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Volume 13, Number 3, Fall 1994

Le tourisme d'aventure : vers la maturité ?

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077115ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077115ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Université du Québec à Montréal

ISSN

0712-8657 (print)

1923-2705 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Munoz, O. (1994). Environnementalism and Ecotourism: A Necessary Alliance. *Téoros*, 13(3), 47–50. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077115ar>

Environnementalism and Ecotourism : A Necessary Alliance

Oswaldo Munoz*



Pérou, Club Aventure.

I recently went with my 8 and 12 year-old children to see Walt Disney's animated cartoon feature called *The Lion King*. Upon returning home, they scrambled to the family library and opened up a picture book on the animals of the world. They immediately indexed out the *l* for *lion*, and then the *j* for *jaguar*, the latter being the largest cat that they knew existed in Ecuador's Amazon rainforest. They then approached me with a rather inquisitive look, and the interrogations followed. «Daddy, how many times have you seen a jaguar on your tours to the Amazon?» I replied, «Well, to be precise, in 25 years it's been once plus some footprints another time; but it's more a matter of sharing their environment for a while than actually seeing them - that's partly what ecotourism is about». I felt my explanation went unnoticed when, with squinting eyes, they retorted, «Bet the oil people got the rest». Silence followed, after which they assured me, «Don't worry, Daddy, we'll try to do something».

By the way, as you will gather by now, I not do work in the petroleum industry. I'm an inbound ecotourism operator.

Ecuador : A Case Study for Ecotourism

Ecuador's territory stretches over Andes Mountains, Amazonian rainforest, and Pacific coastline, including the Galapagos Islands. Of its 120,000 square miles, over 14,5 % is officially protected within a system of 17 reserves and national parks, containing three of Norman Myers' 12 international hot spots for biodiversity (no other country on earth has more than two). For example, 473 species of fishes have been recorded in the upper course of the Napo River, contrasting with Europe's grand total of 100. One tenth of the world's trees (vascular plants), along with one third of Latin America's orchids make this country a haven as well as a challenge for botanists. When it comes to birdwatching, one tree alone was visited by 10 different species of hummingbirds, whereas no more than 15 species are found throughout North America. It's no won-

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der Ecuador's 1600 species of birds surpasses Brazil's total, a country 31 times larger in area! And more species of amphibians, butterflies, reptiles, and mammals than the entire United States and Canada.

Ethnocultural diversity is just as impressive, exemplified by 10 indigenous languages and rich folkloric manifestations that have survived Spanish influence. This is the birthplace of ceramics in the New World (4,000 B.C.), metalurgic technology that melted platinum at 1800 degrees centigrade centuries before Europe, and cosmographic knowledge that located ancient markers along the equator line 2,000 years ago.

Such unique natural and cultural features make this country a haven for naturalists and ethnographers the world over, who account for 76 % of the total 400,000 foreign tourists that arrive each year. These inseparable resources must be mutually protected as a means of guaranteeing the future of this specialized economic activity. Thus, *nature tourism* and *adventure travel*, though not synonymous of ecotourism, must also incorporate the principles of environmentalism in order to secure their resources as well as the business. Perhaps it is time to realize that nature, in its purest form, is not composed of homeostatic ecosystems devoid of people, but hopefully of ecosystems with purely natural human beings.

Ecuador has its share of environmental problems, such as the spilling of over 17 millions gallons of crude into its Amazonian rivers within the past 20 years, massive deforestation along the northwestern coast, mangroves decimated by shrimp farms, illegal fishing in the Galapagos, mercury contamination by gold mining industries, etc. This situation makes ecotourism as sensitive to adverse environmental changes as a jaguar, that must migrate to safer regions in order to survive. But there is a difference - the jaguar cannot fight back effectively, but humans can. That's where partnerships between ecotourism operators and conservationists are proving to be a viable means of safeguarding everyone's resources.

Environmentalism and compatible terminology

In our modernized mentality, we might at times find it difficult to consider any co-

TABLE 1

Private tourism sector (includes travel agents, outfitters, hotels, lodges, and transport)	42 %
Conservation and education (includes universities, institutes, environmental organizations)	24 %
Government tourism sector (includes tourism boards, national park authorities, municipal tourism planning)	18 %
Journalism and promotion	8 %
Indigenous sector (native communities)	4 %
Other	2 %
TOTAL:	100 %

existence between ecology and technology from an economic and conservationist viewpoint. Thus, it is helpful to have a clear understanding of the origins of the following words: ecology, technology, economics and conservation, so as to understand their seldom-suspected affinities if we are to profess that ecotourism has the potential of being an economic activity of sustainable development.

