wildlife activities in 1992 notched up Zimbabwe dollars 320,000, a 450% increase in three years. While a levy is paid to the local management authority and the district council, the balance from activities is paid directly to the villages (8). If they choose, dividends can be given to individual families. Critics however, say that some councils are reluctant to hand over the full revenues generated and the powers of wildlife management to the communities. They add that the divisions within communities over natural resources are often overlooked; and traditional decision-making structures need to be integrated.

CAMPFIRE’s community principles are now spreading and being adapted to projects elsewhere in the region, particularly in South Africa. A new initiative, says journalist Eddie Koch in a recent study, Rhetoric or Reality? Ecotourism and Rural Reconstruction in South Africa, is the "contract park" in the remote Richtersveld region in the north-western Cape.

A panorama of mountains and desert, the region is a conservationist's wonder containing small mammals and reptiles and hundreds of succulent plants. During the late eighties the (South African) National Parks Board wanted to declare a nature reserve and evict the local pastoralists.

But backed by human rights groups in Cape Town, the local communities put forward an alternative plan based on people’s participation. Koch reports that the people have negotiated the right to remain in the area, to continue grazing their stock, and to receive royalties and jobs from the park. As well as having a say in the running of the park, people have won the right to review the complete agreement after a thirty year period. This breakthrough led to a series of reforms by the National Parks Board.

But the problem in many parts of South Africa is that the natural resource base is so severely depleted it is incapable of meeting the sustained development of large numbers of people. Koch says that if ecotourism is to realise its full potential it has to be accompanied by wide ranging reforms such as a restoration of land rights to local communities, support for new forms of land tenure, and the strengthening of local democratic institutions.
Primate conservation in Rwanda

Man’s closest living relative attracts tens of thousands of ecotourists to central Africa’s rich rainforest highlands whose steamy canopy rises above 4,000 metres. Spread over hundreds of dense square kilometres the Virunga volcanoes are the refuge of several endangered primates. But its most famous son, who has even become a Hollywood legend, is the mountain gorilla.

The recent genocide, says a spokeswoman of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund in London, has left the gorillas largely unscathed, though there are worries of poaching and landmines. The 30 or so guides forced to flee into neighbouring Zaire are now back at base repairing their damaged centre. But who knows when the tourists will return. The mountain gorillas grew up in Africa’s first national park formed in 1925. However, its modern day popularity goes back to the mid-seventies when path-breaking studies of this special creature were published. Evidence also came to light that the gorilla population had declined from 450 to 260 between 1960 and 1973, mainly through poaching (9).

And a much bigger threat was looming. The Rwandan government decided to clear a section of the park in the late seventies, including the richest gorilla habitat, for a cattle-raising scheme. Pressure had mounted from local farmers who saw little value in forest conservation. Their fertile plots of land were becoming smaller and smaller due to population growth and there were no other jobs.

This threat led to the setting up of the Mountain Gorilla Project (MGP) in the late seventies around a tourist programme. Although the word "ecotourism" had not been uttered, the idea of ecologically sensitive tourism was the goal. And this was tied in with improving park security and spreading conservation awareness.

"Tourism has become a key factor in the success of the MGP," says William Weber, a specialist of primate conservation at the New York Zoological Society. The number of visitors rose throughout the eighties to an average of 5,000-6,000 per year. Rising entry fees met the arrival of more visitors, and annual revenues in 1989 topped the US$ 1 million mark for direct entry fees. In 1990, MGP revenues were more than half of the US$ 1.4 million taken at Kenya’s Amboseli National Park visited by over four times the number of visitors. It is estimated that an extra US$ 3-5 million is brought into the national economy through foreign tourists (10).

Observers say the money filtering into the local and national economy has increased the appreciation of wildlife values and the commitment toward gorilla conservation. There is now less opposition to the park from local farmers, and perhaps more crucially, high-standing political support for its future development.
Conservation results have been encouraging. Up to 1989, the gorilla population climbed from 260 to 320 over a 10-year period. According to Weber, tourism revenues were the key. These paid for more forest guards who helped eliminate gorilla poaching.

Other conservation measures have also played a key part. Visits to the wild gorillas is strictly controlled to six people per gorilla group a day. Only one visit a day is allowed and this fits in with late morning gorilla rest periods. No feeding or physical contact is allowed with the gorillas who can catch all human diseases. At first two and then four gorilla groups were approached and became used to the visitors.

Such success attracted international support. While the government was able to run personnel and operations with visitors’ revenues, extra financial and technical help came from international NGOs and development agencies.

However there is a different twist to the story on the other side of the Virunga mountains in Uganda’s Mgahinga National Park. Here over 1,300 small peasants were evicted from their small plots in mid-1992 when a reserve was set up to protect the gorillas. After a year-long campaign against the authorities the people were eventually compensated with funds from US-AID. Clearly the gorillas have benefited, but to date only two farmers have found work as trackers with the park authorities.

