

**Forum:** ECOSOC

**Issue:** Developing and promoting ecotourism in the tropical rainforest regions

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## Introduction

One of the unspoken tragedies of the 21st century is the effect that travelling can have on biodiversity and indigenous populations. With the exponential rise in social media usage over the last 20 years, trends such as “backpacking across Asia” or “volunteering in Africa” have seen more and more attention. They are portrayed as fun and cool, an experience that many young people aspire to have. However, this neglects the fact that authenticity and ecotourism are increasingly becoming mutually exclusive. The upper class, who often travel to exotic locations to experience nature and other cultures, are so used to their standards of living that adapting to those of the poorer countries they are visiting is unfavourable. As such, entrepreneurs try to save the day by building and running 5 star resorts in the middle of a jungle in order to cater to the ecotourists’ desires. In orchestrating these elaborate schemes, however, we often fail to realise the damage being done to the environment that we are trying to promote as a unique experience. This research report will explore the main consequences brought on by ecotourism, as well as previous attempts at solving these issues, hopefully guiding delegates to potential solutions that can be debated among themselves this coming January.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Developing and Promoting

Although not quite a classic key term, for the purposes of this debate, it is crucial to define the meaning of the phrase “developing and promoting”. Ecotourism is an industry, as its definition will establish. In order to make this industry successful, its investors need to actively advertise it in the media. Developing & promoting ecotourism, therefore, refers to creating a public image of the ecotourist idea and developing infrastructure to cater to this romanticised concept, such as hotels, retreats, or even villa complexes.

### Ecotourism

Ecotourism refers to a sub-category of tourism that is dedicated to “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the wellbeing of local people and involves interpretation and education” (International Ecotourism Society, 2015).

### Tropical Rainforests

Tropical rainforests are often viewed as exotic locations characterised by “a hot, humid, and flourishing dense forest, usually found around the equator”, which hold roughly a quarter of the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and are the most significant land ecosystem in combating climate change. (Amazon Aid Foundation)

### **Indigenous Populations**

According to the United Nations, there are currently no official classification of an indigenous person; however, there is a system that has developed of criteria which are usually met by an indigenous person, including: self-identification as indigenous which is accepted by the collective, historical correlation with pre-colonial times, a connection with particular land territories and resources, unique social and political organisation systems, being a part of a societal minority, and a determination to preserve an ancestral way of life (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues).

### **Biodiversity**

Biodiversity refers to the variations of life that can be found in an environment: “the variety of animals, plants, fungi, and even microorganisms like bacteria that make up our natural world” (Hancock).

### **Flora and Fauna**

For the purposes of this research report, flora and fauna will be used synonymously with the word “environment”, referring to the plants and animals that are found within a specific ecosystem.

### **Ecosystem**

The word ecosystem derives from the study of ecology, referring to “a geographic area where plants, animals, and other organisms, as well as weather and landscapes, work together to form a bubble of life.” (Bouse).

### **Sustainability**

As per the United Nations, sustainability is a term used to describe the process of “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (“Sustainability | United Nations”).

### **Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)**

The process of a foreign investor, that is, outside of the country in question, is directly investing into the economy of a country through means such as the establishmentg of factories, where proprietorship of 10% or more of the voting power of a company is evidence of foreign direct investment (“Foreign direct investment (FDI)”).

### **Community-Based Tourism**

Similar to what the majority of the world knows as tourism, except all operations involved in the tourist process are directly operated by and affiliated with the local community of the tourist destination (“The European market potential for community-based tourism | CBI”).

### **Cultural Heritage**

According to UNESCO itself, cultural heritage is defined as “artefacts, monuments, a group of

buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance” (“Cultural heritage | UNESCO UIS”).

### **Ecosystem Services**

These services are composed of four categories: provisioning, regulating, cultural, and supporting services. Together, these represent the different benefits that ecosystems are able to provide to people (“Four Types of Ecosystem Services”).

### **Stakeholders**

Stakeholders is a term used to describe the entire group of individuals affected by a decision; who have a stake in an outcome.

### **Conservation**

This term can be used synonymously with preservation, and should be taken to mean “the protection, preservation, management, or restoration of natural environments and the ecological communities that inhabit them” (“What does conservation mean?”).

