



## Ecotourism

### Key points

- **Tourism is a growing industry whose economic potential looms particularly large in developing countries. Minimizing tourism's environmental impacts while maximizing its economic benefits for development and poverty alleviation is in line with the overall green growth goal.**
- **Experiences indicate the important role of governments in setting a guiding framework that maximizes benefits, protects the interests of indigenous communities and avoids "greenwashing".**

### Ecotourism explained

Although the concept of ecotourism is widely used, there is no universal definition. However, the various descriptions of ecotourism feature some recurring characteristics of the concept: environmental conservation, minimizing environmental impacts and involving and promoting the interest of the local community and its economy.<sup>1</sup> The International Eco-tourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people."<sup>2</sup> Similar terms such as "green tourism", "ecologically responsible tourism", "carbon-free tourism" or "carbon-neutral tourism" also mean the same thing as ecotourism.

### How it works

Ecotourism is considered the fastest-growing market in the tourism industry.<sup>3</sup> Within ecotourism, linking of tourism with environment and community interests takes place – a practice that has become an essential movement in light of global climate challenges and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

### Greater potential in developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region

Tourism in general is one of the major growing service industries. Because it involves many sectors, from construction to daily commodity suppliers, it can be an important driver of socio-economic changes and progress, especially in developing countries where the economic contribution from tourism is significant.<sup>4</sup> In 2009, the global travel and tourism industry accounted for an estimated 7.9 per cent of global GDP and 8.1 per cent of worldwide employment.<sup>5</sup> The share of emerging and developing economies in this figure grew twice as fast as that of industrialized countries between 1995 and 2007. The significance of tourism industries in least developed

<sup>1</sup> United Nations World Tourism Organization and United Nations Environment Programme, *Quebec Declaration of Ecotourism* (Quebec, 2002). Available from [www.gdrc.org/uem/eco-tour/quebec-declaration.pdf](http://www.gdrc.org/uem/eco-tour/quebec-declaration.pdf) (accessed 19 January 2012). Other suggested components include: active contribution to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, promotion of local culture, education on the importance of environmental protection and the value of ecosystems, initiatives by hospitality providers to promote recycling, energy efficiency, water reuse, and the creation of economic opportunities for local communities.

<sup>2</sup> The International Ecotourism Society website "What is Ecotourism?" Available from [www.ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism](http://www.ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism) (accessed 18 January 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Alison M. Johnston, *Is the Sacred for Sale? Tourism and Indigenous People* (Sterling, VA, Earthscan, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations World Tourism Organization, *From Davos to Copenhagen and Beyond: Advancing Tourism's Response to Climate Change*, Background Paper (Madrid, 2009). Available from <http://sdt.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/fromdavostocopenhagenbeyonduwtopaperelectronicversion.pdf> (accessed 21 February 2012).

<sup>5</sup> World Travel & Tourism Council, *Travel & Tourism Economic Impact 2009: Germany* (London, 2009). Available from <http://torc.linkbc.ca/torc/downloads/germany%20wttc.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2012).

countries (LDCs) is even greater – for 46 of the 50 LDCs, tourism is the primary source of foreign exchange earnings.<sup>6</sup> In many small island countries, such as the Maldives, one half to two thirds of the GDP derives from tourism.<sup>7</sup>

In the Asia-Pacific region, the prospect of growth for tourism is especially high: With an average growth rate of 8 per cent in international tourist arrivals over the past several years, the region is among the leaders in the global tourism industry. For example, tourists arriving in the region exceeded the 200 million mark in 2010, equalling a 13 per cent increase from 2009 arrivals.<sup>8</sup> In the Asia-Pacific countries, expenditures by inbound tourists rose to US\$249 billion in 2010, marking an increase of nearly 22 per cent within a single year.<sup>9</sup>

### **Importance of greening the tourism industry**

Tourism has a significant impact on the environment because it generally entails resource consumption (such as for building tourist accommodations and providing food and water), solid and liquid waste generation and ecosystem disturbance or degradation (such as when coastal ecosystems are built on or used by bathing or boating tourists). The CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the tourism industry account for 5 per cent of the global total emissions.<sup>10</sup> In a business-as-usual scenario, the emissions level in the tourism industry is expected to rise by 130 per cent by 2035.<sup>11</sup>

Because of these significant impacts on the environment and the economic importance of tourism in developing countries, it is one of the most important green adjustments on the way to low carbon green growth. Ecotourism tackles environmental and climate challenges while maximizing tourism's potential for economic growth, social development and poverty reduction.