Around Africa

Elsewhere in Africa other primate conservation projects have learnt from the MGP. Zaire’s Kahuzi-Biega National Park initially allowed 30-40 tourists on a single visit with guides hacking down vegetation around the gorillas, which scared the animals. This has been radically overhauled and conservation is now a key goal. Visitors have increased and entry fees, which have been raised, bring in nearly US$ 400,000 (11).

But attracting ecotourists to other primate sites in lowland forest areas is proving difficult. Despite international publicity in a widely acclaimed wildlife film, the Korup National Park in Cameroon, which was set up in 1987, gets few visitors. In 1990, only 350 made it to the park. Here they found no trained guides and so set off to look for primates. In 1990, entry revenues failed to cover the annual running cost of a park vehicle (12).

Today many of these projects are threatened by political instability. Reports say visitors are down, park wardens are often not paid for months, and group size limits to view chimps and gorillas have been abandoned.

At such lowland rainforest sites poverty and survival will always drive people to short-term gains whether killing wildlife or felling trees. The revenues generated
from ecotourism and the value this puts on wildlife and habitats will never be enough on its own to protect the environment.

**National parks, people and biodiversity**

Limiting visitor group sizes in national parks, as in Rwanda, is seen as one way of lowering environmental impact and protecting biodiversity. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organisation have come up with guidelines for the "carrying capacity" of natural scenic spots. This is defined as "the level of visitor-use an area can accommodate with high levels of satisfaction for visitors and few impacts on resources". But critics say this may not satisfy the development needs of local people. And tour operators can accommodate as many who pay to go!

At Manuel Antonio National Park in Costa Rica no more than 800 visitors are allowed inside at one given moment. Some parks such as Pasachoa in Ecuador closes for one month every year to let nature recuperate, while in the Galapagos Islands visitors are restricted to 18 sites.

Price controls have also been put in place. In Costa Rica the entrance fees were increased overnight from US$ 1.3 to US$ 15 for foreign visitors. So even if the numbers were halved, the parks would still get five times more money. The plan went ahead despite criticism from officials in the Tourism Ministry that visitors would go elsewhere.

Yet many developing countries charge absurdly low rates for foreign visitors and some countries even fail to charge a tariff. Given the huge under-pricing of natural resources, the scope exists to raise charges. Effective management is also needed from the training of guides to the rules of conduct. At the Iguazu National Park in Brazil where one million people visit annually, many visitors can be seen feeding anteaters crisps and other snacks!

Critics also point out that few environmental impact assessments have been undertaken for projects such as the building of hotels or lodges inside or on the borders of national parks. Many argue that these should be mandatory and also include social impact assessments.

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4. REACHING OUT FOR PARADISE

"Governments in destination areas need to take a proactive role in raising revenue, integrating tourism activities and encouraging the involvement of local people" Erlet Cater, Reading University, UK.

**Welcome to Annapurna Lodge**
For many observers, ecotourism is no panacea for developing countries. Its dangers are as manifold as its potential for good. However, they point out that it is here to stay and the South needs to keep a watchful, regulating eye if it is to put further money into local economies and help conservation. Ecotourism is dependent on an integrated policy involving governments, tourists, and tour operators, but above all it is at the village level that control needs to be handed over to local people.

Nepal's Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) was set up in 1986 to counter the harmful impact of the annual invasion of trekkers into the Annapurna Sanctuary area below the world's highest summits.

Covering over 2,600 square kilometres and home to musk deer, the endangered snow leopard and tens of different types of orchids, the project takes an integrated approach to rural development including such activities as forest and nature conservation, tourist management, community health and sanitation, and job creation (13).

Along today's trails, trekkers come across not only bowed porters and revolving Buddhist prayer wheels, but streams with micro hydroelectricity schemes and lodges sporting solar water heaters. Many of the 850 lodges, offering anything from tea to bean stew and pizzas, are owned by the local Gorkhalis. According to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) which helped to found and fund the project a revolving fund managed by the people provides money for latrines and garbage pits.

Most people are subsistence farmers, herders and traders dependent on the natural resources over 90% of local energy needs are met by forests. Incomes have been bolstered by the explosion in the trekking industry which outnumbers the local population by two to one in the busy months. To tap into foreign tourism, many locals have now been trained in skills from food preparation and menu costing, to safety and security for trekkers. Others have been trained in other skills such as carpet weaving which helps to keep money in the villages. Integrating tourism with farming activities, handicrafts and creating other businesses is critical.

