



The role and importance of ecotourism on the tourism market

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Abstract

Ecotourism is a specific form of tourism that represents the complete opposite of mass, conventional tourism. It is a type of tourism that develops in line with the principles of sustainable development. It takes into account the natural, social, and cultural environment, as well as the economic impact on local communities. Ecotourism is particularly important for protected natural areas. All these characteristics make ecotourism highly attractive to tourists for whom experiences in nature, education, and interaction with the local community and its culture are important aspects of travel. For them, it is especially significant that ecotourism does not have a negative impact on the natural and cultural environment, while at the same time contributing to the well-being of the local population. In many countries, particularly in developing ones, ecotourism plays a crucial role in economic development, as it represents the main source of foreign exchange income. The aim of this paper is to highlight the role and significance of ecotourism in the contemporary tourism market. Examples of good practice are presented with the purpose of showing how ecotourism contributes to the development of different natural areas.

Keywords: ecotourism, eco-tourists, protected natural areas

1. Introduction

The natural and cultural environment represents the most significant tourist values of a destination. These are key elements that influence tourists when choosing a destination. However, uncontrolled tourism development has led to their degradation, especially of natural resources, which has affected the dissatisfaction of both local residents and tourists. The pressure on the natural environment is particularly evident in popular tourism destinations. The development of alternative tourism, as opposed to mass tourism, emerged as a result of increased awareness of the need to preserve the natural and cultural environment, which influenced the creation of new tourism products, such as ecotourism (Milićević et al., 2017, p. 26). The protection of the natural and cultural environment is the primary goal of ecotourism development in all leading eco-destinations worldwide. Ecotourism implies an entirely new behavior of all participants in tourism flows, unlike the concept of mass tourism (Milenković et al., 2012, p. 484).

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2025), ecotourism is among the fastest-growing segments of the tourism market. It seeks to reduce the harmful effects of mass, conventional tourism on local communities and ecosystems. Ecotourism helps preserve biological and cultural diversity, alleviates poverty in rural areas, raises public awareness of environmental issues, and contributes to a good “triple bottom line” that includes profit, social benefits, and environmental protection. For these reasons, the interest in ecotourism has been increasing year by year (Stronza et al., 2008).

Most authors point out that Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin, a Mexican architect, ecologist, and international consultant for ecotourism, was among the first to use the term “ecotourism” as the name for a new form of travel into nature. In 1987, he provided the first official definition, according to which ecotourism is travel to relatively undisturbed and uncontaminated natural areas with the purpose of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery, wild plants and animals, as well as the cultural features (both past and present) found in these areas (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996). This definition was officially adopted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) at the World Congress in Montreal, Canada, in 1996 (Dimitrovski et al., 2021).

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The basic characteristic of ecotourism development is that it has no negative effects on the natural and cultural environment and at the same time contributes to the well-being of the local population in ecotourism destinations. In many countries around the world, especially in developing ones, ecotourism plays the most important role in economic development, as it represents the main source of foreign exchange income at the national level. This paper seeks to highlight the great role and significance of ecotourism in the modern tourism market. The aim of the paper is to show, through examples of good practice worldwide, how the development of ecotourism in different natural areas contributes to the natural and cultural environment as well as to the local community as a whole. Methodologically, the paper is based on a literature review and descriptive approach.

2. Theoretical background: ecotourism and eco-tourists

The International Ecotourism Society has defined ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves education and interpretation. Education should include both tourists and staff (TIES, 2025). Jamaliah and Powell (2017) define ecotourism as a form of alternative tourism that meets the goals of sustainable development. Ecotourism is a sustainable type of tourism that provides tourists with an authentic experience, contributes to the well-being of local communities, significantly contributes to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and at the same time strives to achieve a balance between the needs of tourists and the needs of local residents (Li et al., 2022; Shang et al., 2023). Ouboter et al. (2021) state that ecotourism serves as a “human shield” by deterring negative external effects such as mining, logging, and poaching. Ecotourism not only raises ecological awareness but also increases the income and living standards of local communities (Hussain, 2022).

