

Oslo Statement on Ecotourism



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Dear Friends and Colleagues,

On behalf of the staff and Board of The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), I am pleased to present the Oslo Statement on Ecotourism. Reflecting the outcomes of the Global Ecotourism Conference 2007 (GEC07), which was held in Oslo, Norway, 14-16 May, this Statement is a tool for ecotourism stakeholders both in the public and private sectors to assess the current state of the global ecotourism community, to evaluate the challenges facing ecotourism today, and to establish goals and benchmarks for the coming years.

GEC07 marked an important step forward in the global ecotourism community's efforts to strengthen its voice, and to put sustainability on the agenda of all sectors of the tourism industry. This Statement serves both as a summary of the discussions that took place during GEC07 and a practical tool for those seeking to improve their sustainability practices and those interested in learning more about ecotourism and its challenges.

I encourage you to use the recommendations put forth in this Statement to enhance your operations and to raise awareness of key issues in ecotourism. Please forward the Statement widely to your friends and colleagues, local government representatives and ecotourism businesses, to spread the word about ecotourism's roles in safeguarding our natural and cultural heritage and influencing the travel industry to become more sustainable.

The Oslo Statement on Ecotourism comprises of the following sections:

- **Background** – The United Nations declared the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE) in 2002, and the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism was issued as a concrete outcome of IYE. GEC07 marked 5 years since IYE.
- **Ecotourism: Current Status and Challenges** – The global ecotourism community has experienced significant growth since 2002, and is continuously evolving. In light of the various changes in the tourism industry in recent years, ecotourism today faces many new opportunities and challenges.
- **Recommendations from GEC07** – Based on the results of the workshops and meetings during the conference, TIES has developed sets of recommendations around four key areas (local sustainable development, conservation, education and communication, and critical issues in ecotourism).

As the world's oldest and largest ecotourism organization, TIES is committed to promoting the principles of ecotourism and responsible practices in travel and tourism. With the goal of uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel, TIES serves its members in over 90 countries, and strives to act as the global source of knowledge and advocacy in ecotourism.

Thank you for taking the time to read the Oslo Statement on Ecotourism, and I hope that you will help transform the recommendations of the Statement into real action that will lead to positive changes.



David Sollitt

Executive Director, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)

Background

In 2002, the United Nations declared the International Year of Ecotourism, whose peak event was the World Ecotourism Summit, held in Quebec, Canada in May of that year.

The *Global Ecotourism Conference 2007 (GEC07)*, held in Oslo, Norway, from 14-16 May, marked the fifth anniversary of the Quebec Summit. Its objectives were to assess the achievements and challenges in the field of ecotourism since 2002, to bring together national and regional ecotourism associations and ecotourism professionals and practitioners from around the world, and to build commitment to policies and actions to strengthen the unique contribution of ecotourism to conservation and sustainable development.

Organized by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), Ecotourism Norway, and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the conference was attended by some 450 delegates from over 70 countries. To summarize the results of *GEC07* and to put forward recommendations, TIES has developed this Statement with the aim of outlining the core content presented at the *GEC07* and to further articulate the global ecotourism community's commitment to improving sustainable practices.

In 2002, the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism spelt out the potential and challenges of ecotourism in contributing to sustainable development, and made recommendations to governments, the private sector, NGOs, international agencies and local and Indigenous communities. These recommendations remain valid today and this Statement reaffirms the Quebec Declaration.

Ecotourism: Current Status and Challenges

Since 2002:

- Many of the world's natural areas remain under threat; there has been a further loss of biodiversity and resources for conservation remain inadequate.
- World tourism arrivals have grown by 23% and are forecast to double by 2020.
- Climate change has increasingly become a major threat affecting the very resources on which ecotourism depends – natural areas and local and Indigenous communities around the world. This has helped raise awareness of the contribution of current and future tourism operations and services to global climate change.
- The role of tourism in supporting sustainable development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, notably the alleviation of poverty, has become recognized as a critical industry responsibility.
- Ecotourism has articulated the core principles of sustainability in the travel and tourism industry and therefore plays a leading role within the industry as a whole.
- TIES has made connections with members in over 90 countries and affiliations with over 40 national and regional ecotourism associations, and continues to act as a global source of knowledge and advocacy uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel.