### **Strengths of ecotourism**

- **Conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems through a market-based mechanism:** Ecotourism's potential contribution to poverty alleviation and environmental protection, particularly for endangered ecosystems, was officially recognized in the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. In that same year, marked as the UN International Year of Ecotourism, the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism was adopted, along with its recommendations for developing ecotourism activities in the context of efficient development. More recently, the importance of tourism in tackling climate change has raised policy attention. The Davos Declaration (Climate Change and Tourism Responding to Global Challenges, 2007) calls for urgent actions by governments and other actors in sustainable tourism to address climate challenges while also concentrating on other development and poverty goals.<sup>12</sup>

The relevance of ecotourism in green growth is considerable and direct, particularly for conserving biodiversity (such as by protecting species that are rare or at risk of extinction) and protecting forestry and ecosystems as a primary source for carbon capture and storage.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations World Tourism Organization, *From Davos to Copenhagen and Beyond: Advancing Tourism's Response to Climate Change*, Background Paper (Madrid, 2009). Available from <http://sdt.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/fromdavostocopenhagenbeyonduwtopaperelectronicversion.pdf> (accessed 21 February 2012).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Study on the Role of Tourism in Socio-Economic Development* (Bangkok, 2007). Available from [www.unescap.org/ttdw/Publications/TPTS\\_pubs/pub\\_2478/pub\\_2478\\_fulltext.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/ttdw/Publications/TPTS_pubs/pub_2478/pub_2478_fulltext.pdf) (accessed 21 February 2012).

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2011* (Bangkok, 2011). Available from [www.unescap.org/stat/data/syb2011/ESCAP-syb2011.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/stat/data/syb2011/ESCAP-syb2011.pdf) (accessed 20 February 2012).

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> United Nations World Tourism Organization, United Nations Environment Programme, World Economic Forum, World Meteorological Organization and Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, *Davos Declaration: Climate Change and Tourism Responding to Global Challenges* (Davos, 2007). Available from <http://sdt.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/davosdeclaration.pdf> (accessed 19 January 2012).

<sup>11</sup> United Nations World Tourism Organization, *From Davos to Copenhagen and Beyond: Advancing Tourism's Response to Climate Change*, Background Paper (Madrid, 2009). Available from <http://sdt.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/fromdavostocopenhagenbeyonduwtopaperelectronicversion.pdf> (accessed 21 February 2012).

<sup>12</sup> United Nations World Tourism Organization, United Nations Environment Programme, World Economic Forum, World Meteorological Organization and Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, *Davos Declaration: Climate Change and Tourism Responding to Global Challenges* (Davos, 2007). Available from <http://sdt.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/davosdeclaration.pdf> (accessed 19 January 2012).

### **Box 1: Ecological value of the forest in Sumatra**

The forest peatlands in Sumatra, Indonesia, are known as the most efficient terrestrial ecosystem for carbon storage. But deforestation due to illegal logging is leading to an annual loss of more than US\$1 billion. According to a recent United Nations Environment Programme report, a hectare of coastal peat-rich forest in Sumatra, where the last 6,600 Sumatran orangutans live, may be worth up to US\$22,000 at the current carbon price, and thus much more than the US\$7,400 per hectare when cleared for palm oil plantations.

*Source: Serge Wich and others, eds., *Orangutans and the Economics of Sustainable Forest Management in Sumatra* (Nairobi, United Nations Environment Programme, Great Apes Survival Partnership, PanEco, Yayasan Ekosistem Lestari, World Agricultural Centre and GRID-Arendal, 2011). Available from [http://hqweb.unep.org/pdf/orangutan\\_report\\_scr.pdf](http://hqweb.unep.org/pdf/orangutan_report_scr.pdf) (accessed 21 February 2012).*

- **Greening tourism for poverty reduction and strengthening communities and their economies:** For developing countries with funding constraints, well-designed ecotourism could provide an effective financing mechanism to sustain the well-being of communities, the economy and natural environments.