### **Tourism Infrastructure**

The range of infrastructure involved in cultivating and maintaining the tourist industry, that is, hotels, public attractions, restaurants, etc.

### **Carrying Capacity**

The number of individuals that a particular location is able to host – “carry” – without overexerting its finite resources.

### **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)**

A measure of the effect upon the environment a particular project will have.

### **Nature-Based Tourism**

Tourism that revolves around the interest to explore the natural attractions of a specific region.

### **Cultural Sensitivity**

As such a broad expression, cultural sensitivity is defined via 3 key aspects: first, one must be aware of the cultural differences between individuals and the challenges that can arise as a result of these. Second, due to these different cultures, no particular set of values or beliefs can be categorised as inherently bad or good. Lastly, a culturally sensitive individual must understand that other peoples’ cultures will differ from their own, and not alienate others as a result of this (New York City Department of Social Services).

## **Background Information**

The term “ecotourism” first appeared in dictionaries a little more than 40 years ago (Thompson). Since then, this industry has seen a rising boom – and in lieu of its name, ecotourism, such tourists explore tropical locations – such as, for example, tropical rainforests. However, with the rising popularity

of ecotourism, one must ensure that their actions are not performative and rather genuinely aim to be tourists in a healthy and sustainable manner, focusing on the three following issues:

### Addressing Sustainable Integration into Local Flora and Fauna

The predominant negative consequence of ecotourism in tropical rainforests is the destruction of local flora and fauna. As hinted at in the introduction of this report, most ecotourism is an export to Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs), which means that they have to cater to the tourism market. With this comes an increased level of business competitiveness – and firms can only compete by innovating. The downside to this innovation is that it is often at the expense of the local environment. This occurs as companies seek to distinguish themselves and attract tourists, leading to the implementation of ecotourism initiatives that may inadvertently contribute to habitat disruption, deforestation, or other forms of environmental degradation in the pursuit of increased competitiveness and economic gain. Holiday retreats are built to cater to the highest level of luxury, with extensive amenities and accommodations, which can only be built by destroying the habitats surrounding them (Folk). In 106 Latin American ecotourism enterprises, the industry is at risk of harming the local flora and fauna through exploitation of natural resources, deforestation, and pollution (Hillel). Forests are torn down to build hotels, and the increase in human activity in tropical locations can cause noise, air, and ground pollution simply through our everyday actions. Not to mention, ecofriendliness is rarely the highlight of ecotourism, and the travel procedure to such exotic locations is usually costly for the environment by itself. Furthermore, especially in tropical locations that are filled with exotic species, souvenirs of local animals or plants are sold which results in endangered species being hunted to garner more tourists, damaging the local environment (“Ecotourism - Global tourism - National 4 Geography Revision”).

The development of tourist facilities and pathways has the potential to fragment and degrade natural ecosystems, endangering the survival of native plant and animal species. This is one prominently detrimental effect of habitat disruption. For example, the construction of hiking trails or lodges may result in the loss of important nesting locations for threatened bird species or alter the migratory paths of specific wildlife. The rush of tourists may also bring diseases and invasive species, endangering the fragile natural balance even further. Demand for adventure tourist experiences like zip-lining and off-roading can lead to noise pollution and disruption, which can interfere with wildlife's ability to mate and feed. Additionally, the strain to accommodate an increasing number of visitors may lead to an excessive extraction of local resources, including wood and water, aggravating environmental degradation. Especially when individuals will need to travel between destinations through some means of transport, they will release an excess amount of carbon dioxide gas into the atmosphere. Moreover, these transport methods – boats in tropical rainforests – have been proven to damage local ecosystems with their noise pollution: specific species of fish, such as a type of salmon, have experienced a “decline in numbers” as a result (Valdez).

Protecting the local flora and fauna when developing ecotourism links directly to SDG Goal 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure, and SDG Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. The goals of these SDGs align with the theoretical idea of ecotourism as a whole, which is to travel while being conscious of the environment around oneself. SDG Goals 12 through 15, namely Responsible Consumption and Production, Climate Action, Life Below Water, and Life on Land are also directly influenced by the successful implementation of ecotourism on a global scale.