According to the UNWTO (2025), ecotourism can be distinguished by several key principles and characteristics. First, it encompasses all forms of nature-based tourism where the primary motivation is to experience and appreciate natural environments as well as the traditional cultures that exist within them. Second, ecotourism is strongly linked to education and interpretation, offering learning opportunities for visitors. Third, it is most often organized by specialized tour operators for smaller groups, with local, small-scale businesses typically acting as service providers. Fourth, ecotourism seeks to reduce negative impacts on both the natural environment and the socio-cultural fabric of the destination. Finally, it plays an important role in sustaining protected areas used as ecotourism attractions by generating economic benefits for local communities and conservation authorities, creating alternative livelihoods, and fostering awareness of the importance of conserving natural and cultural heritage among both residents and tourists.

Ecotourism allows tourism destinations, by adhering to the outlined principles, to achieve multiple benefits—not only economic, but also in terms of environmental preservation and the creation of a positive and recognizable image on the tourism market. Although various definitions of ecotourism can be found in scientific and professional literature, they commonly emphasize the following elements: the natural and cultural environment, protection and conservation, sustainable development, education and learning, the tourist experience, and the well-being of local communities (Dimitrovski et al., 2021). Based on these aspects, it can be concluded that the main characteristics of ecotourism are: nature-based, education-oriented (both environmental and cultural), and sustainably managed (Blamey, 2022; Atzeni et al., 2022; Weaver, 2020).

The demand for ecotourism is continuously increasing, as more and more ecotourists are becoming aware of sustainability issues. With the growing interest in sustainable and environmentally friendly travel, tourism destinations are striving to adapt to the needs of these market segments in order to remain competitive. According to Beall et al. (2021), ecotourists are motivated by their environmental values and worldviews. Compared to tourists who prefer mass tourism, ecotourists are often regarded as the “ideal type of tourists,” since they are willing to go to the opposite extreme and travel much longer distances to visit less crowded and remote places (Butler, 2018). Chin et al. (2023) emphasize that ecotourists are generally well-educated and high-spending travelers, most often originating from the “Western” Baby Boomer generation, and hold strong beliefs about the importance of protecting nature and indigenous cultures.

The main characteristic of ecotourists is their preference for traveling alone or in small groups, as this approach contributes to environmental protection. From their journeys, they expect “something different,” as they wish to combine enjoyment, education, and nature-based experiences with opportunities to engage with the local community and its culture. They strive to experience nature directly and to take an active role in protecting the area they visit (Dimitrovski et al., 2021). During their trips, ecotourists most frequently engage in activities such as hiking, wildlife observation and photography, boating or kayaking, diving, guided educational tours, visits to indigenous and local communities, and cultural exploration. Ecotourists generally prefer accommodation in rustic facilities that do not harm the environment, such as eco-lodges (Wight, 2022; Weaver, 2022).

Although various classifications of ecotourists can be found in the literature, the most commonly cited distinction is between hard and soft ecotourists. They differ in terms of travel motivations, the level of interest in nature and natural attractions, the degree of physical effort they are willing to exert, and the level of comfort they are prepared to tolerate during ecotourism trips (Orams, 2022; Fennell, 2020). Accordingly, hard ecotourists are extremely adventurous, highly physically active, and most often organize their travel arrangements independently (valuing personal experience). They

typically travel in small groups, and their trips are guided by the principles of sustainable development (Weaver, 2011). Their main characteristic is a strong dedication and passion for nature and outdoor activities. They are prepared to accept minimal facilities and very limited comfort during their journeys. They are ready for extended trips into the wilderness under challenging conditions, all with the aim of experiencing nature in its truest form (Orams, 2022). Hard ecotourists have significantly higher expectations of the ecotourism destination and spend much more time actively engaging with the natural environment (Fennell, 2020).

In contrast, soft ecotourists may travel in slightly larger groups and often enjoy spending time with other tourists (Orams, 2022). Their commitment to nature is moderate, which is reflected in shorter trips, more superficial interaction with the natural environment, a preference for physical comfort, and the combination of ecotourism with other types of tourism (Lusby, 2017). These tourists tend to spend more time engaging with other attractions at the tourism destination, such as entertainment, cultural or shopping activities, and visits to theme parks. Soft ecotourists make up the majority of all ecotourists (Fennell, 2020). The key characteristics and differences between hard and soft ecotourists are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics and differences between hard and soft ecotourists