Travel and tourism are labour intensive, employing 230 million people, or 8 per cent, of the global work force. One job in the core tourism industry creates an estimated one and a half additional or indirect jobs in the tourism-related economy.<sup>13</sup> The greening of the sector is expected to reinforce its employment potential with increased local hiring and sourcing. Increasing the involvement of communities in the tourism value chain is essential to develop local economies and reduce poverty.

### **Challenges for ecotourism**

- **Finding the right balance between industrial growth and conservation:** Investing in natural capital is important to stimulate ecotourism. However, governments should set restrictions and regulations to prevent the overexploitation of the natural resources.
- **Distinguishing credible ecotourism providers:** To avoid “greenwashing”, it is important to establish common standards and certification mechanisms for eco-resorts (or ecolodges) and ecotourism products.<sup>14</sup> The certification process should be managed and supervised by a single, independent regulatory body.
- **Accepting changes in conventional tourism patterns:** Environmentally and socially responsible tourism can bring about higher costs and less comfort and convenience for tourists; for example, by incorporating carbon offset payment schemes for long-distance travel by aircraft to ecolodge destinations; limiting access to sensitive ecosystems to specific areas or seasons; or reducing the availability of imported goods that accumulate a huge carbon footprint to reach remote tourist areas.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Environment Programme, *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication* (Nairobi, 2011). Available from [www.unep.org/greeneconomy/Portals/88/documents/ger/GER\\_synthesis\\_en.pdf](http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/Portals/88/documents/ger/GER_synthesis_en.pdf) (accessed 21 February 2012).

<sup>14</sup> While global standards would be desirable, due to the cultural differences and different contexts of economy, it may be a challenging task. For more information, see Untamed Path website “Defining Ecotourism” (January 2007). Available from [www.untamedpath.com/Ecotourism/defining.html](http://www.untamedpath.com/Ecotourism/defining.html) (accessed 18 January 2012).

### Country experience: Thailand's green initiative in tourism

Thailand is pushing forward a "green initiative" under the conceptual framework Seven Green Concept and Programmes, developed by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. To provide reliable and objective rating systems for the certification of major tourist sites and accommodations, the Government is creating a database of "environmentally responsible" tourism operators and service providers. In one of the seven concepts, the Green Destinations, a star-rating for beaches in the country was introduced, led by Thailand's Pollution Control Department.

Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand News Room website "Thai Tourism Going 'Green'". Available from [www.tatnews.org/tat\\_news/3852.asp](http://www.tatnews.org/tat_news/3852.asp) (accessed 21 February 2012).

### Implementing strategies

**Standards, information and economic incentives:** Motivating tourists to understand and choose ecotourism requires not only education changes, spanning from school curricula to media coverage of environment- and ecotourism-related themes, but also regulations that make the disclosure of specific environmental information mandatory for public and private actors. For example, making accurate and timely global and regional information on climate and other environment-related issues available to the tourism industry helps operators and service providers adjust their business and investment plans and strategies.<sup>15</sup> Establishing an objective and reliable certification mechanism to verify ecotourism and to distinguish it from similar marketing attempts (such as greenwashing) and providing economic incentives, such as tax credits, would considerably encourage investors' confidence towards introducing and expanding ecotourism services.

**Designing, incentivizing and regulating to protect indigenous communities and the environment:** If not well planned and regulated, ecotourism can threaten indigenous peoples' sovereignty, which will bring about conflicts and tensions in their communities and threaten the delicate balance they have established with their surrounding natural environment.<sup>16</sup> To prevent such undesirable impact, governments should guide ecotourism businesses (beginning in their planning stage), set guidelines and adjust existing legal frameworks to ensure that the industry takes a responsible approach. One country that follows this strategy is India, which has issued ecotourism guidelines (box 2).