The terms *ecology* and *economics* are derived from a common greek word *oikos*, meaning *home* or *habitat*.

The *home* in this case is that of man, that is, nature and all of its elements called *resources*. Hence, «ecology is the study and understanding of this "home" with the inclusion of the human factor. Hence, *economics* would then be defined as the *management* of man's home».

As Arthur Eichler points out in his book *S.O.S. Planet Earth*, «[...] if we address the science of conservation, it is not only the conservation of animal and plant species but the entire habitat of man which includes, besides physical and biological factors, socio-economical and cultural considerations». Consequently, by definition and reasoning, «conservation is the economics of the ecological interrelationship of man with nature».

The term *technology* is derived from the Greek *tekhne* meaning *art* or *creativity*. Contrary to what many may believe, technology is as old as humanity itself. A

destructive technology does not make any sense as being synonymous of *destructive creativity*, though ironically such a circumstance exists now more than ever. Such practices are leaving us homeless, regardless of social or economic class, as a result of a poor management or *economic administration* of our resources, something typical of present-day technological tendencies.

Though the above definitions may not be orthodox, they nonetheless furnish a clearer and more *down to earth* perspective of their interrelationship and compatibility with the tangible and realistic world.

An Environmental Assessment of Economics

For the past 150 years, we have been conditioned to believe that something is economical when it produces a monetary value and antieconomical when it fails to do so. Such a conclusion is purely and exclusively quantitative. Thus, the deterioration of the ecosphere is hardly ever accounted for in the Gross National Product. By not assessing the environmental costs of our present-day technological growth trends, the accounting is incomplete and erroneous when money is the prime consideration. Nothing is debited from the wearing away of the ecosphere - running out of fish, petroleum, trees, etc. This leads us to wonder if the GNP is nothing more than the arithmetic sum of the monetary value of transactions between humans and nothing more, leaving out nature and its inherent elements altogether. Thus, more than

an index of true progress, it might be a means of measuring our own self-destruction.

Tourism is the largest economic activity after the weapons industry, generating more than US\$ 3.5 trillion of world output, though it accounts for only 6 % of the world GNP. It is the largest expenditure after food, representing 13 % of consumer spending, and could double or decrease considerably by the year 2010, depending on government policies relative to sustainable development.

Ecotourism: Proving its Point

In ecotourism, operators are forever faced with the destruction of huge areas of tropical rainforests that disappear at the rate of 1,600 hectares every half hour. These ecotouristic resources have a hard time competing with short-term, immediate-return businesses that leave nothing for the future generations, not even for those that might have to live from that same business. Thus, ecotourism must come up with figures that will satisfy the monetary pressures of an economic society that has been divorced from its ecological interrelationships. Countries receiving ecotourists see themselves in the need of producing impressive monetary figures to rank tourism as a substantial earner of foreign exchange in the eyes of their governments and credit banks.

Here is an example from Professor T.M. Das of the University of Calcutta that formulated a good argument for saving the natural forests around the world from the lumbering companies. A tree left standing for at least 50 years is worth US\$ 193,250. This amount was reached through the following bookkeeping: It will generate US\$ 31,250 worth of oxygen, provide US\$ 62,000 worth of air pollution control, reduce soil erosion and increase soil fertility to the tune of US\$ 31,250, recycle US\$ 37,500 worth of water and provide a home for animals worth US\$ 31,250. This figure does not include the value of the fruits, lumber or beauty derived from trees. Economically or environmentally speaking, this is just another sensible reason to take care of our natural forests. Furthermore, if this figure is multiplied by the number of existing trees in the Amazon rainforest, times the money generated by tourists visiting this ecosystem, times the possibilities of a permanent, on-going activity, then



Galapagos, Club Aventure.

the *economic/environmental* benefits of ecotourism far surpass many resource exploitation businesses, such as mining, lumbering or petroleum extraction. These are the types of figures and data ecotourism operators must be prepared to handle in order to prove their point.

What is Ecotourism?

Since ecotourism embraces a very wide range of human activities, there is a need to identify its interrelationships with other sectors of the economy. The following are basic concepts and definitions that can contribute towards a better understanding of what exactly ecotourism is:

- Ecotourism, in its simplest and most comprehensive form, is travel that promotes conservation, not only during the actual trip but after returning home as well.
- Ecotourism is an economic interface in ecological, social and ideological perspectives.
- Ecotourism is a science, and as such must be carefully studied, modified, simplified, understood, taught and improved.
- The science of ecotourism must join forces with other disciplines to embrace both natural resources and native cultures if it is to develop in the right direction.
- Ecotourism is highly transcendental, since it establishes guidelines to make

of conservation a dynamically good deal, not only for the business but for the environment as well.