Hard ecotourists	Soft ecotourists
Strong environmental commitment	Superficial environmental commitment
Specialized visits	Multi-purpose visits
Long trips	Short trips
Small groups	Large groups
Physically active	Physically passive
Physical challenge	Physical comfort
Few, if any, services expected	Services expected
Deep interaction with nature	Shallow interaction with nature
Emphasis on personal experience	Emphasis on interpretation
Make own travel arrangements	Rely on travel agents & tour operators

Source: Fennel, D., & Weaver, D. B. (2005). The Ecotourism Concept and Tourism - Conservation Symbiosis. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 13(4), 378

3. Ecotourism development - examples of good practices

Ecotourism is being developed by a large number of countries worldwide. In many nations, particularly in developing countries, ecotourism contributes to economic development, as it often represents a primary source of foreign exchange income (Dimitrovski et al., 2021). Ecotourism has helped many countries reduce poverty and promote peace, including Costa Rica, Ecuador, Tanzania, Kenya, India, and Nepal (Honey et al., 2009). Ecotourism can be established in a wide variety of areas, such as rainforests, mountains, polar environments, islands and coastal regions, seas, and deserts. Many of these tourism destinations, like the Galapagos Islands, offer tourists a once-in-a-lifetime experience (Fennell, 2020).

For many developing countries, ecotourism is a key component of national development strategies. In Brazil, ecotourism represents the largest source of foreign exchange earnings, while in Rwanda, ecotourism constitutes the third largest source of foreign exchange income in South and Central Africa. The majority of this revenue comes from ecotourists visiting Rwanda as part of the Mountain Gorilla Project, which began in the 1970s. The high number of international visitors confirmed the success of this project, convincing the Rwandan government to preserve and protect critical gorilla habitats. As a result, the government has increased support for other national parks and reserves in Rwanda (Goeldner et al., 2011).

Many developing countries are situated in the equatorial zone, characterized by a rich diversity of flora and fauna, which serves as a fundamental resource for the development of ecotourism (Dimitrovski et al., 2021). For example, in the Amazon Basin of Colombia lies Leticia, a small border town regarded as a highly attractive eco-destination. Positioned on the left bank of the Amazon River, an area interwoven with tributaries and lakes, Leticia provides access to the Yahuarcaca Lakes, home to a remarkable variety of wildlife. Species range from the massive, endangered Arapaima fish, reaching up to three meters in length, to piranhas, river dolphins, manatees, caimans, eagles, and turtles (Henao et al., 2020). The lakes are inhabited by 171 species of fish (Ramírez & Santana, 2019) and 123 species of frogs (Lynch, 2005, p.582). Visitors can paddle by kayak through this ecosystem and observe diverse flora, including the world’s largest lotus, *Victoria Regia*. Ecotourists may also explore the Amazon jungle with local guides to encounter tropical birds, monkeys, snakes, sloths, iguanas, armadillos, and other native species. In addition, many tourists seek authentic experiences by visiting indigenous tribes to learn about their culture, customs, traditional rituals, and dances (Amazon Tour Leticia, 2025).

The Gambia is the smallest country in continental Africa. Like many third world countries, ecotourism is vital to the national economy in the Gambia. Tourists come to the Gambia for its pristine nature, rare wildlife and birds, beautiful landscapes, rivers, rainforests, tropical trees and authentic cultural heritage (Dimitrovski et al., 2021; Sambou et al., 2024). On the left bank of the Gambia River, a national park of the same name was established in 1978, which is today the most

visited eco-destination in the country. It is home to numerous wild animals (crocodiles, hippos, chimpanzees and antelopes) and 600 species of birds. A unique *Chimpanzee Rehabilitation Project* was organized in the national park in 1979, and today over 100 chimpanzees live there. Eco-camp offers simple, twin-bedded safari tents on raised platforms, all of which boost views of the national park, from where tourists are offered a unique view of the daily activities of chimpanzees in their natural habitat (Gambia, Chimp Rehabilitation Project, 2025).