#### Box 2: India's ecotourism guidelines

India's ecotourism guidelines, issued by the Ministry of Tourism, include the following principles:

- Communities should be involved, leading to the overall economic development of an area.
- The likely conflicts between resource use for ecotourism and the livelihoods of local inhabitants should be identified and attempts made to minimize them.
- The type and scale of ecotourism development should be compatible with the environment and socio-cultural characteristics of the local community.
- Ecotourism should be planned as a part of the overall area development strategy, guided by an integrated land-use plan that avoids inter-sector conflicts and ensures sectoral integration, associated with commensurate expansion of public services.

Source: Republic of India, Ministry of Tourism website "Eco Tourism". Available from <http://tourism.gov.in/TourismDivision/AboutContent.aspx?Name=Tourism%20Infrastructure%20Development&CID=20&INO=14> (accessed 21 February 2012).

<sup>15</sup> United Nations World Tourism Organization, United Nations Environment Programme, World Economic Forum, World Meteorological Organization and Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, *Davos Declaration: Climate Change and Tourism Responding to Global Challenges* (Davos, 2007). Available from <http://sdt.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/davosdeclaration.pdf> (accessed 19 January 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Serious concerns regarding the rigorous approach of the ecotourism industry were raised during the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the International Year of Ecotourism in 2002.

**Strengthening local initiatives:** Although it is ideal that ecotourism schemes are guided by policies established at the national level, some cases indicate that locally initiated movements provide a new growth driver for local economies. They also help to improve the quality of life of a local population while having a catalytic influence in raising awareness and triggering policy formation at the national level, as illustrated in the case of Suncheon City, Republic of Korea (box 3).

### **Box 3: Ecotourism in Suncheon City, Republic of Korea**

Located in a region known for its petrochemical plants and steel mills, Suncheon City was left behind in the Republic of Korea's industrialization race so city planners there decided to follow a different growth path. Starting in the late 1990s, the city administration turned its undeveloped tidal flats into the largest sanctuary for hooded cranes in the world, which became a competitive advantage for the city. As a result of concerted efforts by the city government and its citizens, Suncheon Bay was designated as a wetland of international importance by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in 2006 and is now one of the five largest coastal Ramsar-selected sites in the world. Additional investment in complementary infrastructure facilitated the arrival of more than 2.3 million visitors in 2009, a dramatic increase from the 0.1 million tourists in 2002. More than US\$79 million was generated in 2009, and by the end of that year about 6,400 jobs had been created in a city of just over 200,000 people.

Such success did not come easily. Plans to restore the Suncheon Bay ecosystem met strong resistance from business and land owners whose private interests were restricted when commercial areas were relocated out of the bay area and rice fields were turned into a reserve for migratory birds. Strong leadership by a mayor, who was convinced that the rich and vibrant Suncheon Bay ecosystem could be a driver of growth, was the critical factor in turning initial resistance into support and eventually into political success.

*Source:* United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, "Investment in the sustainable management of natural resources: Emerging opportunities and policies", E/ESCAP/MCED(6)/8, A Note by the Secretariat at the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific, Astana, 27 September-2 October 2010. Available from [www.unescap.org/mced6/documents/Documents/MCED6\\_8E.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/mced6/documents/Documents/MCED6_8E.pdf) (accessed 24 February 2012).

### **Further reading**

*Davos Declaration: Climate Change and Tourism Responding to Global Challenges* (Davos, United Nations World Tourism Organization, United Nations Environment Programme, World Economic Forum, World Meteorological Organization and Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, 2007). Available from <http://sdt.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/davosdeclaration.pdf>

*From Davos to Copenhagen and Beyond: Advancing Tourism's Response to Climate Change* (Madrid, United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2009). Available from <http://sdt.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/fromdavostocopenhagenbeyondunwtotopaperelectronicversion.pdf>

*Study on the Role of Tourism in Socio-Economic Development* (Bangkok, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2007). Available from [www.unescap.org/ttdw/Publications/TPTS\\_pubs/pub\\_2478/pub\\_2478\\_fulltext.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/ttdw/Publications/TPTS_pubs/pub_2478/pub_2478_fulltext.pdf)