People's involvement and control is the key and lodges have their own management committees to supervise the work. To increase their involvement and ownership in different income-generating schemes, villagers are encouraged to put up half of the funding. This is then matched from other sources. The project authorities also believe that their activities need to be part of national tourism planning and that revenues raised should be injected into development schemes.

ACAP is being funded by foreign donors and an entry charge on foreign trekkers. The idea is to make the project self-reliant in the near future and extend the
conservation area. ACAP now manages two areas exclusively devoted to ecotourism. In the Upper Mustang area adjoining the Tibetan border 1,000 tourists are allowed to trek each year. Charged US$ 700 for a 10-day trek, 60% of this is pumped back into conservation and the local economy. The number of trekkers will be regulated and it is hoped it will become a model of sustainable tourism management for Nepal.

Observers point out that tourism can play a key role in one of the world's poorest economies which has little in the way of large-scale industries. However, it may be that in the Annapurna area the carrying capacity is being overloaded. The director of ACAP, warns that neither the closing of an area, nor the opening of a new one to diversify tourism will help, unless tourism is effectively managed at the macro and micro levels.

The friendly ecotourist and operator

For every bona fide eco-tour operator there is a mala fide one exploiting the ecotourism label for profit. The good guys provide expert local guides, highlight poor environmental practices, follow a travel code of ethics, and can put around 10% of total trip costs into the hands of local conservation groups. But will the bad guys follow this lead?

Some observers believe it is in their own interests. The green or new consumer is growing. A US study shows that today's travellers are prepared to pay more than 8% for sounder environmental travel. The argument goes that in a market place growing greener by the minute, and in which environmentally aware individuals have collective clout in their purchasing power, it is in the operators' financial interest to actively promote conservation and help local communities. Operators should also note that 43 million US travellers are likely to sign up for an eco-tour in the next three years (14).

To encourage the good guys, some commentators say voluntary guidelines drawn up by governments and industry regulating environmental labelling and advertising are useful ways forward. This would, goes the argument, develop consumer awareness and charge companies for misleading marketing. In the US, the Ecotourism Society is about to launch a green evaluation programme to evaluate their tour operators in Ecuador. "The free market will reward those who meet the guidelines," said a spokeswoman.

But others are not so sure. Clearly, parts of the industry are aware that investment in the environment pays. But in a diverse industry where many operators do not even invest in the host country, where competition is red hot, and where consumer and industry awareness of sustainable tourism is patchy, a self-regulatory system without an effective watchdog would always be open to abuse.
Welcome government intervention

Many commentators point out that without intervention the forces of the free market will play into the hands of foreign companies and capital. Vast profits will be immediately repatriated. In turn this is likely to lead to over-capacity and environmental damage in hitherto rare beauty spots. The governments of developing countries can play a vital role in encouraging homegrown industry and ensuring that profits are spread more widely and also channelled into conservation schemes.

It is argued that legislation for appropriate tax measures is needed. In the Maldives, under the master tourism plan, a nightly bed tax raises a high percentage of government revenues (tourist revenues make up nearly 20% of Gross Domestic Product) which then goes back into promoting and protecting the industry so vital to the economy’s well-being. The Maldives also restricts cultural contamination by building resorts on uninhabited islands and restricting visits to others.

The catch here, however, is that developing countries dependent on tourism for hard foreign currency are often worried that higher taxes may put potential investors to flight. Indeed, as in the case of Sri Lanka in the eighties, many governments do the opposite and offer tax holidays and free loans. Reports say a proposed US$ 50 per head passenger tax on Caribbean cruises was dropped after threats from US cruise lines. Opposition to corporate tax can also come from homegrown business interests who have the political muscle to match.

Let ecotourists pay

Another way forward may be the approach taken by the mountain kingdom of Bhutan bordering northeast India. Here the number of visitors is strictly limited to 2,500 each year and visitors have to stump up US$ 250 per day. This exclusive club approach, by putting a proper value on the environment - seen by many to reflect a tightly controlled society - serves the purpose of ensuring that tourism gets the same priority as other development priorities and develops in balance with them.

The need for a national tourism strategy

The raising of income is central to any national tourism strategy of developing countries. But there are other vital components too. Planning controls are needed to ensure that developments do not take place in environmentally sensitive areas, and are not haphazard in designated areas. Economic development priorities need to be set and a dependence on any form of tourism avoided. And ecotourism needs a dovetailing of ministries from forestry and agriculture across to public works and transportation.
In a recent move Costa Rica’s Minister of Tourism and Environment has suggested that a clause on sustainable tourism be inserted into Agenda 21, which came out of the 1992 Earth Summit. Linking sustainable tourism with an agenda to tackle global poverty is critical. For no matter how well-planned and regulated, in dirtpoor conditions activities like illegal felling and the poaching of wildlife will continue to threaten every paradise on earth.

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