

## Eco-tourism

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as: "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people."

In recent years, Africa's ecotourism industry has become increasingly important to the economy. Tourism enterprises based on the natural attractions of the region – particularly small accommodation establishments widely known as "safari lodges" – are considered key to creating jobs and wealth.

### The growth of ecotourism

According to 1998 figures from the World Tourism Organisation, Africa was the fastest-growing region for international tourism, with 25 million tourists visiting African countries and this figure growing by 7.5% a year. South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Madagascar were the leading countries, particularly for ecotourism.



Typical African safari lodge



The World Tourism Organisation estimates that 'nature tourism' generates 7% of all international travel expenditure

### Tourism figures from the Worldwide Tourism Organisation

- There were more than 663 million international travelers in 1999
- Spending by these tourists was estimated at more than US\$453 billion.
- The number of tourists is expected to grow by an average 4.1% a year over the next two decades
- The number of international travellers is expected to total one billion by 2010

### Creating work and income opportunities

Ecotourism establishments are often in poorer rural parts of Africa and may be the main economic activity. Tourist expenditure on lodging, transport, food, guides, and souvenirs can be an important source of income and employment for local communities, particularly for rural farmers, women and young people.

### Protecting the environment

Many conservation organisations also support ecotourism because it contributes to the management and protection of national parks, 'wilderness areas' and wildlife. For example, tourism is largely responsible for saving gorillas in Africa from extinction. In sub-Saharan Africa there are about 440 protected areas covering about 2.6 million square hectares.

### Example: The Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda

Hundreds of people work as rangers and camping staff or provide food, crafts and entertainment for foreign tourists who come to trek in the forest and view gorillas. In the Buhoma valley just outside the park, many local businesses have started up, offering goods and services to visitors. This 'multiplier effect' brought about by tourism can have considerable benefits to the local economy. It is estimated that for every hotel room established for tourists, up to two jobs are created.



The Bwindi Forest in Uganda provides jobs for the local community

### Example: The Kakum National Park in Ghana

Ghana is developing its ecotourism industry and has seen a growth of 12% per year in tourist revenues. By 2010 tourism is likely to become the biggest earning industry in the country. 80-90% of Ghana's original forests have been destroyed or seriously damaged by settlement, agriculture or timber extraction and Ghana's ecotourism programme could help to preserve what remains of its forests.

Ecotourism is focusing on the Kakum National Park with its canopy walkway, which is perched 30 metres above the ground, giving a unique bird's eye view of the rainforest.

The number of visitors increased from 20,000 in 1995 to 59,000 in 1998, while revenue from the walkway rose from \$10,000 to \$108,000. Much of this money goes to the Ghana Heritage Conservation Trust, a local non-governmental organisation that uses the funds to maintain the walkway and fund conservation and sustainable development projects with local communities.



The canopy walkway in Kakum National Park, Ghana

Mr. Gideon Sedziafa, a Ghanaian who lives in the UK but knows the area well says: *"The benefits of this ecotourism attraction are numerous. The road to the park is a first class road, which has improved infrastructure in the area. It has generated income and sustainable livelihoods for the people around Kakum and surrounding towns because of the hotels located near the park. This region is the highest tourism earner in the country, mainly because of Kakum. It also offers opportunities for the conservation of other parks in the country".*



### Example: Madagascar

Madagascar is an island in the Indian Ocean, off the east coast of Africa. Tourism is the country's second largest earner. By 1998 the government had established 40 new protected areas, covering roughly 2 per cent of the country's land area. But these areas are highly populated and intensively farmed because of their favourable climate. To prevent conflict between farmers and the tourist industry, 'participatory ecotourism' has been introduced. This means that money from ecotourism is shared with local communities to compensate them for any restrictions on using the land in parks and protected areas. This means that local communities benefit from tourism. The revenues raised are invested in agriculture production, forestry, drinking water, schools, health services and the development of credit schemes, enabling local people to borrow money at reasonable rates of interest.

### Potential problems with ecotourism

There are a number of arguments used against ecotourism:

- Getting to the destinations usually involves flying, something environmentalists say is the most damaging form of transport when it comes to climate change and global warming
- Large numbers of tourists visiting 'wilderness areas' or national parks can damage the very areas ecotourism seeks to protect.
- Although ecotourism provides employment, the jobs offered to local people are often low quality/low paid jobs and are seasonal – only available at certain times of the year.
- Most of the money made from ecotourism still goes out of the region to foreign airlines, tourism operators, developers and builders.
- Any form of tourism can impact on the culture and traditions of local people, either because they lose their meaning and simply become 'entertainment' for tourists (e.g. traditional dances) or because the customs tourists bring to an area threaten local culture and traditions.

### Further information:

**The International Ecotourism Society:** [www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org) **Tourism Concern:** [www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk)

**Global Eye: Focus on tourism:** [http://www.globaleye.org.uk/secondary\\_spring2002/focuson/index.html](http://www.globaleye.org.uk/secondary_spring2002/focuson/index.html)