

Ecotourism can play vital role in maintaining healthy forests

Rural communities can maximise the benefits of sustainable ecotourism

28 September, 2011, Rome The continuing boom in ecotourism has the potential to save endangered forests, depending on how effectively tourism expansion is managed, an international partnership for forest management and conservation said today.

The Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF), comprising 14 international organizations and secretariats, including FAO, called attention to opportunities arising from ecotourism in the forest sector as the world celebrated World Tourism Day on 27 September and continues to celebrate the International Year of Forests.

Ecotourism and livelihoods in developing countries

Tourism has demonstrated resiliency in the face of the global economic downturn. Globally, the tourism industry generated more than \$1 trillion in 2010, according to the World Tourism Organization (WTO). And the share of tourism in developing countries is steadily rising, up from 31% in 1990 to 47% in 2010.

“Sustainable tourism has proven one of the most effective ways of providing economic and employment opportunities for local communities while protecting the world’s natural resources,” said Taleb Rifai, WTO’s Secretary-General.

Ecotourism, characterized by responsible travel to natural areas that promotes conservation of the environment, is one of the fastest growing segments of tourism worldwide, and is growing at a pace of more than 20 percent annually – two to three times faster than the tourism industry overall. Ecotourism is often known for attracting tourists to fragile environments that are host to endangered species and high biodiversity forest ecosystems.

“For many people, there is an attitude of ‘we had better see it while it is still there to see’ when it comes to visiting threatened forests or endangered wildlife,” said Patrick Durst, a senior forestry official with the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), working in Asia.

Local benefits

Ecotourism can provide local communities with the motivation to maintain and protect forests and wildlife.

“Ecotourism has a far greater potential for contributing to income and livelihoods in poor rural communities than what is realized,” noted FAO’s Edgar Kaeslin, a forestry officer working on wildlife and protected area management at FAO. “It is crucial that local people are fully involved in ecotourism activities and receive sufficient benefits from their services.”

The benefits of ecotourism flowing to local businesses are usually higher than those from mass tourism. Standard all-inclusive package tours typically deliver just 20 percent of revenue to local companies, while the rest is captured by airlines, hotels and large tour companies. In contrast, locally-based ecotourism operations that hire local people and work in nearby areas can return as much as 95% of earnings into the local economy.

Excessive ecotourism poses dangers

However, large numbers of tourist at popular sites can quickly overload ecosystems and damage fragile natural resources, sometimes permanently.

Also, there is a risk that powerful players will dominate and squeeze out smaller local operators. In some cases, ill designed "ecotourism" has wittingly or unwittingly introduced negative influences to local people, disrupted local economies and tarnished unique indigenous cultures. In some instances, indigenous peoples have even been displaced or dispossessed of traditional access to natural areas.

Ecotourism as sustainable forest management

The best ecotourism programmes strive to regulate against such abuses and guide it toward maximizing local benefits. Training for local people is crucial to ensure they can compete successfully for desirable ecotourism jobs.

One prominent example is the ecotourist trade involving critically endangered Mountain gorillas in Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Tourism in these countries generates significant incentives for governments and local communities to conserve their rich environment instead of choosing unsustainable pathways to development, said Doug Cress, coordinator of the UNEP led Great Apes Survival Partnership (GRASP).

"Mountain gorillas are the only species of great ape that are actually rising in numbers," Cress said. "There is no question that is a direct result of the careful commitment to responsible tourism in East Africa that respects the gorillas and their habitat."

In recent years FAO has provided technical assistance to a number of countries, including Egypt, Hungary, Laos, the Philippines and Tunisia, to develop ecotourism based on sustainable forest use. With support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Organization recently began implementing an US\$18 million programme in collaboration with Pacific islands countries (Fiji, Niue, Samoa and Vanuatu) aimed at developing ecotourism as a major component of sustainable forest management.