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Tourism for conservation, conservation for tourism

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Reflections on the relationship between nature tourism, environmental conservation and sustainable development.

Nature conservation and tourism in the contemporary sense date from the first half of the nineteenth century and, to a large extent, have developed parallel to one another. Their common root was the ideology of romanticism with its new look at wild nature, no longer regarded as sinister and repellent. Instead, nature became a value in itself and a quest for contact with it became one of the factors that was responsible for development of tourism.

Society's attitude towards historical monuments evolved in a similar way. During the period of romanticism, people acknowledged the value of relics of the past and started to set up museums. "Monument-discovering" was followed by a natural need to explore them, thus giving a second boost to the development of tourism.

There was also feedback; the people who enjoyed tourism were finding new, interesting cultural and natural objects in the course of their wanderings. By recording various threats, in many cases they became the first defenders of nature and culture.

In the history of many European and North American countries, numerous examples can be found of efforts by tourist organizations as a whole as well as those by their members to protect the natural and cultural heritage.

At the end of the nineteenth century, however, there began to be signs that a rapidly developing tourism industry, treated as a part of the economy, might threaten nature and culture. In 1913, Prof. Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski, a lawyer, alpinist and one of the most active nature protectors, wrote in his prophetic work *Culture and nature*: "Some people, moved by the beauty of nature, wanted to share their impressions with others

and started to facilitate access to it by building roads, trails and shelters. A docile public understood that nature must be beautiful, for the spirit of the epoch demanded it.... Seriously, modern man needs some comfort, so shelters were replaced by hotels which the catering and alcoholic beverage business eagerly supported. Would this not be in the interest of a superior level of excellence, since the public's love of nature would contribute to the national wealth? So, the trails were equipped with railings and guide-posts, narrow paths were turned into roads and, eventually, engineering skill achieved a miracle: in

An article noting the challenges of reconciling the impacts of tourism and development with conservation, introducing the term "ecotourism" to the pages of *Unasywa*.

the manner of Herostratus, it violated mountains by building railways up to their summits."

Unfortunately, subsequent development confirmed the accuracy of this diagnosis, and not only in mountain regions. The next decades were dominated by economic and consumer interests that disregarded the consequent environmental devastation. A certain disillusionment came about by the end of the 1960s, a period that can be recognized as a turning-point for the awakening of ecological consciousness on a global scale. People started to look for ways of reconciling economic development with ecological security, a quest which, in a theoretical sense, has been crowned with the World Conservation Strategy.

When this article was written **Piotr Dabrowski** was vice-president of the Polish Tourist Society, which later merged with the Polish Country Lovers' Society to become the Polish Tourist Country Lovers' Society; he is now Chairman of its Cracow Academic Section.

In terms of tourism, this change in emphasis was possible because, alongside the vast commercial tourist industry, there had continued a strong trend of traditional nature tourism, based on the knowledge, joy and satisfaction resulting from contacts with nature, historical monuments and people of different cultures – a form of tourism where physical effort is not viewed as a nuisance but as a source of satisfaction, that wonderful feeling that occurs on the top of a mountain after long hours of climbing. Tourist adventures can be experienced either alone or with companions. In the latter case, there is an additional humanistic aspect: the consciousness of a close relationship with another person, a deep common emotion.

Essentially, therefore, ecotourism is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it is a return to roots and the rediscovery of values that have been covered with concrete and drowned by the noise of cars.

Ecotourism and protected areas

Protected areas, which are also regions of significant tourist attraction, are formed in three ways:

- Tourist regions that have been exploited particularly intensively are put under protection. This is a typical case for mountain national parks.
- A region is recognized as an interesting site after it has been declared a protected area – who would have thought that vast marshlands or peat bogs could become an attraction until naturalists began calling for their protection?
- Protection is introduced, among other reasons, to save the tourist attractions of a region, e.g. from industrial exploitation. This is the objective of many scenic protection areas.

In all these cases, if tourism evolves into a large-scale movement, sooner or later a sharp conflict appears between the requirements of protection and the tourist industry.

Frequent contact with natural environmental and cultural devastation brought about by large-scale, commercial tourism has often led to restrictive or even prohibitive attitudes on the part of those who are professionally or emotionally connected with nature conservation, and such an attitude is manifested in a tendency to expel tourism from the protected areas. For this reason, nature conservationists are often accused of fundamentalism, of hampering development or obstructing local community welfare and of wanting to establish exclusive reserves for scientists and/or wealthy people. The reaction may be rapid forest exploitation or development in commercial tourist sites in order to anticipate possible conservation measures. A recurring worry for devoted nature tourists is to find all interesting regions turned into either huge amusement grounds, fashionably called “parks”, or strict reserves that are closed to the public.

Information limits of green tourism

For ecotourism to be a solution, or at least for it to mitigate the conflicts just mentioned, a lot of goodwill and accurate information are required on the part of all parties involved – especially the conservation organizations, local communities and the commercial tourist operators. They should know what ecotourism is good for as well as what its virtues, drawbacks and possible limitations are.

Conservationists should be conscious of the fact that suppressing tourism is impossible and inexpedient: impossible, because the pressures and expectations are too high, and inexpedient, because an intelligent form of tourism imparts important human values and might be the best form of environmental education.

The authorities responsible for conservation should consider tourism when deciding on management plans for a given area. Rules aimed at sustainable use as well as accurate estimates of the tourist carrying capacity of a given region become crucial. This is not a simple

challenge, and requires environmental, economic and social studies on quite a large scale. It is not sufficient to estimate the environment’s tolerance threshold. On the one hand, by definition ecotourism should not devastate the natural or cultural environment’s while it should provide the satisfaction and benefits anticipated by all interested parties.

Only when all these basic limitations are specified and the purpose of conservation is clear can an operation policy be worked out. This should not be an administrative procedure but should rely on cooperation with whomever it may concern. Local communities and tourists ought to be properly and convincingly informed about necessary limitations. ♦