### Implementing Economic Support for Developing Nations

With all the downsides that ecotourism can bring, it's worth wondering why nations do not implement stricter regulations against this. The answer lies in the amount of profit that could be brought forth to Less Economically Developed Countries by ecotourism. In the Greater Caribbean, ecotourism was successfully used as a type of community development, where it accounted for 16.4% of GDP and 15.5% of total employment in 2007 (Garraway). Tourism itself is an export to the host nation: foreign individuals enter the economy and begin purchasing an increased number of goods and services, so local workers earn more money and the economy as a whole grows. Moreover, the phenomenon of outside companies entering a country and building new infrastructure – such as the resort itself, but also any activities catered towards tourists – is known as foreign direct investment (FDI). FDI is a major incentive for economic growth (Ventura), especially when broken down: resorts require to be built, which calls for hiring workers; once a hotel is built, several divisions of staff need to be hired to manage it: cleaners, receptionists, gardeners, and so on. Ergo, besides the influx of tourists brought by ecotourist retreats in tropical rainforests who will consume local goods, more workers being hired results in more money entering the economy. In the long run, this is beneficial to the local government, who earns the brunt of its revenue off of taxes – paid by peoples' salaries, earned from working at such resorts.

In line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN, ecotourism can help developing countries economically and alleviate some of the problems related to this sector. Governments can reduce their negative environmental effects and encourage sustainable behaviours by using the money earned from ecotourism to fund conservation and community development programmes. By funding regional education and training initiatives, communities can be given the tools they need to sustainably manage ecotourism and strike a balance between environmental preservation and economic gains. By encouraging employment possibilities, this strategy advances SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) by encouraging the preservation of terrestrial ecosystems. Promoting responsible tourism also supports sustainable practices that reduce resource depletion, which is in line with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). In the end, combining ecotourism with the SDGs provides a thorough framework for promoting economic development and preserving areas of tropical rainforests.

### Emphasising Protection of Workers & Locals

Unfortunately, it is not only the environment that suffers as a result of the establishment of tropical resorts. Oftentimes, workers are exploited by the industry because there is an abundance of people who desire work, and labour regulations in LEDCs are lax as a means of attracting the economic investment described above. Work days range up to 15 hours and pay disproportionately low amounts (Chan). However upsetting, worker exploitation is nothing new in the hospitality industry; a whole other group affected by ecotourism in tropical rainforests is indigenous populations. As previously established, the creation of resorts can have serious impacts on the local flora and fauna: land degradation and deforestation in particular. What people may fail to see is that many indigenous populations are also pushed off of their land in the construction of these retreats. In Brazil for example, home to the Amazon Rainforest, indigenous rights groups are still struggling to reclaim the ownership of lands they inhabited in the past, with courts tending to rule against them (“Brazil: Indigenous people celebrate land rights ruling”). With the influence that hotelier corporations bring to LEDCs, it is easy for them to obtain the plots of land they desire to build their hotels on, regardless of how damaging this may be to local populations. Overall, governments should be wary of the treatment international corporations impose on local populations.

## Major Countries and Organisations Involved

### Costa Rica

Costa Rica has made great efforts to promote its remarkable biodiversity. They have been very active in promoting ecotourism in their rainforest areas. They have many protected areas that promote ecotourism like the Manuel Antonio National Park and Corcovado National Park. They focus on sustainability through different certifications like the Certification for Sustainable Tourism who encourage things like eco-friendly tours and eco-lodges (“Ecotourism in Costa Rica: The Ultimate Eco Travel Guide”).

### Brazil

Brazil is home to the Amazon rainforest. They have programs and initiatives that are especially aimed at having sustainable tourism and helping to preserve some of the rainforest areas. They also have collaborative projects that involve the local communities that aim to create ecotourism opportunities to benefit and preserve the cultural heritage.

### Indonesia

Indonesia is known for its tropical rainforests in areas like Borneo and Sumatra. They have programs that are aimed at educating tourists and the local communities about things like the importance of sustainable tourism and conservation (Nirwandar).

### World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

This organisation works on a global scale to protect natural habitats and species, including the tropical rainforests. They collaborate with governments and local communities to promote sustainable tourism in these rainforest regions, to ensure the preservation of the rich biodiversity (“Our Work in

Action”).

### The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)

The International Ecotourism Society is one of the main advocates for sustainable tourism, they do this by providing training programs and workshops to help educate the tourism professionals in that sector on ecotourism. They also support research projects that focus on the impacts that ecotourism has on ecosystems and communities (“TIES Overview”).