In light of these pressures and opportunities, the World Tourism Organization, UNEP and other international agencies have been pursuing policies to make all tourism more sustainable. TIES fully endorses this approach, and believes that ecotourism must continue to be a leader and innovator in

this quest, setting an example for the whole industry. To do so is inherent in the definition of ecotourism, as a form of tourism that entails *responsible travel to natural areas and which conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people*.ⁱ

Ecotourism has achieved a great deal in the last five years, yet many challenges remain:

- Interest in visiting natural areas, experiencing authentic local living, and observing wildlife has continued to grow, bringing opportunities but also pressures, and the increasing need for best practice management.
- The term ecotourism is more widely recognized and used, but it is also abused, as it is not sufficiently anchored to the definition. The ecotourism community, therefore, continues to face significant challenges in awareness building and education and actively working against green-washing within the tourism industry.
- More governments have developed ecotourism strategies, but not all have been well integrated into mainstream tourism and environmental policies, or supported by action.
- Increasing numbers of projects around the world have striven to establish ecotourism enterprises as a means of enhancing sustainable livelihoods and contributing to conservation, yet many remain economically fragile and lack adequate access to markets.
- Stronger leadership and strategies are needed in order to substantially decrease ecotourism's carbon footprint generated from multiple sources including facility operations and transport-related greenhouse gas emissions. The importance of carbon management strategies needs to be integrated into operational guidelines for ecotourism, including TIES Code of Conduct.ⁱⁱ
- Many countries now have national and regional ecotourism associations. Their role in providing links between governments, NGOs, businesses and citizens and strengthening ecotourism globally must be recognized, and more support needs to be provided for their work.
- The ecotourism community is expected to be more inclusive of innovative and socially equitable approaches. This innovative approach must include the active mobilization of Indigenous communities, women, and local professionals and designers as recognized and equal business and sustainable development leaders.
- As a leading international organization serving as a global network of industry practitioners, institutions and individuals, TIES must continue to acquire and disseminate practical and innovative tools.

Recommendations from GEC07

In recognition of these global and sector-specific challenges and reflecting the four themesⁱⁱⁱ of GEC07, international agencies, governments, and all those engaged in the planning and delivery of ecotourism are called upon to:

1. Recognize the valuable role that ecotourism plays in local sustainable development

Ecotourism, often occurring in regional, rural and remote areas where alternative sources of livelihood are scarce and levels of poverty are frequently high, can provide a much needed addition to local income from an activity that values and supports conservation in both developed and emerging economies. Attention must be paid to sound business practices and market access if it is to be economically sustainable. Local and Indigenous communities should not only be involved in the planning and benefits of ecotourism products, but must also be recognized and supported as equal stakeholders and business leaders in the continued development of sustainable enterprises.

Actions should include:

- To develop strategies to engage and empower local and Indigenous communities in planning, decision making and enterprise ownership for the sustainable management of tourism through stronger cross-sectoral partnerships.
- To ensure that more benefits are made available to poor people, through employment policies, the local supply chain, assistance with enterprise formation, and support for local services and infrastructure.
- To stimulate sustainable farming and livestock practices that support mutual economic advantage by encouraging creative links between ecotourism and other forms of innovative land use, such as sustainable agriculture and agroforestry.
- To encourage innovative product development and fair trade through strengthening links with the arts, handicrafts, and local and Indigenous heritage, and integrate the principles of fair trade^{iv} into the working definition of ecotourism and operational guidelines.
- To promote sustainable partnerships between private and public sectors to address the role of tourism as a development tool, and the need for international organizations, governments and development agencies to support natural and cultural heritage sites so that they can meet the challenge from an increasing growth in tourism worldwide.

2. Maximize the potential of well managed ecotourism as a key economic force for the conservation of tangible and intangible natural and cultural heritage

Ecotourism depends on fine landscapes, abundant wildlife and richly diverse culture. Therefore, ecotourism development and the revenues it can bring should be seen as a strong ally and tool for the respect and conservation of natural and cultural heritage. Indeed, the definition of ecotourism requires that positive conservation benefits should result from it, and that all ecotourism activity should be well designed and managed to minimize any adverse impacts on the environment and local and Indigenous communities while maximizing all potential benefits.

Actions should include:

- To strengthen the knowledge, skills and resources of protected area authorities in developing and managing ecotourism, in order to help deliver benefits to local and Indigenous communities, raise visitors' awareness of conservation issues, and encourage sustainable financial contribution to conservation.
- To strengthen research and monitoring programs for coastal areas and oceans, recognizing their special needs owing to their sensitive habitats, scarce resources, popularity for tourism, and the changing pressures on their communities.
- To promote innovative approaches and mechanisms of using ecotourism to finance conservation initiatives and research projects monitoring the impacts on wildlife, and to support socially, culturally and environmentally sustainable development of destinations.
- To engage local communities and utilize local design forms and materials to build ecotourism facilities in total harmony with their surroundings both aesthetically and culturally, leaving minimal footprints, and combining the forces of creativity and new environmental technology with sustainable economic development strategies.
- To increase efforts to implement the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Development^v globally, by addressing sensitively the direct interaction between visitors, local inhabitants and wildlife, and by seeking a net gain to conservation.

