

# Digging Deeper- Sustainable Solutions to Tourism and Development

© Megan Epler Wood  
September 2008

## Ecotourism Needs More Links to Social Enterprise

Ecotourism is a field ripe for collaboration with social entrepreneurs. Nobel Prize winner, Muhammed Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank, writes that non-profits and charity alone have proven to be an inadequate response to global social problems. In his recent book, *Creating a World Without Poverty*, Yunus contends that social businesses are the most effective mechanism to generate social and environmental benefits in the next century.

For almost two decades, ecotourism has sought to address environmental and social ills via a mix of non-profit and business strategies. But Yunus's model of social enterprise challenges project designers to avoid donations and generate benefits through business sustainability.

It is increasingly accepted that enterprises can marshal more reliable resources to address deeply entrenched social problems. Organizations such as **Ashoka** – which has made social entrepreneurship a mission for volunteers, staffers, and business people around the world and has supported this mission via a creative set of financing and social networking web architecture -- has inspired thousands of social entrepreneurs to seek social and environmental solutions through business. But are these business solutions or business philanthropy?

The **Ashoka Geotourism Challenge** fostered a remarkable 331 entries from small scale tourism entrepreneurs around the world, all with local solutions to attack poverty and environmental degradation. In October 14-15, The **Geotourism Summit** in Washington, D.C. will honor the challenge winners and bring stakeholders together to discuss how a Global Geotourism Foundation will foster more social entrepreneurship in future.

The winners of that challenge provide interesting models for study. Both business and philanthropy appear to be artfully blended without distinction, and the idea of citizen enterprise without profit, seems to be integral to the Ashoka model.

One of the winners of the Geotourism Challenge is 3 Nepal Sisters. According to their application, they have successfully created a trekking program run by women for women.

They explain,

*Women from mountainous areas in west Nepal are especially disadvantaged due to extreme poverty, surviving in remote, harsh environments. These women are physically strong, used to working all day carrying heavy loads and earning nothing. Training was needed for these women to give them the necessary skills and knowledge to work as trekking guides. The training is free, with food/lodging provided for women from remote areas. Mobile training in mountainous west Nepal, introduces women to tourism, teaching them about health, hygiene, the environment, waste disposal, culture,*



*nutrition and preparation of food using local products. Women from these areas are given priority enrollment in trekking guide training.*

3 Nepal Sisters is a private business generating greater social well-being while covering its costs through their trekking program, making it a classic social enterprise.

But for many years, community based tourism and ecotourism specialists have sought to help local communities develop their own enterprises in buffer zones to protected areas, not always generating economically sustainable results. A study on **Community-Based Enterprise in Latin America** found that many donor-supported community-based ecotourism projects actually took cash out of their businesses without regard for covering business costs, to meet social and environmental goals. In the future, one of the key criteria for success in creating ecotourism development programs must be that local enterprises cover their costs first, or the solutions generated will only be temporary at best.

A consortium of organizations specializing in microenterprise development, The **SEEP Network**, has undertaken a study on how local, small and microenterprises in Central America can perform more effectively as businesses while also boosting socially beneficial economic impacts in their communities. Three small businesses in Honduras and Nicaragua have documented every aspect of their business procedures with local business planners and found ways to improve while also boosting local economic impacts. A simple economic impact self-assessment tool was generated to help each business evaluate their local economic impacts. The results of this work will be reported by the entrepreneurs themselves at **SEEP's Annual Conference** on November 6 and several publications will appear on the SEEP Network website after the event.

In tourism, we have relied too often on the good will of donors and philanthropists to bring genuine social benefits to local people. But the social enterprise model demands a more long term solution. If local people run their own businesses, successfully using social enterprise models, as part of the larger tourism value chain, they will cover their costs and have increasingly positive social and environmental impacts.

With all of the tools and learning of the social entrepreneurship movement at hand – the fields of pro-poor tourism, ecotourism, geotourism, and responsible tourism can demonstrate to those in the finance and donor world, that indeed social entrepreneurship in tourism can play an economically sustainable role in both combating poverty and conserving the environment.