

STATE OF THE DESTINATION

Ecotourism: fad or phenomenon?

The United Nations has designated 2002 the International Year of Ecotourism. But what exactly *is* ecotourism? What has prompted the UN to such a grand gesture? And how can the destination industry benefit from this?

Like many terms that have come across the Atlantic, British commentators have never liked the word 'ecotourism'. But there can be no denying that it is a world term - and a world issue. Countless definitions of ecotourism have been attempted in recent years, perhaps the most comprehensive of which is that offered by the World Tourism Organisation (see below). Regardless of their source, all definitions agree on the fundamental objectives of ecotourism, namely that it should generate economic benefits for local populations while protecting the local environment and natural heritage. There

are obvious and important similarities between these aims and those of UNESCO's World Heritage programme (examined up close in the Winter 2001 edition of *Locum Destination Review*).

So how big is the global ecotourism market? The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) claims on its website that ecotourism is 'a small but rapidly growing industry, a niche market that is governed by market forces and regulations. Some countries, companies and destinations have social and environmental policies and programmes, while others do not.' No prizes for observation there, then. But some idea of market size can be gleaned from figures release by the WTO, which estimates that ecotourism accounts for between 2 and 4 per cent of all international travel expenditure. In a global tourism industry worth US\$476 billion, that represents

What is ecotourism?

'While there is not a universal definition for ecotourism, its general characteristics can be summarised as follows:

1. All nature-based forms of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas.
2. It contains educational and interpretation features.
3. It is generally, but not exclusively, organised for small groups by specialised and small, locally owned businesses. Foreign operators of varying sizes also organised, operate and/or market ecotourism tours, generally for small groups.
4. It minimises negative impacts upon the natural and socio-cultural environment.
5. It supports the protection of natural areas by:
 - generating economic benefits for host communities, organisations and authorities managing natural areas with conservation purposes;
 - providing alternative employment and income opportunities for local communities; and
 - increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among locals and tourists.'

Source: World Tourism Organisation

annual revenues somewhere in the region of US\$19 billion - quite a niche, by anyone's reckoning.

Definitive proof of ecotourism's growing significance, if any were needed, has come in the shape of UN recognition. As part of its International Year of Ecotourism, the UN, in conjunction with the WTO, staged the World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec between 19 and 22 May. The principle aims of the summit, according to Klaus Toepfer, executive director of UNEP, were:

'To raise the awareness among all stakeholders of ecotourism's capacity to contribute to the conservation of the natural environment and cultural heritage in remote areas, and to the improvement of standards of living in those areas. To share lessons learned on the planning, management, regulation and monitoring of ecotourism. To finalise the Quebec City Declaration on Ecotourism, for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. And to forge multistakeholder alliances that will help us implement Johannesburg's recommendations.'

The World Ecotourism Summit officially set out to make progress on four themes:

- Ecotourism policy and planning: the sustainability challenge.
- Regulation of ecotourism: institutional responsibilities and frameworks.
- Product development, marketing and promotion of ecotourism: fostering sustainable products and consumers.
- Monitoring costs and benefits of ecotourism: ensuring equitable distribution among all stakeholders.

While praiseworthy in its aims and agenda, it should be noted that the summit attracted a sum total of just 1,100 delegates, and precious little in the way of international media coverage. Not exactly a resounding success for such a

milestone event in so prestigious a year for ecotourism. We will have to wait until September to see the official findings of the World Ecotourism Summit, which are to be included in the 'Quebec City Declaration on Ecotourism', to be presented at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg. It is to be hoped that these findings are properly disseminated and provide a working framework for governments, in particular, to prepare long-term strategies for sustainable ecotourism activity. Otherwise, the International Year of Ecotourism will have been a wasted opportunity, and the World Ecotourism Summit simply an additional source of something that the world could do without right now - more hot air.

Regardless of the outcome, there can be no doubting that ecotourism is indeed a sector with huge growth potential. It is no passing fad. Neither is it, nor should it, be regarded as the preserve of small operators in exotic, far-flung corners of the world. In the UK, the Eden Project has been satisfying all elements of the WTO's definition of ecotourism with some distinction since opening its gates to an intrigued public in 2000. And, as Dorothy Mackenzie points out elsewhere in these pages, ecotourism does not have to mean a cruise down the Amazon or a visit to the Galapagos Islands. Creative lateral planning could breathe new life into natural and built assets, from National Parks to visitor attractions.

The opportunity certainly exists for more operators in the UK and Europe to become part of the world's fastest-growing area of tourism. For a model operation, they should look no further than Eden - a world-class environmental destination which has made itself available to a carefully managed number of visitors, while delivering significant economic benefits to the local population. Tim Smit may not like the word 'ecotourism' - and he doesn't - but he is an arch-exponent of this phenomenon.