

getting started

Ecotourism

case studies

This is the second of two Getting Started columns looking at sustainable tourism. It uses a number of case studies to show how ecotourism can offer a sustainable way of living for local communities.

Sustainability in its strictest sense means retaining local values. Yet ecotourism inevitably demands that market values are adopted by local people. At the same time authenticity of an area or experience is a marketable asset and that traditional quality must be maintained. Successful ecotourism projects therefore have to develop a new source of income and employment for the resident population, while encouraging them to care for their environment. Ecotourism can help to improve a local environment if it means that people no longer have to log tropical forests for timber or grow cash crops for export in order to survive.



Figure 1 Map showing the location of the Posadas ecolodge and education centre



Posada Amazonas

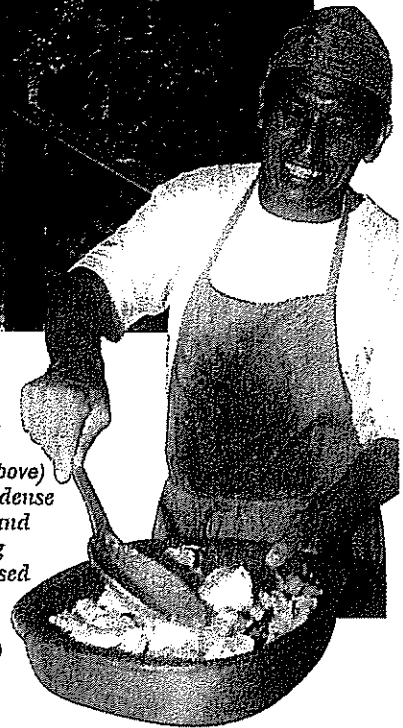
Deep in the Amazon rainforest of southeastern Peru lies the Posada Amazonas (Figure 1, Inset 1). The area gained protected status in 1991 with permission for small-scale development involving 'local stakeholders'. The Bahuaja-Sonene National Park and the 30-room ecolodge, Posada Amazonas, were established in 1996. The project is managed by the local community of Infierno in partnership with Rainforest Expeditions (Peru). According to research by Amanda Stronza (Stanford University 2001), the project offers tourists insight to the forest and boosts the economy of the indigenous people.

Stronza has described the project as making 'commodities of culture and nature'. It is therefore clear that the indigenous people are required to alter their value systems. They are, after all, 'selling their identity, culture, home, way of life...' There is a profit-sharing agreement, in which the Infierno community gets 60% of profits. At present, a private company manages the operations and staff, and it is planned that the Infierno will assume total responsibility by 2017. Financing, staff training, marketing and clientele come from the company, but the local people provide the knowledge, labour, access to the land (10,000 hectares of it), culture, and know the prime locations for wildlife observation.

Ecotourism in Posada has offered an alternative route to development with an emphasis on sustaining local habitats and avoiding irreparable change. Posada is not some detached relic of the past; television

- Posadas ecolodge and education centre
- is constructed from local natural materials and avoids use of non-renewable materials
- is designed to harmonise with the surroundings
- uses recycled materials
- offers educational, conservation and research facilities
- is small scale

The Posada Amazonas ecolodge (above) – note the dense vegetation and the building materials used – and a cook in the lodge (right)



and radio had already seen to that. The Infierno want progress and the project does not deny anyone the right to an improved or different standard of living. The daily arrival of 40–50 tourists by dugout canoe is not too intrusive and presents an opportunity rather than a threat.

Following positive media coverage by the BBC and Discovery Channel, economic sustainability for the project was secured by funding from external sources, not least the World Bank. Handicrafts are sold as souvenirs, and children of the forest now perceive the economic value of local fauna and flora. Income from ecotourism means that there is less emphasis on normal subsistence activities. At the same time, modern tools are being used to cut trees and cultivate the land and motorboats are replacing canoes.

