

# ECOTOURISM GUIDELINES FOR NATURE TOUR OPERATORS

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## INTRODUCTION

by Megan Epler Wood

Some outstanding ecotourism guidelines have been written in the past. But no organization attempted to bring together leading conservationists, tour operators, and academics to thrash the state of the art of delivering ecotourism services should be in the 1990s, until this project was undertaken. This document delivers the most comprehensive view to date, not only on what should be observed by tour operators working in natural areas but also how these services should be delivered, with what objectives, and for whose benefit.

One of our leading participants commented that these guidelines are still idealistic, despite the review process.

Perhaps this is because so many want to share their most optimistic view of what benefits ecotourism can deliver. Skepticism does not often play a role in the development of guidelines. Developing ecotourism guidelines involves the preparation of a road map for top performance, given the right circumstances, expertise, and funds are available. These guidelines should not be seen as threatening or discouraging to companies, particularly those in developing countries that may not be achieving these objectives now.

The point is to have a road map. This is a brand-new, heavily researched road map that provides tour operators and lodges with the information they need to begin pursuing the full agenda of objectives listed here. Now that a road map is available, it will be up to the private sector to obtain the funds and follow them wherever possible. Suggestions on the guidelines are also welcome.

The guidelines will have to be revised every few years, because new perspectives will inevitably emerge and important objectives to be met and techniques to be used. An evaluation form at the back of the booklet provides readers with space to write down new ideas and to provide feedback.

Many companies, conservation organizations, government offices, developers, hotel and lodge owners, the press, and consumers will benefit from this document. It offers such a broad range of recommendations that a responsible traveler, business person, or land manager will easily be able to glean the facts needed to select a tour, develop an ecolodge, or manage a responsible visitor. Of course, individual documents would be wonderful for each of these groups, and perhaps they will be written. But monitoring programs in the field of ecotourism are still in their infancy, and funding to support them is presently not available.

In the future, monitoring programs should be factored into the development of ecotourism projects on both large and small scale. Ecotourism monitoring projects need the full support of corporations, governments, consumers, and conservation organizations if the ecotourism revolution is to realize the benefits described here. Many participants gave their time and their best ideas to this project and deserve our warmest thanks. Survey responses from 39 outbound tour operators in the United States, 40 consumers interested in ecotourism, 68 World Congress on Adventure Travel and Ecotourism participants, 18 travel agents and inbound tour operators working in Costa Rica, and

administrators from universities and major nonprofit organizations in the United States were and evaluated.

In all cases, the ratio of respondents represents a sample exceeding 20 percent. Three interdisciplinary committees were established in the United States and Costa Rica to help interpret the results of the surveys and to review the draft guidelines. The interdisciplinary committee members wrote the techniques listed here, and they discussed how a consumer evaluation form for travelers used by tour operators should be drafted.

The International Ecotourism Society is proposing that a consumer evaluation program, the Green Evaluations Program, follow the publication of these guidelines.

## SUMMARY OF GUIDELINES FOR NATURE TOUR OPERATORS

### Predeparture Programs -- Visitor Information And Education

**Guideline:**

Prepare travelers to minimize their negative impacts while visiting sensitive environments and before departure.

**Guideline:**

Prepare travelers for each encounter with local cultures and with native animals and plants.

**Guideline:**

Minimize visitor impacts on the environment by offering literature, briefings, leading by example and taking corrective actions.

### Guiding Programs -- Prevention Of Cultural Impacts

**Guideline:**

Minimize traveler impacts on local cultures by offering literature, briefings, leading by example and taking corrective actions.

**Guideline:**

Use adequate leadership, and maintain small enough groups to ensure minimum group impacts at destinations. Avoid areas that are undermanaged and overvisited.

**Guideline:**

Ensure managers, staff and contract employees know and participate in all aspects of company operations to prevent impacts on the environment and local cultures.

**Guideline:**

Give managers, staff and contract employees access to programs that will upgrade their skills and ability to communicate with and manage clients in sensitive natural and cultural settings.

**Guideline:**

Be a contributor to the conservation of the regions being visited.

**Guideline:**

Provide competitive, local employment in all aspects of business operations.

