

Ecotourism Development

A Manual for Conservation Planners and Managers

Volume II

The Business of Ecotourism Development and Management

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Ecotourism Development – A Manual for Conservation Planners and Managers
Volume II: The Business of Ecotourism Management and Development

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I.S.B.N.: 1-886765-16-2

Editing: Alex Singer
Design/Layout: Jonathan Kerr
Photography: Cover: sea lion, Galapagos, Ecuador: Jenny A. Ericson; Kapawi lodge, Ecuador: CANODROS S.A.; bird identification: Kiki Arnal; inside: all Andy Drumm unless otherwise noted.

Production: The Nature Conservancy
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This publication was made possible, in part, through support provided by the United Nations Development Programme under terms of contract 2002-0501, and through support provided by the Office LAC/RSD, Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, U.S. Agency for International Development, under terms of Grant No. LAG-0782-A-00-5026-00. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or those of the United Nations Development Programme. This publication was also made possible, in part, thanks to the vision, trust, and support of the Alex C. Walker Foundation.

For further information on the Conservancy's ecotourism activities, please visit nature.org/ecotourism, or to provide feedback, please write to ecotourism@tnc.org or to:

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Ecotourism has become an important economic activity in natural areas around the world. It provides opportunities for visitors to experience powerful manifestations of nature and culture and to learn about the importance of biodiversity conservation and local cultures. At the same time, ecotourism generates income for conservation programs and economic benefits for communities living in rural and remote areas.

The attributes of ecotourism make it a valuable tool for conservation. Its implementation can:

- ❖ give economic value to ecosystem services that protected areas provide;
- ❖ generate direct income for the conservation of protected areas;
- ❖ generate direct and indirect income for local stakeholders, creating incentives for conservation in local communities;
- ❖ build constituencies for conservation, locally, nationally and internationally;
- ❖ promote sustainable use of natural resources; and
- ❖ reduce threats to biodiversity.

Some areas have greater potential for realizing the benefits of ecotourism than others. In areas with low visitation, the potential is not usually clear. In others, tourism may already be an important factor. In both cases, the ecotourism planning process is critical to achieving ecotourism's potential as a powerful conservation strategy.

Of course, not all tourism to natural areas is ecotourism. Nature tourism, as opposed to ecotourism, may lack mechanisms for mitigating impacts on the environment and fail to demonstrate respect for local culture. Nature tourism is also booming economically. Consequently, we are witnessing an onslaught of visita-

tion to natural areas that, in many cases, is undermining the values that make these areas attractive.

Because of their ecological value, protected areas, especially those found in the tropics and in less-developed countries, contain many of the world's greatest ecotourism attractions. These attractions may consist of rare or endemic species of flora or fauna, abundant wildlife, high indices of species diversity, unusual or spectacular geomorphological formations, or unique historic or contemporary cultural manifestations in a natural context.

Protected area managers, then, are faced with the challenge of controlling and limiting the impacts of unfettered nature tourism while at the same time deciding where and how to plan adequately for the development of ecotourism as a compatible economic development option.

By integrating ecotourism development into a systematic approach to conservation using The Nature Conservancy's Conservation By Design¹ framework, we can ensure that ecotourism is initiated only when it is the most effective strategy to achieve tangible, lasting results. The distinct but intimately interrelated aspects of ecotourism, conservation management and business development, must be fully understood by ecotourism planners and protected area managers before moving ahead with plans to implement ecotourism activities.

Conservationists have typically approached ecotourism with a limited understanding of business issues and an incomplete understanding of the management mechanisms that are available and necessary to ensure the sustainability of tourism in protected areas. Starting points for ecotourism initiatives have typically been guide training programs or lodge construction, which are almost guaranteed to end in failure. They have led to:

1. *Conservation by Design: A Framework for Mission Success*. 2001. Arlington, Virginia: The Nature Conservancy.

- ❖ the creation of high expectations in communities that are seldom fulfilled;
- ❖ ecotourism activities becoming a drain on scarce NGO and protected area resources as projects struggle to reach break-even point;
- ❖ NGOs and protected areas being pulled away from their central conservation mission; and
- ❖ tourism destroying the natural attractions that originally drew visitors.

Similarly, nature tourism operators have often carried out their initiatives with an incomplete understanding of conservation issues and consequently have operated in an unsustainable fashion.

We now recognize that in order for ecotourism to be successful, conservationists need a greater understanding of business considerations; likewise, developers need a greater awareness of the management mechanisms that are necessary to ensure the sustainability of the activity. Combining both conservation and business perspectives is essential for a successful ecotourism program.

Protected areas may be state, private or community owned or administered, or any combination thereof. Funds for protected area management of any type are usually scarce in developing countries. As a result, these areas often lack the capacity to ensure that tourism generates the full range of benefits it should. Hence, in many areas opportunities for income generation for site conservation and local communities are under exploited and tourism may in fact pose a threat to conservation.

For ecotourism to fulfill its potential and generate sustainable benefits, protected areas must implement a planning framework to guide and manage the activity.

This manual focuses primarily on providing a set of criteria to ecotourism planners and managers at conservation NGOs to facilitate decisions with respect to ecotourism management and development. However, it should also be helpful to protected area specialists and managers of state-owned and community-owned reserves, as well as to other actors in ecotourism including tour operators and hotel developers, who seek greater understanding of the conservation implications of proposed activities. Additionally, it will be of use to investors considering ecotourism development proposals.

The manual consists of two distinct but related stand-alone volumes. Conservationists who are intrigued

by ecotourism and want a greater understanding of it, or who are considering ecotourism as a conservation strategy for a protected area, may elect to consult Volume I: *An Introduction to Ecotourism Planning*, Part I, initially for a brief overview.

For those who seek fuller understanding of the ecotourism management planning process or have decided that ecotourism may be right for their site, Volume I, Part II should be consulted. Part II: "Ecotourism Planning and Management" explains the process for ecotourism development and management planning from Site Conservation Planning and Preliminary Site Evaluation to Full Site Diagnostic, participatory ecotourism management planning and implementation of a plan.

Volume II, *The Business of Ecotourism Development and Management* provides orientation and guidance on both key conservation management and key business development strategies. Part I: "Key Strategies of Ecotourism Management," is an introduction to the critical elements of ecotourism management planning including zoning, visitor impact monitoring, visitor site design and management, income generation mechanisms, infrastructure and visitor guidelines, and naturalist guide systems. This volume may be usefully consulted to review options for mitigating tourism threats that may already exist at a site.

Volume II, Part II: "Business Planning for Conservation Managers," outlines the business planning process. It will assist conservation managers and planners to develop an understanding of business planning, to be able to promote viable business partnerships with communities or private tourism operators, and to contribute to the preparation of business plans.

Most chapters end with a *References and Resources* section that includes publications, organizations, institutions and useful web sites for investigating these themes further.

Acknowledgements

The authors are extremely grateful for the enormously valuable input provided by the following reviewers (all Conservancy staff unless otherwise noted): Jim Rieger, Connie Campbell, Tarsicio Granizo, Edward Millard (Conservation International), Michele Pena, Chris Russel, Nitesh Mehra (EDSA), Marie Uehling, Bill Ulfelder, Eva Vilarrubi, Brad Northrup, John Finisdore, Benson Venegas (ANAI, Costa Rica), Melina Pitaud Laprevotte, Patricia León, Bruce Boggs, Jonathan Kerr and Michelle Libby. Any errors are of course exclusively the responsibility of the authors.

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