- Ecotourism has the great challenge of not only proving itself trustworthy of its principles, but of setting an example whereby all other economic activities could be induced into the importance of a balanced relationship with the planet.

Ecotourism «make-up»

Between 1990 and 1993, there have been 10 major international events on ecotourism in Latin America. The table 1 is an inventory of the types of participants to these meetings in accordance to their activity.

This gives testimony to the alliance that is developing between tourism activities and the environmental sector. The percentages do not imply that one sector is more important than any other by volume alone, since each one forms a vital part of the mechanism through which ecotourism is made possible. Being a part of the whole implies mutual commitment and support. There can be differences of opinion, even within each sector, let alone between them, but isn't that, figuratively speaking, what *biodiversity* is about? Those of us involved in some way with ecotourism must accept the fact that we form part of this unique *ecosystem* where our interests must be symbiotic with one another.

The Ecuadorean Ecotourism Association

As a reaction to the fact the Ecuador has so much to offer and so much to protect, the Ecuadorean Ecotourism Association was founded in 1991 to unite both the government and private sectors as a controller of ecotourism activities and for the advancement of sustainable development through environmental awareness. Among its members are the Ecuadorean Tourism Board, the Municipality of Quito, the Charles Darwin Research Station, the Ecuadorean Guiding Association, educational institutions, environmentalists, ecotourism operators, and hotels. We await memberships from airlines, indigenous organizations, as well as cultural and environmental celebrities. We still have our problems and we have a challenging agenda before us, but we enthusiastically believe that this type of national network-

ing is a viable means to make ecotourism work, providing benefits of all those involved directly or indirectly, without forcing the involvement of those that do not wish to be involved.

One of the most important projects the Association has committed itself to is a joint venture with The Ecotourism Society based in the U.S. to carry out a pilot program in Ecuador called *Green Evaluations*. This consumer evaluation program consists of two major steps: 1) the formulation of *Ecotourism Guidelines for Nature Tour Operators*, which was researched and compiled by a committee formed by Costa Rica and U.S. experts; 2) the development of a *Consumer Evaluation Questionnaire* to be filled out by tourists travelling with nature tour operators based in Ecuador. The program will be launched in October of 1994 and the survey will take place for one year. This will be an important contribution towards the establishment of an ongoing monitoring system that could be adapted to most any country in order to perfect operational ecotourism activities.

What might we be overlooking?

The *ecotourism explosion*, as I see it, is almost like the arms race. Tourism operators seem to be going at 100 miles a minute in an effort to:

- 1- do things technically and ethically correct;
- 2- outdo each other, either within a country or internationally, regarding marketing and promotional efforts;
- 3- stake a claim on each and every piece of land with our *ecotouristic flag* wherever pristine territory is still available.

The first motive is alright, obviously, but what about the other two? What might we do? These are some ideas:

- 1- develop ecotourism, not nature;
- 2- monitor humans, keeping in mind that nature monitors itself. As an extension to this, try to prevent major impacts on nature and people, instead of having to monitor impacts that might already be out of control, with irreversible damage. This could be called *preventative medicine for ecotourism*;
- 3- national parks and nature reserves are not the only areas worth protecting.

Let's use them as *teaching tools* to promote not only their protection and sustainable development, but that of our cities as well, which, in most cases, are inhabited by the majority of a country's population;

- 4- consider a moratorium for ecotourism activities in newly discovered ecosites, until performances are improved in areas which have already been *touched* by this type of enterprise;
- 5- consider revealing some environmental problems in promotional tourism brochures as another way of urging environmental awareness and action. Too many *nice* brochures might be contributing to «showing a clean front door, while the backyard is dirty». Let's be honest with our guests, for they will quite often find out the whole truth for themselves;
- 6- ensure that nature tour activities are conducted in accordance to a Code of Ethics established by local ecotourism associations and endorsed by the government;
- 7- see to it that a portion of profits resulting from ecotourism activities be reinvested in resource management, conservation, and recovery;
- 8- organize and sponsor environmental education and training programs at all levels for ecotourism and sustainable natural resource management;
- 9- foster legally established tourism enterprises for local community participation and benefit, within or adjacent to ecotourism sites;
- 10- all other efforts leading towards the advancement in the art of ecotourism.

An Epilog...

I recall a sign posted at the entrance to one of Ecuador's national parks which reads: «This land is not something that has been given to us by our parents. Rather, it is something that has been lent to us by our children». That statement is reassuring, provided we accept the challenge. Only then will there be a place and a future, not only for ecotourism, but for all activities that embrace, with responsibility and awareness, humanity's greatest asset: the gift of reasoning. *f*