**Guideline:**

Offer site-sensitive accommodations that are not wasteful of local resources or destructive to the environment that provide ample opportunity for learning about the environment and interchange with local communities.

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For list of advisers (Green Evaluations Committee) see end of document.

**PREDEPARTURE PROGRAMS -- VISITOR INFORMATION AND EDUCATION**

**Guideline:**

Prepare travelers to minimize their negative impacts while visiting sensitive environments and before departure.

Offer visitors the educational materials they need to learn about the places and people to be visited and introduce the importance of contributing to the conservation of places being visited.

Educate visitors about the full range of natural and cultural phenomena to be observed.

Educate visitors to consider the effects of their visit in advance and to modify their behavior while traveling, with the objective of minimizing impacts.

Provide introductory information on the people and ecosystems to be visited in predeparture programs. Stress the importance of reading pre-departure information, such as selected bibliographies, and additional resources for each destination.

Keep information objective and well-grounded using examples of phenomena visited and visitor encounters.

Provide general travel ethics addressing standards for behavior in natural areas and with local people.

Provide information on the equipment, clothing and personal supplies suitable to the region being visited.

Warn against bringing disposable goods that contribute to the solid waste burden in the region.

Provide information on products to avoid that are illegally traded.

Provide information, as required, on avoiding the accidental transport of foreign, exotic species to isolated ecosystems being visited.

**Visitor Benefits:**

Visitors are attuned to the full range of opportunities for viewing wildlife and learning about local cultures.

Awareness of personal responsibility to minimize impacts on the environment and local culture at departure.

Visitor has proper gear and clothing for environments and cultures to be visited.

#### GUIDING PROGRAMS -- GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF GUIDING TOURS

##### Guideline:

Prepare travelers for each encounter with local cultures and with native animals and plants.

##### Objectives:

Pave the way for reciprocal sensitivity between cultures by teaching tourists to be unobtrusive in the environments and cultures they are encountering.

Provide visitors with the opportunity to learn more about the social and political circumstances of the region being visited.

Provide visitors with the opportunity to learn more about local environmental protection and conservation efforts.

##### Techniques:

Provide quality orientation and enough leaders to manage the group according to the sensitivity of the environment visited.

Give quality interpretation at all times; explain local cultures and describe natural history. Encourage interaction with local people while overseeing contact to avoid cultural errors.

Conduct briefings before each stop, including behaviors to avoid, restricted practices and zone alerts for fragile and endangered species, specific distances to maintain with local wildlife, and regulations.

Use of time on road and in cities for educational discussions of all kinds including balanced discussion of local issues.

##### Visitor Benefits:

Awareness of how to encounter cultures and environment with minimum negative impact.

Insight into the visitor's own role and potential contribution to local conservation and socioeconomic development efforts.

#### GUIDING PROGRAMS -- PREVENTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

##### Guideline:

Minimize visitor impacts on the environment by offering literature, briefings, leading by example, and taking corrective actions.

Objectives:

Help visitors to minimize their negative impacts by enhancing their understanding of the fragile environment.

Company guides should pursue the following procedures:

Provide a set of environmental guidelines, created by the company, specific to the area being visited.

Obtain and distribute available guidelines for each natural area visited.

Allow protected area staff to introduce guidelines if possible.

Brief visitors on proper behavior - on trails, in campsites, around wild animals, around fragile areas, and with trash, with human waste, with fires, and with soaps.

Advise all travelers on the level of difficulty of each excursion to prevent damage to the environment caused by lack of experience or ability to maneuver in unfamiliar terrain.

Discourage unrealistic expectations of observing rare wildlife and plants by interpreting all activities in the ecosystem.

Advise against collecting souvenirs from natural areas, such as feathers, bones & shells, unless specifically condoned by local authorities.

Advise against purchasing specific crafts that are produced from threatened natural resources.

Visitor Benefits:

Learns how to travel without leaving footprints.

Gains a greater understanding of travel's impact on the environment.

Is informed of the rules and regulations of natural areas and the need to follow them.

GUIDING PROGRAMS -- PREVENTION OF CULTURAL IMPACTS

Guideline:

Minimize traveler impact on local cultures by offering literature, briefings, leading by example, and taking corrective actions.