Tourism places a price on natural species, which means that their value increases and they are better protected. In this way ecotourism adds to environmental sustainability. The indigenous people are the stakeholders who guard the wildlife and understand its value. Local farmers gain as their market extends to tourists and to those local people who no longer have time to farm, although there is a need to designate land for domestic production. A proposed new road designed to boost development was rejected by the community for fear of the impacts it would have on the wildlife – the very attractions that tourists come to see.

Ricancie in Ecuador is the Indigenous Network of Communities of the Upper Napo for Intercultural Co-Living and Ecotourism. This communal project was developed in

the 1990s as an alternative source of income when oil and maize prices fell.

By managing the business themselves, local people are able to limit the negative impacts of tourism. The Quichua people, who have traditionally been hostile to tourists, are able to protect their independence and permit tourists to 'experience nature'. There are 20 ecotourist projects, dispersing the pressure away from any one centre. Accommodation is in bamboo and thatch cabins, furnished with locally produced mattresses, bedding and mosquito nets. Local people lead forest tours and make presentations about their own culture and lifestyle.

Community funds derived from tourist spending are managed and spent locally. Money has been allocated to health schemes, interest-free loans to members, improved farming and transport equipment and educational facilities. Low volumes of tourists mean minimal footpath/trail erosion. The tourists hike in to the area and so have little luggage and low levels of refuse. Latrine blocks near the tourist cabins are less harmful than traditional toilets that empty directly into streams. The impacts of tourists on surface erosion are lower than those of traditional tree felling.

However, the growing numbers of tourists have brought problems. By 1995 up to 700 tourists a year were recorded.



Community enthusiasm was waning, according to some observers, and it was clear that Western values were having an impact on local habits. Drugs, alcohol and earrings were becoming common among people who previously lacked even the words to label such items. Female tourists were also known to be arranging late night rendezvous with Quichua men.

Ecotourism: where next?

The Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP), established in 1992, seeks to promote and innovate best practice. NEAP pressed for international certification for ecotourism and developed the International Ecotourism Standard. This is based on the Agenda 21 principles for sustainable development, and has been endorsed by 182 governments. It is managed by Green Globe 21 (see Inset 2). Individual nations are developing their own bodies. Ecotourism Australia awards certificates in accordance with these principles.

Inevitably, individual operators see advantages in displaying their ecoconscience. The Daintree Ecolodge and Spa, located in the Daintree World Heritage site in Australia, boasts strong controls over energy consumption, waste disposal, food supplies, construction materials, Aboriginal cultural experiences and wildlife conservation. Self-proclaimed sustainability dominates the

marketing literature of the multinational parent company and tourist numbers are increasing. However, it is expensive, costing visitors as much as AU\$2,000 (about £800) for a 5-day stay. Visitor suites are indulgently furnished and air-conditioned.

Independent certification of the ecotourism product together with education of the tourist may eventually secure the ecocredentials of this industry and ensure genuine sustainability.

Questions to take you further

- (1) Study the principles in Inset 2 and consider for yourself how far each of the projects described in this Getting Started may be considered representative of ecotourism.
- (2) Does ecotourism appeal mainly to wealthy people? Does its small scale of operation mean that it can only operate locally in an industry that is increasingly global?

Russell Chapman

Russell Chapman is Senior Tutor and a geography teacher at University College School, London. He was formerly Head of Geography, an A-level examiner for OCR and Conference Officer of the Geographical Association 1989-95.

Green Globe 21 certification

Ecotourism operators that satisfy all the requirements of the Green Globe 21 International Ecotourism Standard and who are successfully certified following an on-site visit by an accredited third-party assessor are entitled to use the Green Globe 21 logo.

Principles of ecotourism:

- ecotourism policy, performance and framework
- natural area focus
- interpretation and education
- ecologically sustainable practice
- contribution to conservation
- benefiting local communities
- cultural respect and sensitivity
- customer satisfaction
- responsible marketing
- minimal impact codes of conduct