WHAT IS ECOTOURISM?

Ecotourism, ecotravel, ecolodges and just generally being "eco" have become popular tourism sales pitches. What is true ecotourism? What defines an ecolodge or an ecological company? How is the surrounding community involved? And finally, is ecotourism such a great thing anyways?

In order to truly understand ecotourism and all of it's attendant pros and cons it is necessary to do some background research. This page offers an introduction to the topic along with several links to more detailed information. The basic definitions below have been adapted and clarified from commonly used travel industry lingo. Some of the links are to articles that help further define ecotourism some promote it and some attack it but all are provocative and informative.

The goal of this page is neither to sell nor devalue ecotourism but rather to explore it as a concept and to help create informed travelers who ask lots of questions before, during and after their trip. Well informed travelers choose their guides, travel companies and lodges from a position of knowledge. This purchasing power can be the driving force behind positive or negative impacts on the places you visit. To learn more read on...

Defining The Experience:

There are almost as many terms to describe types of travel as there are travel companies. A couple of buzzwords that you often hear these days are "Eco-Tourism" and "Adventure Travel". To further confuse the issue there is also "Sustainable Tourism", "Responsible Tourism", "Nature Based Travel", "Green Travel", "Multi-Sport Adventures" and "Cultural Tourism". The following are Untamed Path's definitions based on common usage.

**Eco-tourism:** Perhaps the most over-used and mis-used word in the travel industry. But what does it mean? The Ecotourism Society defines it as "responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of the local people". A walk through the rainforest is not eco-tourism unless that particular walk somehow benefits that environment and the people who live there. A rafting trip is only eco-tourism if it raises awareness and funds to help protect the watershed. A loose interpretation of this definition allows many companies to promote themselves as something that they are not. If true eco-tourism is important to you, ask plenty of questions to determine if your trip will help "conserve and improve" the places you visit.
**Adventure Travel:** Another term which is heavily used by marketing departments. While travel to another country is often adventurous it is not necessarily "Adventure Travel". Most dictionaries define adventure similarly: "an unusual experience including some level of risk and uncertainty". "Adventure Travel" includes this idea of risk and oftentimes some unconventional means of transport. A dugout canoe journey deep into the Amazon basin with its attendant difficulties meets this definition. While a city tour of Paris might have some level of uncertainty it is not by definition "Adventure Travel". If you love true adventure you probably already know this and can see through the hype to find the real thing for yourself.

There is sometimes a distinction made between "Soft" and "Hard" adventures. Soft adventures have a lower level of risk, greater comfort in accommodations and are less physically rigorous. Hard adventures often have very basic facilities, higher risk factor and greater physical challenge (ie: mountain climbing, backpacking or river expeditions).

**Sustainable Tourism:** Any form of tourism that does not reduce the availability of resources and does not inhibit future travelers from enjoying the same experience. If the presence of large numbers of tourists disturbs an animal's mating patterns so that there are fewer of that species in the future then that visit was not sustainable. Kayaking school on a free flowing river is an example of sustainable tourism. Big game hunting in Alaska is not.

**Responsible Tourism:** Tourism which operates in such a way as to minimize negative impacts on the environment. A wilderness camping trip using "Leave No Trace" ethics would be considered responsible tourism while dune buggy tours would not.

**Nature-Based Tourism:** A more generic term for any activity or travel experience with a focus on nature. Large jungle lodges fall into this category as do cruise ships to view penguins in Antarctica. These types of trips may or may not be environmentally sustainable or responsible.

**Green Tourism:** Often used interchangeably with eco-tourism and sustainable tourism but more accurately described as "any activity or facility operating in an environmentally friendly fashion". A lodge with composting toilets, gray water system, and solar powered lighting is probably "green". There are varying degrees of "greenness"; an awareness of where resources are coming from and where wastes are going is at the heart of the idea.

**Multi-Sport Adventures:** These trips have a focus on physical outdoor activities. Rafting, mountain biking, climbing, surfing, diving, etc. all offered in the same package. Not necessarily sustainable or eco but might be since many companies want to protect the areas where these activities take place.

**Cultural Tourism:** Interacting with and observing unique cultures is the focus of this style of trip. The concept of learning from other cultures to broaden one's perspective is usually a core value. An artisan showing you how to weave a tapestry and learning from them about their traditional dress would be a form of cultural tourism. Buying crafts in the market with no more
interaction than the exchange of money does not provide the insight into another culture that is the central theme of cultural tourism.

Clearly all of these definitions are debatable. What one person or company calls "eco" another calls "sustainable" and so on. The main distinction between these terms is the motives and ethics behind them. Is the environment being cared for? Is there genuine effort to help the local economies? Are resources being left intact for future generations? Is the local culture being honored and valued and not just photographed? These questions will cut through the semantics and allow you to see what is really being offered.

At Untamed Path we've blended many of these ideas together to create our own unique form of travel. We place a high priority on preserving the places we visit, both environmentally and culturally. We enjoy active outdoor pursuits so many of our trips incorporate these sports but never at the expense of the natural world or the people who already live there. However, we don't make claims to be something that we can't live up to and are constantly reassessing our trips for ways to improve their ecological and cultural soundness. All of our trips contain elements of adventure travel, eco-tourism, multi-sport and cultural travel. We operate in a focused responsible and sustainable fashion and always, always have fun.

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**Defining Ecotourism**

Defining "Ecotourism" a has proven to be a difficult task given all the different players attempting to define it. People tend to define things in terms that are beneficial to themselves, hence the variety of definitions. There are however several workable definitions currently in wide use.