### United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO)

The UNWTO is not exclusively focused on rainforest regions, however they promote sustainable practices in the tourism sector, which can include different initiatives to support ecotourism in rainforest regions (“ABOUT UNWTO”).

## Timeline of Events

Date (start - end)	Name	Description
November 1st, 1975	Foundation of the United Nations World Tourism Foundation (UNWTO)	The UNWTO is a UN governing body dedicated to promoting sustainability, equity, and responsibility within tourism (“ABOUT UNWTO”). As such, it should be kept in mind by all delegates when attempting to centralise responsibilities for monitoring ecotourism through means such as yearly reports, oversight committees, etc.
May, 1990	Foundation of The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)	This organisation is the first official non-profit dedicated to using ecotourism as a means of preserving local ecosystems and supporting the sustainable development of LEDCs (“TIES Overview”).
September 13th, 2007	Adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) by the General Assembly	This event represents the official recognition of indigenous peoples’ rights by all United Nations Member States, as stated in the UNDRIP.
Presented January 2017, Adopted by ECOSOC April 20th 2017, Adopted by UNGA April 27th 2017	United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests	A series of goals and associated targets divided by the United Nations to be met and maintained by 2030 in order to successfully support the forests around ourselves.
September 16th, 2019	Adoption of Resolution A/73/L.117, “International Labour Organization	The Assembly agreed upon full, productive employment and decent work being crucial to economic development, and vowed to foster

	Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work”	continuous, sustainable economic growth with fair work conditions for all.
3-14th June, 1992	Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	Orchestrated by the United Nations, this conferences aimed to place environmental sustainability at the forefront of the global mind. As part of the Agenda issues brought forth, Chapters 11 and 12 specifically mention ecotourism and sustainable tourism as a means of preservation (“United Nations Conference on Environment & Development”).
2002	International Year of Ecotourism	Designating 2002 as the official year of ecotourism back in 1993, the United Nations aimed to focus more resources and efforts to the development of ecotourism on a global scale in this year.
19-22nd May, 2002	Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism	As part of the UN’s projects in the International Year of Ecotourism, the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism serves as a series of recommendations provided to governments, businesses, non-governmental organisations, academic and research institutes, and more, on the implementation of sustainable tourism practices. (“QUÉBEC DECLARATION ON ECOTOURISM”)
August, 2002	Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism	The Declaration highlights the fundamentals of responsible tourism for all domains of it. The proclamation promotes behaviours that reduce adverse effects on the economy, society, and environment, such as socially conscious, economically advantageous, and environmentally sustainable tourism to local communities (Fabricius and Goodwin).
2017	International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development	As per the 70th United Nations General Assembly, 2017 was declared the year of sustainable tourism for development (“2017 International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development”).

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- International Labour Organization Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, 19 September 2019 (A/73/L.117)
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 13 September 2007 (A/61/L.67)
- United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests 2017–2030, 27 April 2017 (A/RES/71/285)
- Report of the Special Session of the UN Forum on Forests, 20 January 2017, (E/CN.18/SS/2017/2)



## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

### The International Ecotourism Society

The International Ecotourism Society, TIES for short, is the predominant stakeholder in promoting sustainable ecotourism on a global scale. They have organised several projects regarding the promotion of ecotourism, many of which are still ongoing. In El Salvador, they have collaborated with the Business Foundation for Social Action (FUNDEMAS) to construct a nation-wide sustainable tourism strategy. Prior to the war, TIES worked to analyse the potential of the ecotourism sector in Ukraine and devise a national plan. They have also collaborated with universities to develop educational programmes for ecotourism in Central Asia.

### Costa Rica's Certification for Sustainable Tourism Programme

Established by the Costa Rican Tourism Administration at the end of the 20th century, this accreditation, which has a validity of two years, is awarded upon tourism resorts meeting specific criteria regarding the “management and impact of the natural, cultural and social resources of the country” (“Costa Rica CST Standard is a GSTC-Recognized Standard | GSTC”). Such certifications provide incentives for foreign agencies to foster sustainable practices within the nations in which they are promoting their businesses, which is in line with ecotourist goals.

