

Ecotourism Then & Now

Column for the 20th Anniversary of The International Ecotourism Society

By Megan Epler Wood

Ecotourism Society Launched in 1990 to Assist Parks

Ecotourism 20 Years Ago

In 1989, hundreds of thousands of acres were being added to park systems to conserve ecosystems around the world. International conservation was going into high gear, driven by the rude fact that development was accelerating in the most vulnerable and biodiverse regions of the planet. Conservationists were talking more about preserving the Amazonian rain forest, and less about “saving the panda.”

As conservation objectives were being ramped up, parks had jumped from being places for family recreation to becoming a global tool to preserve the last “great” endangered places. Costa Rica was winning awards for conserving the highest percentage of park land in the world. But, the large majority of new protected areas worldwide were simply lines delineated on maps. These under protected areas and fledgling parks became known as *paper parks*.

In 1986, I visited the Cayambe Coca Ecological Reserve, in Ecuador, for World Wildlife Fund-US to report on how new reserves in Latin America were faring. Traveling up to the continental divide by road adjacent to the park with about 5 park guards, I quickly learned we were not planning to enter the park as I had requested, just visit their ranger station and drop off supplies along the road. When I asked when we were going to hike in, I learned that none of them had ever entered the park, as they were loathe to pass through the buffer zone which was illegally occupied by slash and burn farmers! The guards simply protected “the perimeter.”

While conservationists were thinking big, there was, unfortunately, little funding on the ground. The five guards I visited were protecting several hundred thousand acres, with little training, no local community buy-in, and almost no knowledge of the terrain they were tasked to protect.

Funding was perhaps the gravest problem. There was vision, and conservationists were quick to start raising funds to make these fledgling parks real. But national budgets were short and economic resources within park agencies exceedingly tight. Economic activity in these biodiverse zones was usually ranching, forestry and mining, or subsistence agriculture; none of which were park friendly.

But despite these economic and social realities at the time, parks were already attracting substantial economic activity and foreign exchange in developing countries, because of tourism. The idea of using tourism as a means to finance parks began take off in the mid-1980s.

The nature tourism market was vibrant and growing rapidly. Latin American countries in the tropics are home to about 1000 species of birds, most of which cannot be observed in North America. Word spread from scientific stations to expatriate families, to friends in Europe and North America, to global tourism markets. The story was exciting. Rain forests are teeming with birds and wildlife, and visitors could experience some of the last great preserved sanctuaries on earth. They were no longer just uncomfortable, mosquito-ridden “jungles.”

In Africa, tourists were starting to swarm into wildlife parks. For many years, the preserves there had been the refuge only of the wealthy who could afford the luxury of a private safari. But by the 1980s, safaris had gone mass market. Thousands of tourists were visiting Kenya and paying relatively little for the opportunity. Tour buses were filling Amboseli National Park and Masai Mara Reserve, and lions and cheetah were being surrounded routinely.



Epler Wood filming in Montana



Interview with Richard Leakey



Film crew in Nairobi

In 1989, I was working as an independent filmmaker with my own company, Ecoventures, specializing in environmental documentaries. I convinced the National Audubon Society to produce an hour-long documentary on ecotourism for television. The funding covered production in Kenya, Belize and Montana. With a serious budget, I researched every aspect of how tourism was providing income to parks and quickly discovered the most articulate advocate for using tourism to finance parks was Dr. David Western. Known as Jonah by all his friends and colleagues, Western was the head of the Wildlife Conservation Center program of the New York Zoological Society (NYZS) in East Africa. The son of a game warden, he was field seasoned from birth, had a wickedly smart ability to sum up key points, and had long been a strong advocate for community-based conservation. This led him to be one of the earliest advocates for ecotourism. We met twice, once for an audio tape interview at the Central Park Zoo in New York City, and once in Amboseli National Park with a whole film crew. After the shoot, I asked if I could make a private visit to discuss an idea with him, and he invited me to his home.

The idea I presented was the founding of The Ecotourism Society (later to become The International Ecotourism Society). Sitting in front of an African water hole, having tea at Western's house overlooking Nairobi National Park, I made my pitch. I would be the point person, and he would be my chairman. He agreed and TIES was born.