The International Ecotourism Society defines Ecotourism as: "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people".

The Australian Commission on National Ecotourism Strategy calls it: "nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable".

Since the publication of her excellent book "Ecotourism and Sustainable Development" Martha Honey's definition is quickly becoming the standard. Most serious studies of ecotourism including several University programs now use this as the working definition. Here then are her 7 defining points:

1) **Involves travel to natural destinations.** These destinations are often remote areas, whether inhabited or uninhabited, and are usually under some kind of environmental protection at the national, international, communal or private level.

2) **Minimizes Impact.** Tourism causes damage. Ecotourism strives to minimize the adverse affects of hotels, trails, and other infrastructure by using either recycled materials or plentifully available local building materials, renewable sources of energy, recycling and safe disposal of waste and garbage, and environmentally and culturally sensitive architectural design.
Minimization of impact also requires that the numbers and mode of behavior of tourists be regulated to ensure limited damage to the ecosystem.

3) **Builds environmental awareness.** Ecotourism means education, for both tourists and residents of nearby communities. Well before departure tour operators should supply travelers with reading material about the country, environment and local people, as well as a code of conduct for both the traveler and the industry itself. This information helps prepare the tourist as The Ecotourism Societies guidelines state "to learn about the places and peoples visited" and "to minimize their negative impacts while visiting sensitive environments and cultures". Essential to good ecotourism are well-trained, multilingual naturalist guides with skills in natural and cultural history, environmental interpretation, ethical principles and effective communication. Ecotourism projects should also help educate members of the surrounding community, schoolchildren and the broader public in the host country. To do so they must offer greatly reduced entrance and lodge fees for nationals and free educational trips for local students and those living near the tourist attraction.

4) **Provides direct financial benefits for conservation:** Ecotourism helps raise funds for environmental protection, research and education through a variety of mechanisms, including park entrance fees, tour company, hotel, airline and airport taxes and voluntary contributions.

5) **Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people:** National Parks and other conservation areas will only survive if there are "happy people" around their perimeters. The local community must be involved with and receive income and other tangible benefits (potable water, roads, health clinics, etc.) from the conservation area and it's tourist facilities. Campsites, lodges, guide services, restaurants and other concessions should be run by or in partnership with communities surrounding a park or other tourist destination. More importantly, if Ecotourism is to be viewed as a tool for rural development, it must also help shift economic and political control to the local community, village, cooperative, or entrepreneur. This is the most difficult and time-consuming principle in the economic equation and the one that foreign operators and "partners" most often let fall through the cracks or that they follow only partially or formally.

6) **Respects local culture:** Ecotourism is not only "greener" but also less culturally intrusive and exploitative than conventional tourism. Whereas prostitution, black markets and drugs often are by-products of mass tourism, ecotourism strives to be culturally respectful and have a minimal effect on both the natural environment and the human population of a host country. This is not easy, especially since ecotourism often involves travel to remote areas where small and isolate communities have had little experience interacting with foreigners. And like conventional tourism, ecotourism involves an unequal relationship of power between the visitor and the host and a commodification of the relationship through exchange of money. Part of being a responsible ecotourist is learning beforehand about the local customs, respecting dress codes and other social norms and not intruding on the community unless either invited or as part of a well organized tour.

7) **Supports human rights and democratic movements:** Although tourism often is glibly hailed as a tool for building international understanding and world peace, this does not happen automatically; frequently in fact tourism bolsters the economies of repressive and undemocratic states. Mass tourism pays scant attention to the political system of the host country or struggles
within it, unless civil unrest spills over into attacks on tourists. Ecotourism demands a more holistic approach to travel, one in which participants strive to respect, learn about and benefit both the local environment and local communities. Although not part of The Ecotourism Societies definition, giving economic benefits and showing cultural sensitivities to local communities cannot be seperated from understanding their political circumstances. In many developing countries, rural populations living around national parks and other ecotourism attractions are locked in contests with the national government and multinational corporations for control of the assets and their benfits. Ecotourist therefore need to be sensitive to the host country's political environment and social climate and need to consider the merits of international boycotts called for by those supporting democratic reforms, majority rule, and human rights. For example the campaign by the African National Congress(ANC) to isolate South Africa through a boycott of investment, trade, sports and tourism helped bring down apartheid. Determining whether to boycott or visit a country is not always easy. Among the questions to ask are: Does the economic growth fueled by tourism really improve the chances of human rights being respected? Will boycotting a country harm already impoverished workers more than it will corporate or government titans? Or are the short term economic penalties more than offset by the ultimate benefits of change? If one visits a repressive state like China, Indonesia, Peru or Syria, it is possible to make the trip rewarding both personally and politically by consciously learning about the country beforehand, meeting with dissidents and average folks, as well as government officials while there, and speaking about the political climate, not just the weather after returning home.

Clearly this is a tall order to fill for anyone claiming to run "Ecotours" and it is highly doubtful that any one project or operator can claim to meet all these criteria. However it does give a base of ideas to work from when looking into whether or not something is or isn't "Ecotourism". Most operations which can truly be called Ecotourism are striving to meet as many of these criteria as possible.

Properly understood then, the emphasis in ecotourism is on a set of principles and how to put them into practice; on what ecotourism stands for and how these standards are being implemented.

The following links are to articles about the meanings and implications of "Ecotourism".

Ecotourism Guidelines for Responsible Travelers

Benefits of Ecotourism

The Greenwashing of The Travel Industry

Eco-tourism or Eco-terrorism?

Tourism, Globalisation and Sustainability

Ref.:  http://www.untamedpath.com/Ecotourism/what_is_ecotourism.html