

Nature and Nurture: Conservation through Ecotourism

Travel to natural and wilderness destinations has increased dramatically over the past decade. In the Galapagos Islands alone, for example, visitation has more than doubled in the last 10 years. If not properly addressed, this ongoing trend threatens the health and vitality of some of the world's most beautiful places. The Nature Conservancy is working to turn this threat into an opportunity by using tourism to protect parks and to give rural and coastal communities an environmentally friendly form of income.

Generating income from tourism for conservation

Parks need funding in order to pay for guards, provide visitor services, maintain trails and facilities, manage wildlife, and conduct community education. The tourists who enjoy these parks should pay a share of these expenses as a way of compensating the parks for the cost of their visit and the impacts they have during their stay. In many places and often in developing countries with limited budgets for their parks, tourists are free to come and go without contributing to these costs, producing a net loss for conservation.

Diving for Dollars in Belize

Gladden Spit Marine Reserve in southeastern Belize features whale sharks, the world's largest fish, and is an increasingly popular tourist destination. The high number of visitors and illegal fishing in the area imperil the very resources that make Gladden Spit so unique. Until last year, no system existed for collecting money from those who visited.

Together with our partner, Friends of Nature in Placencia, Belize, the Conservancy developed a program to collect money from divers visiting the reserve. This new source of revenue has enabled the park to increase patrolling to prevent illegal fishing, initiate a monitoring program to ensure the whale sharks are not disturbed by visitors, and fund scholarships for local high school students for environmental education. Best of all, now that this collection system is in place, income



A fee program in Bolivia is paying for a plan to control off-road vehicle access and other visitor pressures that threaten wildlife, such as the Andean flamingo at the Eduardo Avaroa National Reserve. © Steffen Reichle/TNC

will be generated year after year, thus providing a long-term source of financing for protecting the whale sharks and benefiting surrounding communities.

Fees from Bolivian Parks

The Conservancy piloted another entrance fee program with the Bolivian National Park Service at the country's most frequently visited park, Eduardo Avaroa Reserve – the “Yellowstone” of the Bolivian Park System. Within four years, the program generated over \$600,000 in new income for conservation—a stunning return on investment for the small amount required to launch the project. The money is being used to address threats such as human waste and off-road vehicle access.



The Conservancy is helping reduce over-fishing in the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, by holding workshops that help fishers start tourism businesses.
© Andy Drumm/TNC

Through our evaluation of this pilot program, we have further identified the opportunity to generate as much as \$3 million annually for Bolivian park conservation by extending the program to multiple sites. The Park Service and the Conservancy are engaged in establishing fee collection programs, tourism concessions, and community-based ecotourism at protected areas around the country to realize this potential.

Reducing threats to wildlife and natural communities

In the Corales del Rosario National Park in Colombia, more than 500,000 visitors per year participate in snorkeling, boating, camping, and other activities. These high volumes of visitors exert intense pressures on the very attractions that draw them. To address these threats, the Conservancy launched a program together with the Colombian National Park Service to monitor visitor impacts and initiate a dialog with tour operators, hotel owners and local communities to generate recommendations for improvement. Park managers from ten other parks around the country participated to multiply the results of our investment

During an ecological assessment workshop, participants found excessive algae levels, a reduction in coral, and fewer fish. Representatives from community associations, tour operators, fishers, and others developed an action plan for addressing these problems. The workshops marked the first time a dialogue had been established between groups representing all the major interests in the park. The participants agreed to limit the number of boat landings on beaches, close certain

areas to public access, place restrictions on fish catch sizes, and agreed to codes of conduct for tour operator behavior resulting in a higher quality visitor experience and better protection for natural communities.

In the future, the Conservancy and our Colombian partners will monitor the success of the agreements that were established and create long-range plans for improvement. With the knowledge they gained from participating in the program, the visiting park managers of the Colombian Park Service are now in the process of applying the same methodology at their own parks in Amacayacu, Tayrona and Gorgona National Parks.

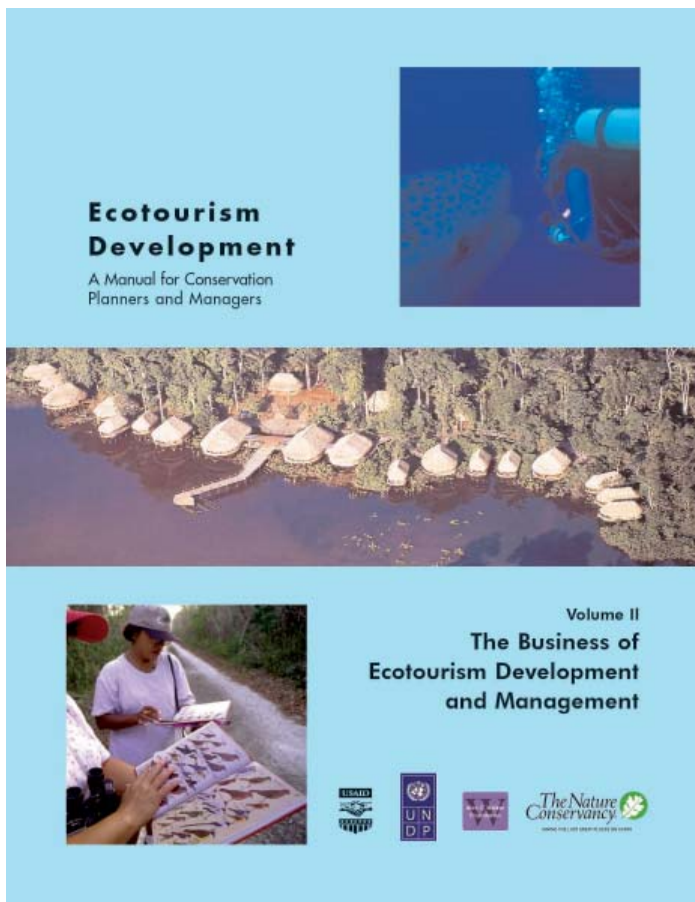
Supporting community-based ecotourism

Another important part of our work is to provide opportunities for communities to use natural resources in a way that protects rather than depletes the resources' value. In the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, over-fishing by community fishers is one of the largest threats facing the Galapagos Marine Reserve. The dwindling fish populations have also led to a rise in the illegal shark-fin trade, threatening the reserve's world-class scuba diving industry and a major source of employment for the islands.