The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve is one of Costa Rica's most visited eco-destinations. The Reserve was established in 1972 and cover over 14,200 ha. The forests of this reserve are almost constantly covered with clouds or fog, which gave the reserve its name. The reserve offers ecotourists numerous opportunities to explore, observe and enjoy unique ecosystems. Tens of thousands of diverse insects, 2,500 species of plants (420 are strictly orchids), 400 varieties of birds, over 100 types of mammals live in the reserve. It's one of the few remaining habitats that support all six species of the cat family: jaguars, ocelots, pumas, oncillas, margays, and jaguarundis, as well as the endangered three-wattled bellbird and resplendent Quetzal. Many tourists come just to see the bird *Quetzal*, which was the sacred bird of the Mayan and Kich people, and the Aztecs considered it the founder of their civilization. Over 13 km of trails are available for visitors to explore on their own or with a local guide. Hiking through the reserve, bird watching, visits to the *Butterfly Garden*, *Orchid Garden* or *Insect Museums* are popular excursions among tourists. *Suspension Bridges*, *Zip-lines* and *Sky Tram* represent the most important tourist attractions and a very exciting way for "walking across the forest canopy" and bird's-eye view of the reserve. Monteverde has the longest and most professional *Zip-line* in the country; In total, there are 15 cables and 18 viewing platforms that stretch over 2 miles (Monteverde Travel Guide, 2025).

The *Galapagos Archipelago* is one of the most renowned eco-destinations in the world. Located about 1,000 km off the coast of continental Ecuador, it consists of 127 islands, 19 of which are large and 4 permanently inhabited. The other islands are strictly regulated, with controlled visitation through carefully planned tourist itineraries. Today, around 30,000 residents live in the archipelago, while it receives approximately 170,000 tourists annually. Since 1959, 97% of its terrestrial area has been designated as a National Park, and in 1978 the islands were placed under *UNESCO* protection. The surrounding *Galapagos Marine Reserve* is one of the world's largest and most biologically diverse marine reserves. Ongoing volcanic and seismic processes continue to shape the islands and, combined with their geographic isolation, have led to the development of extraordinary ecosystems and unique species such as marine iguanas, flightless cormorants, giant tortoises, huge cacti, endemic trees, as well as various subspecies of mockingbirds and finches. The flora of the archipelago includes nearly 500 plant species, about 180 of which are endemic, while the fauna is represented by 12 native terrestrial mammals and 36 reptile species, including the only marine iguana in the world. The *Galapagos Marine Reserve* also provides an exceptional diving experience, with rich biodiversity ranging from corals, sharks, and penguins to sea lions and other marine mammals. Nowhere else in the world can visitors dive among such a diversity of marine life so accustomed to human presence that they often accompany divers. The diversity of underwater geomorphological formations further enhances the uniqueness of this site, confirming the *Galapagos* as an irreplaceable eco-destination (*Galapagos National Park*, 2025; *UNESCO*, 2025).

4. Conclusion

Ecotourism represents a highly attractive form of tourism among contemporary eco-tourists. Many tourism destinations around the world therefore develop it in order to attract a larger number of international eco-tourists. Eco-tourists are well-educated and high-spending travelers who typically spend more than the average tourist. Their main characteristic is awareness of the importance of preserving nature and indigenous cultures. By respecting the principles of ecotourism, tourism destinations can achieve numerous economic, ecological, and socio-cultural benefits, while also creating a positive and recognizable image in both domestic and international tourism markets. Ecotourism is particularly significant for developing countries such as Rwanda, The Gambia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Ecuador, as it makes a substantial contribution to national economies and often represents a primary source of foreign exchange earnings at the national level. Ecotourism is also of great importance for the preservation of ecosystems worldwide, especially in wild natural areas such as rainforests, jungles, deserts, and similar environments. Many developing countries are located in the equatorial zone, characterized by an immense richness and diversity of flora and fauna, which serves as the primary resource for ecotourism development. It is important to emphasize that local communities in these destinations take biodiversity protection seriously, being well aware of the significance of these resources. The key characteristics of ecotourism include: contributing to biodiversity conservation, supporting the well-being of local communities, incorporating an educational and interpretative approach, and requiring responsible behavior from key stakeholders (ecotourists, the tourism industry, and local populations). However, the future development of ecotourism will face important challenges, including the impacts of climate change, the risk of over-commercialization, and the need to manage carrying capacity in fragile natural areas. Addressing these issues will be essential to ensure that ecotourism continues to deliver long-term benefits for both nature and local communities.

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