



International Year of Ecotourism (IYE) 2002

Ecotourism activities have been expanding rapidly over the past two decades world-wide and further growth is expected in the future. Recognising its global importance, the United Nations designated the year 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, and its Commission on Sustainable Development requested international agencies, governments and the private sector to undertake supportive activities. The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have joined forces to take the leading role in the preparation and co-ordination of activities to be undertaken at the international level during the IYE.

What is ecotourism?

Much has been written about *ecotourism*, but there is little consensus about its meaning, due to the many forms in which ecotourism activities are offered by a large and wide variety of operators, and practised by an even larger array of tourists.

While there is not a universal definition for ecotourism, its general characteristics can be summarised as follows:

1. All nature-based forms of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas
2. It contains educational and interpretation features
3. It is generally, but not exclusively organised for small groups by specialised and small, locally owned businesses. Foreign operators of varying sizes also organise, operate and/or market ecotourism tours, generally for small groups.
4. It minimises negative impacts upon the natural and socio-cultural environment
5. It supports the protection of natural areas by
 - generating economic benefits for host communities, organisations and authorities managing natural areas with conservation purposes,
 - providing alternative employment and income opportunities for local communities,
 - increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among locals and tourists.

Over the years, it has also become clear that some concerns still need to be wholly addressed in ecotourism, such as:

- land tenure and control of the ecotourism development process by host communities,
- efficiency and fairness of the current concept of protected areas for protection of biological and cultural diversity
- the need for additional precautions and monitoring when operating in especially sensitive areas
- indigenous and traditional rights in areas suitable for ecotourism development,

Is sustainable tourism the same thing as ecotourism?

The principles of sustainable tourism were defined by WTO as early as 1988; sustainable tourism is “envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems”.

A clear distinction should be made between the concepts of ecotourism and sustainable tourism: the term ecotourism itself refers to a segment within the tourism sector, while the sustainability principles should apply to all types of tourism activities, operations, establishments and projects, including conventional and alternative forms.

The international year of ecotourism will offer an opportunity to review successful ecotourism experiences world-wide, in order to consolidate tools and institutional frameworks that ensure its sustainable development in the future. This means maximising the economic, environmental and social benefits from ecotourism, while avoiding its past shortcomings and negative impacts.

Efforts to better understand ecotourism, as well as to improve its planning, management and marketing techniques have been conducted by many ecotourism companies and practitioners, governments and research people throughout the world. However, there has not been so far a truly comprehensive effort to allow the various stakeholders to voice their views, disseminate widely the results achieved, or to integrate such results so as to produce the necessary synergies that will ensure that ecotourism will indeed generate the economic, social and environmental benefits expected from it.

With the above in mind, WTO and UNEP aim at involving all the actors in the field of ecotourism during the International Year, with the following *objectives* in mind:

- (a) Generate greater awareness among public authorities, the private sector, the civil society and consumers regarding ecotourism’s capacity to contribute to the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage in natural and rural areas, and the improvement of standards of living in those areas.
- (b) Disseminate methods and techniques for the planning, management, regulation and monitoring of ecotourism to guarantee its long-term sustainability.
- (c) Promote exchanges of successful experiences in the field of ecotourism.
- (d) Increase opportunities for the efficient marketing and promotion of ecotourism destinations and products on international markets.

In order to reach the above goals, the two organisations envisage to jointly undertake the following main *activities*:

1. To publish, jointly with the World Conservation Union (IUCN), a guide for the sustainable development and management of tourism in national parks and protected areas, which are prime destinations for ecotourism.

2. To facilitate and participate at regional conferences and seminars on specific aspects of ecotourism to take place during 2001 and early 2002 world-wide.
3. To dedicate the World Tourism Day of 2002 to the subject of Ecotourism.
4. To create a Web-based venue to allow various organisations and stakeholder representatives to access information about activities and events, and exchange lessons learned on ecotourism projects.

5. The main event of the IYE: The World Ecotourism Summit

Among the many activities to be undertaken at the global, national, regional and local levels on the occasion of the International Year of Ecotourism throughout the world, this Summit will be the major landmark and it will be held in **Quebec, Canada, 19-22 May 2002**.

The Summit is expected to be the largest ever world-wide gathering of all types of stakeholders involved in ecotourism, including Ministers, public sector officials, tourism companies and their trade associations, local authorities, national park managers, NGOs relevant to the ecotourism sector, the academic community, and others. Further information will be provided one year before the Summit.

Take action and prepare for the IYE!

With a view to spreading as much as possible the results expected from this International Year, WTO and UNEP recommend that:

1. Governments encourage the establishment of inter-ministerial working groups within the National Tourism and Environment Administrations to co-ordinate activities relating to the International Year at the country level with those to be undertaken by WTO and UNEP at the international level.
2. Governments define, strengthen and disseminate as appropriate, a National Strategy and specific programmes for the sustainable development and management of ecotourism.
3. National governments provide technical, financial and promotional support for, and facilitate the creation and operation of small and medium size firms in the field of ecotourism where appropriate.
4. Multi-stakeholder regulating and monitoring systems be set up regarding ecotourism activities, particularly in what refers to the environmental and socio-cultural sustainability.
5. National and/or local committees for the celebration of the International Year of Ecotourism are set up involving all the stakeholders relevant to this activity (public tourism and environment authorities at the national and local levels, private sector, NGOs, host communities, etc.), as well as the local media.
6. Governments and other stakeholders are invited to inform the WTO Secretariat and UNEP of the activities planned for 2002 at the national level. These will be disseminated internationally.

WTO and UNEP Publications on Ecotourism and related issues

“Guidelines for the Sustainable Development and Management of Tourism in National Parks and Protected Areas” A joint publication of WTO, UNEP and IUCN, to be released by mid-2001.

“Guide for Local Authorities on Developing Sustainable Tourism” , WTO, 1999

“Sustainable Development of Tourism: A Compilation of Good Practices”, WTO, 2000

“Sustainable Development of Tourism: An Annotated Bibliography”, WTO, latest issue November 1999

“Ecotourism Information Pack”, UNEP/The International Ecotourism Society, to be released Jan 2001

“Ecolabels in the Tourism Industry”, UNEP-IE, 1998

“Towards Sustainable Coastal Tourism”, CD-ROM, UNEP - USAID/Caribbean Environmental Network (CEN project), 1999

“Tourism Focus”, UNEP DTIE Newsletter, latest issue 2000

“Our Planet, Special Issue on Tourism”, UNEP Magazine for Environmentally Sustainable Development Vol. 10, No.1. 1999

For more information, and publications on the issue, please consult these useful websites:

www.world-tourism.org

www.uneptie.org

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