

Ecotourism Trailblazer

Megan Epler Wood has devoted her life to ensuring that tourism is sustainable and does not destroy the indigenous cultures and attractions that people travel so far to see, reports **Ron Toft**.

Tourism can be a gilt-edged boon in developing countries, creating much-needed jobs in poor, often remote, communities. Tourism can also be a curse, degrading or destroying the very natural environments and historic landscapes and buildings visitors pay thousands of dollars to see.

Helping governments and NGOs get the balance right is Megan Epler Wood – recently named by *Conde Nast Traveler* magazine as one of 10 ecotourism trailblazers working to ensure that tourism respects the natural environment, human rights and helps preserve indigenous cultures.

A highly-regarded ecotourism pioneer of 20 years standing and founder and former president of The International Ecotourism Society – TIES, Epler Wood says many people are surprised to learn that there are ecotourism consultants like her ready, willing

and able to help countries “develop tourism in ways that will foster greater local benefits and conserve natural areas”.

She warns that unless tourism is planned properly, “the beautiful ecosystems we know and love, from desert to reef, are definitely at risk.”

Lecturer, keynote speaker and author Epler Wood (56), who has increasingly focused on the business and economics of tourism as a way of tackling poverty, says she has learned that “without applying good, solid business solutions in developing countries, all efforts to make tourism ethical or green come to naught”.

She has worked in more than 30 countries for clients like the World Bank and USAID and now finds herself “helping folks develop small tourism businesses in just about every remote rainforest region on the planet”.



Kerala Backwaters, India



Megan Epler Wood

"Ecotourism is becoming so embedded globally that I now work in areas that are not known at all as tourism destinations, because it's one of the few income generators that allows local people to put an appropriate value on what is authentically theirs – without leaving home. It keeps people on the land with their children and also helps them to value their natural and cultural resources."

THE TWO countries presently closest to Epler Wood's heart are El Salvador and Sierra Leone. "In years past I would have named different countries. The reason these are so important to me right now is because both have been heavily affected by conflict – one more recently than the other – and both have a very important and truly authentic culture and natural resources that could become quality tourism assets." Epler Wood, through her Burlington, Vermont-based business EplerWood International, prepared a regional action plan to

Chimp rehabilitation, Sierra Leone

help structure the development of Sierra Leone's Western Peninsula, which she describes as the country's "most beautiful and accessible natural asset".

She also spotlighted an urgent need to preserve Bunce Island – one of the historically most important slave castles in West Africa. Now in a "near state of collapse due to the civil war," Bunce Island was one of the main points of sale for slaves shipped to the rice coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. Run by four London-based companies, Bunce Island was established in about 1670.

Before being closed down in 1808 by the British Parliament, the island – cited as one of the world's most endangered monuments in 2007 by the World Monument Fund – exported tens of thousands of enslaved Africans to North America and the West Indies.

"Bunce Island was of pivotal importance in the history of the North American slave trade," said Epler Wood. "So much so, that the Gullah people living in coastal areas of South Carolina and Georgia today still speak Mende, one of Sierra Leone's languages."

Epler Wood has supported efforts to promote cultural links between these areas of the southern US and Sierra Leone.

In western El Salvador, where the coffee economy is declining because of foreign competition, Epler Wood worked with a local team with USAID support to devise

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a destination development campaign "to build the identity of the region and ensure it is developed sustainably". This has led to the emergence of a wide range of new local businesses capable of delivering quality, sustainable tourism experiences, and a new web portal – www.elsalvadorexperience.com – promoting authentic cultural experiences and ecotourism.

IN KERALA, India, Epler Wood helped to organise a multi-stakeholder workshop to explore the potential for a new international institute of ecotourism development for students throughout Asia.

In the border town of Imperial Beach, between San Diego, California, and Tijuana, Mexico, she advised on how to generate income from several protected areas by attracting visitors from the northern winter who would enjoy living adjacent to the marshland region in spring and fall.

"A preliminary design for a visitor centre and long-term stay properties incorporating sustainable design principles was explored with local developers. The city is pursuing its ecotourism options actively."

Epler Wood called for a presidential commission to take immediate control of the development around Siem Reap in Cambodia – gateway city to the World Heritage Site Angkor Watt temple complex – "to avoid the imminent severe resource shortages, particularly water, and carefully examine the opportunities to incorporate more corporate social responsibility within the growing tourism industry".

She described Siem Reap as a "boomtown preparing for collapse, all unleashed by a lack of government oversight and pressures from investors without social or environmental responsibility."

With Epler Wood's help, the tourism trade has been provided with strategic goals and directions for developing nature tourism around a historic gold trail, the Estrada Real, in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Visitors already flocking to the colonial capital, Ouro Preto, and other historic cities in the region are now learning how to responsibly explore the spectacular mountain chain in the area, with environmental education and quality interpretation of local natural resources as fundamental building blocks for more nature tourism in future.

A KEY part of ecotourism is helping local people to recognise and value what they have on their doorstep – everything from wildlife and historic buildings to language and culture.

"During the past 20 years I have seen a

dramatic change in ecotourism," she said. "It has gone from being what was a strictly international phenomenon to one that is now frequently domestic. As standards of living improve, so more and more people are becoming increasingly mobile and keen to visit natural, historical and cultural places of interest within their own country or region. This is the case even in developing countries like Bangladesh where the textile industry has created a middle class that wants to travel.

"My job now is not only to attract foreign visitors but to help guide sustainable tourism projects which can meet the growing demand for domestic leisure travel. I think few people realise that behind the scenes there is an increasing amount of international cooperation to help countries, businesses and their citizens better understand how to make the tourism economy work for them."

Epler Wood is about to start working with partners in Bangladesh to create an ecotourism programme at a Bay of Bengal tiger reserve which also features a beach used heavily by local tourists.

Her hope for the future is that there will be more and more well-designed and well-managed tourist destinations and attractions all over the world.

"ECOTOURISM IS a lovely concept but one that is sometimes misunderstood as being simply a marketing phenomenon. For consultants like me who work in the field, it's all about better tourism management and planning. Beyond developed countries, the planning process



Volcanos Park, El Salvador



Western Peninsula, Sierra Leone

globally is very poor and completely ad hoc. Little consideration is given to what is necessary to protect local landscapes and local cultures. Unless action is taken at the planning stage, all the efforts being made to try to bring about a 'certified green' commercial tourism will never succeed due to a lack of focus on the process required to develop sustainable tourism."

She added: "What the tourist sees is the tip of the iceberg. The steps required to prevent tourism from destroying the places people visit are my stock and trade, but I want more young people to get involved in helping countries develop ethical tourism around the world and more travellers worldwide to understand what it takes to make tourism responsible." ■

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Serra do Cipo, Brazil