

# FINE-TUNING ECOTOURISM AND ETHNIC CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION STRATEGIES

By Oswaldo Munoz \*

## Nature and cultural identity

Through what could be termed as “*cultural homogenisation*” we are destroying our heritage. Names and surnames mean nothing without cultural identity, much in the same way that plants render useless to those that do not understand their applications or their aesthetic beauty.

Humans around the world were not created the same, not only because of genetic factors, but also most importantly because of cultural and ethnic differentiation that intertwine with their environment. Hence, we must understand that *the most important ally of culture is nature*. They should go hand in hand.

Conservation International's monumental volume called “*Hotspots*” makes reference to not only 25 places on the face of the globe that harbour the greatest variety of living species, but also to the indigenous cultures that are intimately linked to those unique and fragile ecosystems. Therefore, reference is not made to “man and nature” but rather “*man as an integral part of nature*”. When we dismiss that fact, we start to destroy ourselves. The depletion of our natural resources, when regeneration or sustainable management is not taken into account, not only makes life miserable, but also reduces our chances of survival as a species. As German naturalist Arthur Eichler once said decades ago, “*Civilization starts with the cutting of the first tree, and ends with the cutting of the last*”.

## Ecotourism and the GNP

Tourism is the largest economic activity after the weapons industry, generating more than US\$4 trillion of world output, though it accounts for only 6% of the world Gross National Product - GNP. It is the largest expenditure after food, representing 13% of consumer spending, and could double or decrease considerably by the year 2010, depending of government policies on sustainable development.

But it is time for us to reconsider the problems that parameters such as the GNP of a country entail, when the bookkeeping does not really respond to environmental and therefore human needs and considerations. Why? Because for the past 150 years *we have been conditioned to believe that something is economical when it produces a monetary value and anti-economical when it fails to do so*. Such a conclusion is purely and exclusively quantitative. Thus, the deterioration of the ecosphere is hardly ever accounted for in the Gross National Product. By not assessing the environmental costs of our present-day technological growth trends, the accounting is incomplete and erroneous when money is the prime consideration. *Nothing is debited from the wearing away of*

*the ecosphere - running out of fish, petroleum, fresh water, pure air, trees, etc.* This leads us to wonder if the GNP is nothing more than the arithmetic sum of the monetary value of transactions between humans and nothing more, leaving out nature and its inherent elements altogether. Thus, more than an index of true progress, it might very well be a means of measuring our own self-destruction.

It is for this reason that we cannot look at ecotourism solely as an economic contributor to people's prosperity, but rather *people as the most important contributor in order for ecotourism to prosper.*

### **What does ecotourism entail?**

Since ecotourism embraces a very wide range of human activities, I feel there is a need to identify its interrelationships with other sectors of the economy:

- Ecotourism, in its simplest and most comprehensive form, is responsible travel that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”.
- Ecotourism is an economic interface in ecological, social and ideological perspectives.
- Ecotourism is a science, and as such, it must be carefully studied, modified, simplified, understood, taught and improved.
- The science of ecotourism must join forces with other disciples to embrace both natural resources and native cultures if it is to develop in the right direction.
- Ecotourism is highly transcendental, since it establishes guidelines to make of conservation a dynamically good deal, not only for the business, but for the environment as well.
- Ecotourism today faces the challenge of proving itself trustworthy of its principles, setting an example whereby all other economic activities could be induced into the importance of a balanced relationship with the planet and its human population.

Ecotourism activities are faced with the task of coming up with figures that will satisfy the monetary pressures of an economic society that has been divorced from its ecological interrelationships. Countries receiving ecotravelers see themselves forever coming up with impressive figures to rank tourism as a substantial and sustainable earner of foreign exchange in the eyes of their governments and credit banks.

Within this context, *much in the same way that robots could not entirely replace humans even in the most distant future, natural forests cannot be replaced by artificially planted trees.* To better exemplify this fact, let's take a look at the following argumentation.

