

A Crash Course in Ecotourism

By Lorilei Stierlen

Ecotourism was officially defined in 1990 by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) to mean "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." It is meant to bind together conservation, local communities, and the principles of sustainable travel. The goal is to improve and encourage both environmental and cultural understanding and respect, while at the same time furthering and fostering the local involvement in conservation and the benefits from those efforts. The ecotourism philosophy is a holistic approach to sustainability applied to travel. Ecotourism promotes the belief that it is our duty to practice responsible stewardship toward the earth at all times. When we travel, not only should we do no harm to the ecosystem or the indigenous peoples, we should strive to improve the area and benefit the local people in a meaningful manner. By engaging both visitors and locals in the welfare and care of natural areas, the conservation of these will be advanced and improved. Including the local population in the positive benefits of conservation efforts fosters a generational desire to protect and preserve them.

The most rewarding ecotourism experiences engage the traveler's passions and interests. These also provide the greatest opportunities for interaction and involvement, so you want to include what you care about as part of your ecotourism adventure. If you like hands on experience, you can give voluntourism a try, and really help a local community or organization by donating your time. As an example, I am a long time environmental and wildlife conservationist, so I arrange to spend as much time as possible with the local groups working on these issues. While I was in Botswana, I was able to meet and work with the Endangered Wildlife Trust and take part in nest spotting of the endangered Wattled Cranes. This year in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve I'll be working with an innovative local wetlands project which is designed to enhance local water conservation efforts.

As has been the case with so many other earth-friendly activities, 'green' or 'eco' travel has suffered from its fair share of greenwashing. As the demand for ecotourism has grown, the overall number of less than scrupulous vendors has increased. This is complicated by the growing number of different organizations and certification programs which are now operating. It makes navigation of green travel options difficult, and at times confusing, for travelers. Start with the [International Ecotourism Society](#) as they are a network of travelers as well as ecotourism providers. The information on their web site is a great starting point. They are not a certification agency, but rather they offer unbiased evaluation of programs, destinations and current hot topics. It takes some extra homework and planning, but ecotourism offers the opportunity for profound experiences and growth while traveling.