Objectives:

Protect the integrity of the cultures being visited by minimizing visitor contribution to acculturation and the decline of local values. Enhance visitor understanding of local cultures but avoid intrusions into the private lives of others.

Techniques:

Company guides should be aware of the following procedures:

Interpret local cultural values and history of local cultures.

Provide a set of cultural guidelines created by the company, specific to the area being visited, available, obtain and distribute guidelines written by local communities.

Advise visitors to accept differences, adopt local customs, and be unobtrusive. Discuss appropriate behavior when photographing.

Discuss appropriate behavior when purchasing goods, tipping, and responding to begging.

Visitor Benefits:

A better understanding of local values and cultures and how to behave with local peoples to minimize cultural impacts.

The ability to look, listen and learn from others without intruding.

## MONITORING PROGRAMS -- PREVENTION OF ACCUMULATED IMPACTS OF TOURISM

Guideline:

Use adequate leadership, and maintain small enough groups to ensure minimum group size at destinations. Avoid areas that are undermanaged and overvisited.

Objectives:

Diminish accumulated effects of tourism on sensitive sites.

Avoid overloading local visitor management capabilities if there are inadequate funds and manage visitors in sensitive sites.

Contribute to an effort to disperse tourism, and lighten the load on popular destinations during peak seasons.

Recognize sites, in advance, that are inappropriate for tourism, or need assistance with damage.

Techniques:

Be sensitive to total number of groups visiting sites simultaneously.

Informally census the number of groups encountered on trails or roads within protected areas. Track of sites with rapid increases. Notify authorities or landowners if the number of groups increases rapidly.

Monitor negative environmental impacts, including trail erosion, improper waste dumping, water pollution, species harassment, illegal collecting of plants or animals, feeding of wildlife animals that have become abnormally tame or aggressive. Notify authorities or landowners verbally and, if need be, in writing.

Assist land managers in monitoring key, indicator species, or offer logistical assistance to those working on tourism impacts.

Design itineraries and promotions to avoid overselling popular sites, particularly those inadequately managed for visitation during peak seasons.

Watch for accumulated cultural impact and work to prevent or buffer them.

Indicators include; inflated prices for goods in communities; hostility towards tourists in communities; black markets, drug dealing and prostitution catering to the tourist industry.

Visitor Benefits:

Avoids contributing to the destruction of sites visited.

Learns to recognize the negative impacts of tourism and the importance of notifying the authorities when this occurs.

Learns to avoid overloading popular sites, by making trips in off-season or avoiding peak hours.

Learns to recognize cultural impact and avoids contributing to the decline of local values.

#### MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS -- PREVENTION OF NATURE TOUR COMPANY IMPACT

Guideline:

Ensure managers, staff and contract employees know and participate in all aspects of company operations to prevent impacts on the environment and local cultures.

Objectives:

Make the nature tour company as environmentally and culturally sensitive as possible, both in the office and in the field.

Techniques:

Establish an environmental code and objectives manual for the company.

Confidence in the personnel who are leading the organization and the tours.

#### MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS -- TRAINING

Guideline:

Give managers, staff and contract employees access to programs that will upgrade their skills and communicate with and manage clients in sensitive natural and cultural settings.

Objectives:

Offer meaningful opportunities for staff and contract employees to work within a sustainable environment.

Techniques:

Establish clear guidelines for staff regarding opportunities and company support available for them via internal training programs (natural and cultural history) and via training programs available externally (language skills and first aid, accounting, mechanics).

- Establish an operators consortium for training. - Establish a relationship with a local ec facility and work to integrate needed training components into the curriculum.  
Work with nongovernmental organizations to establish an ecotourism training program.

Visitor Benefits:

Opportunity to contribute to a local sustainable economy that offers local people opportuni employed in increasingly responsible positions.

#### MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS – CONSERVATION CONTRIBUTION PROGRAMS

Guideline:

Be a contributor to the conservation of the regions being visited.

Objectives:

Put tourism-generated revenues into the hands of local environmental organizations and prote management agencies for conservation initiatives.

Ensure that tourism revenues cover the costs for the management of tourism on wild l protected areas.