Professor T.M. Das of the University of Calcutta came up with a price tag for a tree, in an effort to satisfy skeptic economists about the value of letting native forests live. The price was US\$ 193,250. This amount was reached through the following bookkeeping: *A tree living for 50 years...*

*Generates oxygen worth  
US\$ 31,250*

*Controls air pollution for  
US\$ 62,000*

*Reduces soil erosion and increases soil fertility for  
US\$ 31,250*

*Recycles water worth  
US\$ 37,500*

*Provides a home for animals worth  
US\$ 31,250*

*Total US\$ 193,250*

This figure does not include the value of the fruits, lumber or beauty derived from trees. This amount multiplied by number of trees in tropical rainforests around the world, times the number of ecotourists visiting these regions times an indefinite (or eternal) number of years using the resources in a sustainable manner certainly surpasses in astronomical figures any type of natural resource exploitation in those regions of the world.

Economically or environmentally speaking, this is just another sensible reason to take care of our forests - and a great case for the sustainable potentials that ecotourism offers.

Even more dramatic is *the plea of a Tibetan humanist* that warned us in the most eloquent manner what we might be doing wrong in our uncontrollable development frenzy:

*When all trees would have been cut...  
When all rivers and lakes would have dried up...  
When all other species would have silenced their voices forever...  
We would have come to realize that...  
We can't eat money.*

### **What to always keep in mind ...**

- *Deal and negotiate with other economic sectors*, for the sustainable success of these could very well determine the future of ecotourism. Viable alliances are possible so that various economies can flourish in the same ecosystem, including ecotourism, without endangering each other's future, under the principles of peaceful co-existence,

sustainability and mutual respect.

- *Introduce ecotourism's principles to gateway cities and urban sectors.* Whether it's visiting a cathedral on a city tour, or a rainforest in the Amazon, the same basic guidelines apply.
- *Promote mass ecotourism programs in special areas for that purpose.* There is no way we are going to effectively "spread the word" about the importance of conservation if we are not a part of it on one hand, and if we concentrate our marketing efforts on only an elite class of "ecotourists", based on their educational or economic possibilities. *We cannot discriminate with the educational aspects of ecotourism for a chosen few.* Therefore, let us identify places close by and with large carrying capacities where large numbers of local visitors can learn, experience and enjoy nature, regardless of their economic limitations. *Tourism should not be a privilege, but rather a right endowed to every person.* After all, the more allies ecotourism generates, the better for everyone.
- *Monitor humans, keeping in mind that nature monitors itself.* In so doing, we could prevent major negative impacts before they are out of control with irreversible damage. This could be called "*preventative medicine for ecotourism*".
- *Consider a moratorium for ecotourism activities in newly discovered ecosites, until our performance improves in areas that have already been "touched" by this enterprise.* In this sense, *I propose the establishment of "ecotourism reserves" to be set aside for the future, so as to not use up all of what we have now.* Also, we must also take into account those very fragile areas that could be, for the sake of their preservation, out of grounds for ecotourism activities.
- *Invite the "opposition" to meetings such as this, so that they are not afraid of us, but rather get familiarized and join us in our ethnic cultural environmental movement.* How? Through symbiotic relationships and programs among PECC member economies and specialized workshops throughout the year. Let us keep in mind that we must work *carefully* because we cannot make mistakes - and we have to work *fast* because we have no time to lose. And I believe that mutual collaboration is more important than competitiveness, because that way *everyone* wins.

### **In closing ...**

Nearly two years have passed since the First PECC Ecotourism Forum was held in Quito, Ecuador with the underlying theme "Strategic Alliances Between Travel & Conservation". Today, the distinguished and enthusiastic presence of colleagues from around the world at this Second Forum attest to the fact that ecotourism is here to stay. What's more, we have come to realize that the Pacific Ocean does not separate but rather unites the 25 member economies, given that the shortest distance between two countries is understanding. And

this year's theme, Ethnic Cultural Heritage Protection, has to do with just that - *understanding*.

Within that context, more than a speaker, I have come here as a tourist, as an "Earth native" in order to fill up all of my senses with understanding, a type of understanding that is not only factual but also emotional, for knowledge nurtures the brain, understanding nurtures the soul. And in the next days I truly look forward to exploring that horizon called Shangri-La that ever since a child was always one of my dearest dreams. Thank you for inviting me to your home.

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