### New Zealand's Qualmark Certification System

A similar idea to the one described above, New Zealand implemented the Qualmark Certification, which is awarded by Qualmark, an independent corporation, based on the the extent of sustainability a tourist business has in the nation. This award has different levels, namely Bronze, Silver, and Gold, and a higher rating attracts more tourists – a mechanism that incentivises tourism companies in New Zealand to constantly strive for a higher degree of sustainability (“Sustainable Tourism Business Criteria”).

### The Global Sustainable Tourism Council

Becoming an officially registered 501-k non-profit organisation in the United States of America in 2009 (“GSTC History | GSTC”), the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) was founded as a response to the need for a regulatory body for sustainable tourism. This council is the work of a collaboration of UN bodies, and developed an extensive list of criteria based on four sub-topics of sustainability – those being managing for sustainability, social sustainability, cultural and community sustainability, and environmental sustainability – to serve as guidelines for all businesses working in the ecotourist sector to aspire to (“GSTC Mission and Impacts | GSTC”).

### Australia's Eco-Certification Programme

Similar to what has been implemented in New Zealand and Costa Rica, Australia's eco-certification programme aims to provide special accreditations to businesses in the tourism

sector who meet certain environmental and social sustainability goals. The use of such programmes in multiple countries should prove to delegates the importance of education and media campaigns, as well as how award-style systems can be an effective tool at perpetuating change.

## Possible Solutions

### Addressing Sustainable Integration into Local Flora and Fauna

Firstly, delegates should look towards the creation and implementation of policies that ensure the ecotourist locations operate sustainably. These can include guidelines for waste disposal or wildlife interactions, the monitoring of which can be assigned to bodies such as the UNWTO or governments themselves, among others. Secondly, education programmes are a crucial way of ensuring ecotourism stays ecofriendly. These should extend beyond LEDCs, as it is usually the More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs) that import such types of tourism. Cultivating a global understanding of the importance of preserving wildlife and local environment is crucial to ensuring ecotourism is used as a means of conservation, rather than destruction.

Moreover, delegates should focus on mitigating rather than adapting to the negative consequences of ecotourism, which includes measures such as promoting the implementation of green technology and advanced infrastructure planning, as to foresee any potential challenges. As a whole, collaboration with external organisations, such as Non-Governmental Organisations or bodies such as the United Nations, should be encouraged as to alleviate the burden on LEDCs regarding managing ecotourism, and gain an outside perspective into how sustainable they are genuinely being.

### Implementing Economic Support for Developing Nations

Economically speaking, ecotourism is a fantastic way of raising government revenue. However, to ensure that workers are not being taken advantage of by ecotourist resorts, delegates should look at means of promoting alternate sources of employment, such as promoting locally produced goods to tourists. Additionally, delegates can focus on finding ways to help LEDCs gain more control over ecotourism in their respective countries, whether that be promoting collaboration with the foreign firms operating within their borders, or diversifying LEDCs' streams of income. Grants and loans, as well as bodies that can help with economic organisation of certain markets, are always helpful.

Alternate solutions can look at promoting small and medium sized enterprises alongside ecotourism, selling them as a joint idea. Running media campaigns to highlight unique cultural experiences is another means of generating profit for the government. Lastly, conservation monitoring bodies or conservation fees can be implemented to ensure governments are the beneficiaries of some economic benefits enjoyed by foreign firms who bring in ecotourism.

### Emphasising Protection of Workers & Locals

For this sub-topic, collaboration with international organisations such as the International Labour

Organisation is highly encouraged. The implementation of increased worker labour protections at a UN-level would also be helpful, which delegates can do through specific clauses in resolutions. Resources can also be dedicated to poverty analysis, as these statistics can help inform Member States of how they should allocate their economic resources to combat such issues. Ensuring that indigenous nations are wholly involved in the conservation and preservation efforts of ecotourism, which usually fall under indigenous groups' goals, is another way of ensuring they are not taken advantage of. Moreover, placing the protection of indigenous lands and cultural heritage at the forefront of this discussion would help protect local groups.

In terms of worker protections, these should look at a series of different areas: health & safety, ethics, and worker rights awareness. Delegates can see if they are able to generalise ethical and health standards across the United Nations, as well as look into means of ensuring all workers are aware of their rights in the workplace.

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