Back in Washington, books were being written about the potential for tourism to fund parks. Elizabeth Boo of WWF-US wrote, *Ecotourism: Potentials and Pitfalls*, which caught the eye of conservationists around the world. Karen Ziffer, a Stanford MBA who was snatched up by Conservation International, wrote the second work *Ecotourism, An Uneasy Alliance*; laying out the challenge for ecotourism to both fund local conservation and fuel economic development. During the production of the Audubon film, I held meetings on the potential of an international organization dedicated to ecotourism. Boo, Ziffer and I were the core working group. World Resources Institute economist Kreg Lindberg soon joined us, and Ecoventures' marketing director Frances Gatz worked on outreach. When Western joined forces with us, funds were raised and in 1990 the new organization was founded.

The idea of an international organization dedicated to making ecotourism a tool for conservation and sustainable development was new. It was the first organization in the world to dedicate all of its resources to tourism as a sustainable development mechanism.

Funding to launch came with two grants (which Western and I raised together) from the Liz Claiborne Art Ortenberg Foundation and the Merck Family Fund. The organization's goals were set out by its first board of directors in its first meeting in May of 1990. And the first definition for the concept of ecotourism that incorporated sustainable development ideas was coined: *"responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and sustain the well being of local people."*

With a definition in hand we went to work. But ecotourism had few organizing principles and could not be called a professional discipline. It was merely a very interesting, and ever controversial idea. With every year, we brought more expertise together, attracted thousands of members in countries across the planet, and slowly but surely laid out a set of professional methodologies and guidelines. Lessons have been learned, and the market for ecotourism has grown. But its role as a financing engine for parks remains nascent.

Ecotourism Now

Twenty years later in 2010, the funding crisis for protected areas remains. The hard work of getting funding mechanisms into place via government policies has advanced slowly.

Recent news is not encouraging. Parks and protected areas around the world face a growing crisis to cover the costs of their operation and management. It is estimated that at least \$ 12-13 billion will be needed in the next decade to manage protected areas in developing countries according to IUCN

World Congress documents in 2005. Parks have long been one of the main attractions for the tourism industry, and this trend continues to increase. But most decision makers remain woefully unaware of the economic importance of parks.

IUCN's 2008 World Congress focused on creating *market viable ecotourism products*. In this exact same time period, the international adventure and related ecotourism industry was having one of its greatest boom periods in history. Businesses were bringing record numbers of visitors to parks, and yes entrance fees were being raised around the world. But few efforts to finance yawning budget gaps with tourism were implemented on the scale required. While park budgets reach crisis proportions, the tourism marketplace is kept at arm's length by park administrators.

Nevertheless, real progress has been made. The national parks of South Africa launched a concession program that has been economically, socially, and environmentally successful, according to Gigu Varghese, the head of business development for South African National parks (SANParks) as reported in the book *Responsible Tourism*. SanParks manages over 4 million hectares of pristine wilderness in a system of 23 national parks. After the democratization of South Africa in 1994, the government became answerable to a much larger population and their economic needs. In 1998, SANParks was told to prepare to become less dependent on government funding. In 2000, private operators were given the legal right to operate in 11 sites with 20-year contracts, a public-private approach known as concessions, which yielded over \$14 million to SANParks in 5 years. Stringent environmental standards were applied and local employment was generated, all carefully monitored and scored to ensure that black populations were a prime beneficiary of the effort.

Concessions are a government contracting instrument with a solid history. The first concession arrangements for parks in the world were authorized by the US National Park Service after its founding in 1916. But only recently has it been fully demonstrated that this type of contract can also include environmental and social goals. According to IUCN author, Derek de La Harpe, in his chapter for the IUCN book *Parks in Transition*; park agencies, often with strong qualifications in biological issues, frequently lack the managerial, financial and commercial skills, resources and mindsets needed to oversee businesses. Most park agencies still resist working with the private sector.

Oliver Hillel, of the Secretariat for the Convention on Biological Diversity, states,

“The vast majority of national park agencies still are unprepared to partner productively with the tourism industry. Building the capacity of park agencies and local authorities to engage with tourism industry representatives could easily result in doubling current economic benefits from tourism to protected areas.”

Tourism concessions worth billions of dollars in new revenues for conservation could help to bridge the funding gap for parks around the world. Businesses are willing to pay governments for the opportunity to operate in parks and protected areas; and concession contracts that require strong environmental and social standards are entirely feasible.

The time has come to truly finance parks through tourism concessions. Hard work to create the legal mechanisms and management capacity is required, but the vision is clear. After 20 years, it appears that tourism is still the prime candidate to help pay for parks around the world.