To reduce this threat, the Conservancy held workshops in tourism business development that will enable fishers to enter the tourism sector, an economic activity that uses marine resources without impacting fish populations. As a result, community fishers will now have the opportunity to work in the more prosperous tourism sector resulting in a decrease in the pressure of over-fishing.

UNESCO World Heritage partnership

In an effort to spread our strategies beyond the protected areas and countries where the Conservancy directly works, we approached the UNESCO World Heritage Program which is responsible for protecting 177 natural sites around the world declared to be of outstanding universal value. These discussions led to a Conservancy-wide agreement for collaboration signed by Conservancy CEO Steve McCormick and the head of UNESCO. The agreement opens the door for joint projects covering a range of themes – including tourism, marine conservation, and long-term financing – which are currently under development



Volume II: *The Business of Ecotourism Development and Management* has been shared with conservation professionals around the globe.

New tools for sharing our lessons learned

In our ongoing effort to provide the latest conservation tools and share best practices with conservation professionals, we published the second volume of our practical guide to developing ecotourism. The volume, entitled *The Business of Ecotourism Development and Management*, provides detailed information about applying key ecotourism strategies, including visitor use zoning, nature guide training, and environmentally friendly building design, and also outlines steps for developing a successful ecotourism business.

The resource guide was launched in both English and Spanish to an audience of 5,000 conservation professionals at the World Conservation Congress in Bangkok this past November. Since its release three years ago, the first volume of the ecotourism manual, *An Introduction to Ecotourism Planning*, has become the Conservancy's most frequently downloaded technical aid, serving as a valuable tool for partner organizations, tour operators, and park managers in the regions where the Conservancy works and beyond.

Looking ahead to the future

In the coming year, the Conservancy plans to build on its success in applying strategies that make ecotourism an asset for park conservation, provided through the funding needs shown in parentheses:

Long-term financing for protected area systems (\$150,000)

To help establish financial sustainability for Bolivian protected areas, we will work with the Bolivian National Park Service to apply entrance fees, tourism concessions, and donation programs across the protected area system. In Ecuador, we will also work with their park service to evaluate the potential of tourism to provide funding for improved wildlife protection by developing tourism-based income generation mechanisms.

Developing tourism management capabilities at protected areas (\$200,000)

In the area of threat reduction, we will be working with the Bolivian National Park Service to develop a program for managing the impacts of tourism at the Eduardo Avaroa Reserve, while at the same time building the capability of implementing the program system-wide. In addition, we plan to develop a South America-wide network to facilitate the replication of this training process by local partners.

The UNESCO and United Nations Foundation partnership (\$1 million)

In one of our most exciting new developments, this year we will be launching a program based on our newly signed agreement with UNESCO to apply our



The Conservancy is working with partners in Belize to create new sources of revenue to protect public and private reserves. © Marci Eggers/TNC



When well managed, wildlife interactions can promote conservation awareness and provide economic benefits to nature conservation and local communities, such as in the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador. © Greg Miller/TNC

ecotourism strategies at World Heritage Sites. We are developing a \$1 million proposal that will generate a dollar-for-dollar match for this work from the United Nations Foundation. This important fundraising goal will allow us to work at several of these areas of unique global importance to make sure tourism is an effectively managed asset. The experience will serve as a model for applying these strategies globally at other parks throughout the World Heritage Sites network.

Ecotourism Learning Network (\$75,000)

To share our work in a more systematic way with Conservancy staff and partners, we will be developing the Ecotourism Learning Network to facilitate the exchange of ideas and broader implementation of our core strategies. The Learning Network will use a combination of print and electronic media, as well as workshops, to disseminate this valuable information.

Building markets for sustainable tourism (\$250,000)

We will continue and expand our work in developing markets for our growing network of local tour operators and conservation partners at priority ecotourism destinations. Without access to markets and a plan for business development, visitation will be insufficient for even the best ecotourism outfitter. In a new initiative, we plan to promote the tourism products and services of our key conservation partners to the Conservancy's one million members. In addition to sharing strategies of ecotourism best practices from a conservation perspective, we will also provide our partners with marketing assistance to help their operations flourish and thus provide benefits to both conservation and local communities.

In Closing

While the rapid increase in demand for tourism to wilderness destinations poses a significant threat to parks, it also represents a promising opportunity. By establishing programs that will channel tourism income into park conservation, reduce conservation threats caused by visitors, and promote income opportunities with long-term viability for surrounding communities, the Conservancy is helping to realize the potential of ecotourism to enable visitors to enjoy the beauty that parks harbor for generations to come.



The Conservancy is working with the National Park Service of Colombia to monitor and reduce tourism impacts that affect sea turtles and other species in places like Corales del Rosario National Park. © Marci Eggers/TNC

Contact

Eastern and Southern U.S.

Cathy Kerkam
(703) 841.2082 ckerkam@tnc.org

Central U.S.

Robin Mucha
(312) 580.2155 rmucha@tnc.org

Pacific and Rocky Mountain U.S.

Alice Srinivasan
(703) 841.4507 asrinivasan@tnc.org

nature.org/ecotourism