

## Tour Operators' Contributions to Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas

### Tourism in protected areas: Friend or foe?

Tourism activities in and around protected areas can have both positive and negative impacts on local people and the environment.

Tourism can benefit a national park or other protected area by serving as a financing mechanism, with direct revenues from user fees and taxes used to protect biological resources and maintain natural areas. Intangible benefits can include increased awareness of and support for the purpose and role of protected areas, by both local communities and tourists. If tourism is important to the local or national economy, it may encourage authorities to manage and maintain protected areas more effectively, benefiting tourists, local communities and the environment.

The negative environmental impacts of tourism can include water and soil contamination from construction or improper disposal of solid waste and wastewater, air pollution from transportation, wildlife habitat destruction, and land degradation. Tourism can also lead to the exclusion of local people from certain areas, particularly in protected areas that were created to conserve wildlife. Although, in most cases, the protected area designation will have preceded the development of tourism, exclusion of local people from these areas usually occurs after tourism becomes established and profitable, and thus more economically important to governments or landowners than traditional activities.

### Co-operation is success

Successfully addressing the challenges of tourism in protected areas requires strong co-operation among all parties, including those operating within and outside protected area boundaries, as well as those that can promote effective management of protected areas by ensuring that the appropriate planning and management tools are adopted. Although the goals of different stakeholders can be quite varied, tourism activities can only be sustainable if implemented with a common understanding and consensus-based approach to development.

Tour operators play a central role in the tourism industry. As intermediaries between tourists and tourism service suppliers, tour operators can influence the choices of consumers, the practices of

suppliers and the development patterns of destinations. This unique role means that tour operators can make an important contribution to furthering the goals of sustainable tourism development and protecting the environmental and cultural resources on which the tourism industry depends for its survival and growth.

The members of the Tour Operators' Initiative believe that tourism in protected areas should be:

- Developed and implemented with the consensus of, and in close co-operation with, relevant stakeholders;
- Supported by effective policies, guidelines, management strategies and technical tools; and
- Focused on conserving the environment while ensuring economically, socially and culturally sound development.

### Tour operators' contributions to sustainable tourism development in protected areas

The members of the Tour Operators' Initiative also believe that tour operators can contribute to the sustainable development of tourism in protected areas in many different ways, such as:

- Including protected areas in their itineraries and giving customers information about the natural and cultural features of visited sites and their roles in the conservation of local ecosystems;
- Limiting the size of their groups, or dividing large groups into smaller ones when visiting protected areas;
- Informing protected area managers of visits ahead of time and discussing ways to reduce visitor impacts;
- Integrating sustainability principles into the selection criteria and service agreements of their suppliers, and choosing locally owned and operated suppliers;
- Making financial contributions to conservation and development projects;
- Providing customers with opportunities to proactively support protected areas; and
- Providing customers with guidelines on how to avoid negative impacts while visiting sensitive areas, for example by maintaining appropriate distances from wildlife, staying on trails to avoid trampling plants or causing erosion, and keeping water and energy use down to avoid related impacts on the environment.

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### Examples of good practice by TOI members

**Discovery Initiatives** (UK) offers Discoverer Holidays, which allow customers to get involved as field assistants in specific research projects. For example, a tour in Kalimantan, Indonesia, on the island of Borneo, allows travellers to work with the world's leading orang-utan study programme and contributes US\$1,000 per client to the Orang-utan Foundation in Tanjung Putung National Park.

**Dynamic Tours** (Morocco) has developed a Mountain and Desert Guide's Charter for its guides, as a means to build awareness on their roles as liaisons to travellers on:

- Environmental problems;
- Economic impacts of groups in a given area;
- Financial resources generated by tourism and their role in preserving local species and heritage;
- Local social and economic development; and
- Appropriate and sustainable environmental and social practices.

**Exodus** (UK) has a Responsible Tourism policy that includes:

- Hiring more local guides to provide better experiences and support to local communities;
- Purchasing local products and services, where appropriate, for all trips;
- Working with local operators to implement the policy; and
- Limiting group size based on local situations.

**Hapag-Lloyd Kreuzfahrten** (Germany) specialises in expedition and luxury river and ocean cruises, particularly in the Arctic, Antarctica, the South Pacific Islands and the Amazon basin. To minimise the environmental impacts of its tours and improve the experience of its customers, the company has developed a handbook for travellers to Antarctica, which provides:

- Guidelines and practical information for appropriate behaviour in Antarctica;
- Historical, geological and scientific facts to accompany lectures offered on cruises; and
- Supplementary reading on Antarctica, covering topics such as the region's history, the Antarctic Treaty, native plants and animals, and environmental issues in the region.

**Hotelplan** (Switzerland) established an Eco-Fund in January 2001. Funds are raised through a contribution of five Swiss Francs (about US\$3) per customer on any of Hotelplan's 'Holidays at the Seaside' packages, which represent 20-25 percent of sales. In 2002, the fund raised about US\$750,000. The money is used for internal and

external sustainable tourism projects, environmental efforts by partners at Hotelplan destinations, and emergency help in case of natural disasters or one-off projects.

**Premier Tours** (US), which specialises in safari tours to Southern and East Africa, selects tented camps and lodges in national parks and private game reserves that are committed to sustainable practices and apply a sensible approach to tourism, conservation and local community involvement. Premier Tours favours camps that:

- Employ full-time ecologists to ensure sustainable environmental practices in camps;
- Provide electricity through solar panels;
- Do not allow hunting, but support photographic safaris;
- Provide for direct or indirect benefits to local communities and/or conservation projects;
- Have garbage removed to appropriate places for safe disposal; and
- Have lined tanks for safe sewage processing.

**TUI Nederland** (the Netherlands) launched the Environmentally Aware Tourism project in Bonaire and Curaçao in 1999, to provide customers with information on responsible travel and sustainable products. Initial information is provided in the brochures of TUI Nederland's brands Arke and Holland International. Once a client has chosen a holiday to Bonaire or Curaçao:

- TUI Nederland provides tips for environmentally sound practices in the voucher booklet that includes their air tickets;
- KLM, a project partner, shows an on-board video about the sustainable excursions and activities that are part of the project;
- Upon arrival, trained TUI Nederland hostesses introduce guests to the sustainable excursions and activities that are available; and
- The TUI Nederland resource book, available in hotel lobbies, further directs guests to sustainable excursions, activities and attractions.

**Viaggi del Ventaglio** (Italy) decided in 1998 to grant US\$1 per bed/night to the Ministry of Tourism of the Dominican Republic, to help repair damage from Hurricane George. Contributions lasted for one year and generated about US\$150,000. Part of the funds were invested in the conservation and development of Saona Island, inside the Parque Nacional del Este. The island represents a unique and beautiful, but delicate, ecosystem, and is a favourite excursion for hotels located in the area. Funds were also used to reconstruct 63 houses in the village of Manojuan, which was badly damaged by the hurricane, and to promote and develop local handicrafts, through grants to local enterprises.