Help parks and protected areas generate revenue, thereby providing economic impe conservation agenda on the national level in destination countries.

Techniques:

Provide corporate contributions to local non-profit conservation initiatives and protected area direct corporate donations, partnerships, technical assistance, education programs, facilitation, direct staff involvement, and becoming involved in joint initiatives.\*

Facilitate visitor contributions to local conservation initiatives during the trip by: providing on projects in the regions being visited and guidelines for in-kind contributions; arranging brie visits to local projects with project staff; or offering opportunities for visitors to volunteer.

Facilitate visitor contributions to local conservation initiatives after the trip by: sending mailings to clients with local nonprofit membership literature, brief descriptions of projects assistance, upcoming opportunities to do volunteer services, or opportunities to work at home an ambassador or fund raiser or organizer for local projects.\*

Encourage writing to government and corporate organizations whose policies are damagi environment or local cultures in the areas visited by providing addresses and contact names.

\*This may not apply to non-profit organizations running tours

Visitor Benefits:

A better understanding of how tourism can be a net contributor to the conservation of cul environment visited.



A chance to be a part of the effort to conserve a beloved place on a longterm basis and biological diversity and cultural heritage worldwide.

#### MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS -- LOCAL EMPLOYMENT & JOBS PROGRAMS

Provide competitive, local employment in all aspects of business operations.

Make ecotourism beneficial to local communities.

Provide local people access to jobs that are not destructive to the environment.

Provide local people with a full range of opportunities beyond the service employment sector.

Techniques:

Hire locally-owned businesses including transport (vehicle and boat rental services), accom (hotels, lodges, camps), and restaurants.

Buy local supplies from food and craft vendors and avoid all products made from enda threatened species.

Hire local office and field staff. Pay competitive wages, above minimum wage for the region, acceptable benefits.

Contribute to community enterprises and development efforts that support a wide variety residents, with special sensitivity to indigenous groups.

Visitor Benefits:

Opportunity to contribute to a sustainable market economy, e.g. to provide job opportunitie not destructive to the environment.

Awareness that the choices visitors make affects the lives and livelihoods of others.

#### LOCAL ACCOMMODATIONS CHECKLIST

Offer site-sensitive accommodations that do not waste local resources or destroy the enviro that provide ample opportunity for learning about the environment and sensitive interchange communities.

Ensure all aspects of the visitor's experience are in harmony with the natural and cultural envii

Review the following check list of considerations when booking new accommodations.

Select accommodations that are in compliance with environmental regulations.

Review facility's level of destruction to natural surroundings.

Consider facilities efforts to maintain a scale in keeping with the local environment and national or local cultural design motifs in architecture and interior design.

Review facility's use of energy saving devices and renewable energy resources.

Review facility's treatment of solid and organic waste. Ensure that solid waste is safely disposed that recycling programs are in place where possible. Ensure that all waste products are prevent effects on natural resources.

Determine if restaurant is composting and using other techniques to reduce waste such as paper products and styrofoam.

Determine if facility is offering meaningful opportunities for locals.

Check into training programs offered by lodge.

Review opportunities for locals to have sensitive cultural interchange, on their own terms, with

Look for locally produced craft and food items available for sale on the premises or used restaurants, and ensure that all products from threatened natural resources are avoided.

Check for the interpretive/educational materials inside the facility that are available to guests. field guides, videos, books, pamphlets, and check lists of species found locally.

Check for availability of interpretive services outside, such as self-guided trails and guide serv

Check for the facility's sensitivity to interpretive opportunities; i.e. how well the facility has in its own land's natural features and natural resources, or the local cultural backgrounds and pe of its own staff, for visitors.

Ask if owners contribute to conservation or community development efforts with financial, te logistical support.

Avoid sites that bait animals, or that keep exotic species on the property that were trapped in especially threatened or endangered species.

Visitor Benefits:

An appreciation of the possibilities for sustainable living.

Greater sensitivity to the role of the resort in a community, its impact and contribution to k how to select resorts that are environmentally and socially sensitive.

Better opportunities for sensitive cultural interchange and enlightening field trips accompanie or representatives of local communities.

The Green Evaluations committee reviewers were:

San Jose, Costa Rica Meeting

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