3. Support the viability and performance of ecotourism enterprises and activities through effective marketing, education and training

The business of ecotourism can be as fragile and sensitive as the environments in which it occurs. Owing to its nature, many ecotourism products are provided by micro or small enterprises, and many of the people involved in ecotourism businesses are not necessarily experienced in finance or knowledgeable about markets and handling visitors. People in the sector should be encouraged and supported to work together in capacity building.

Actions should include:

- To increase access to practical and high quality training and education in ecotourism, whether delivered locally or remotely, to provide individuals and businesses with fair opportunities to enhance key business skills and sustainable business management performance.
- To make up-to-date information and research available about ecotourism markets, and strengthen access to them through the most effective channels, including websites, online forums and groups, mailing lists, web media, and in more remote areas, radio broadcasting.
- To establish sound environmental and cultural interpretation as a key component of high quality, authentic ecotourism by increasing innovation and funding for education centers and training programs, whose effectiveness should be assessed based on visitor numbers and desired experience.
- To cooperate with the media and utilize its role as an effective educational tool for promoting accurate and informative reporting of ecotourism, avoiding green-washing, raising the profile of the sector, and encouraging adherence to the principles of ecotourism.
- To strengthen local, national and regional ecotourism associations, and their links to TIES, in order to create an even stronger network that will serve as the nucleus of the global ecotourism community.

4. Address some of the critical issues facing ecotourism in strengthening its sustainability

The definition of ecotourism makes a high claim for its positive impact on society and the environment. It is important that these principles are properly implemented and continue to show the way for others. Various issues need to be addressed, reflecting current trends and external circumstances, including new opportunities to strengthen the benefits of ecotourism and new challenges to meet.

Actions should include:

- To promote adherence to recognized, linked and audited certification schemes and industry guidelines that help enhance environmental management, assist in minimal impact operations, protect cultural sites and intangible culture, and provide for land management strategies.
- To harness new trends towards corporate social and environmental responsibility by making business measurable according to approved standards that support and empower local and Indigenous communities, increase conservation efforts, and minimize ecological footprints.
- To actively address and combat tourism's impact on climate change by encouraging adapted travel patterns (e.g. increase length of stay per trip), promoting more energy-efficient, alternative or non-motorized transport options, utilizing reduced and zero-emission operation technologies, and increasing participation in reliable high-quality carbon offsetting schemes.

- To promote adherence to sustainability principles in other parts of the tourism industry by enhancing ecotourism's role in changing the attitudes and practices of the mainstream tourism sector, and encouraging synergetic efforts to positively influence tourism stakeholders.
- To encourage the ecotourism industry to operate with integrity to protect and promote tangible and intangible cultural heritage and living cultures, and to preserve and celebrate the multitude of unique cultural, social, religious and spiritual elements of local and Indigenous communities around the world.

Through disseminating information and providing resources on ecotourism principles and practices, and highlighting current trends in ecotourism and sustainable travel, TIES will continue to educate and positively influence tourists, tourism professionals and the industry at large. TIES is committed to promoting and assisting new and existing national and regional ecotourism associations and to furthering the development of worldwide ecotourism networks that will channel resources to where most needed.

As part of our efforts to strengthen the global ecotourism community, TIES will release a public statement that outlines our new commitment to incorporating the key issues addressed at *GEC07* into our organizational structure and strategies, and develop an Ecotourism Handbook based on the Oslo Statement on Ecotourism.

ⁱ TIES' definition of ecotourism (Adopted in 1990; www.ecotourism.org)

ⁱⁱ TIES members are required to sign the following Code of Conduct – “We agree that ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people, and further agree that we will undertake to adhere to the principles of ecotourism as outlined below:

- Minimize impact
- Build an environmental and cultural awareness and respect
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts
- Provide direct benefits for conservation
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people
- Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate”

TIES is in the process of renewing this Code of Conduct to include principles outlining commitment to reducing carbon footprint.

ⁱⁱⁱ The workshops at *GEC07* were organized under the following four main themes:

- Theme I: Ecotourism and Local Sustainable Development
- Theme II: Ecotourism and Nature Conservation
- Theme III: Communication, Education and Global Branding for Ecotourism
- Theme IV: Critical Issues and Current Trends in Ecotourism.

^{iv} According to IFAT, the International Fair Trade Association (www.ifat.org), Fair Trade is “a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade,” and its core principles include: fair economic opportunities, transparency and accountability, capacity building, gender equity, a safe and healthy working environment, labor rights, and responsible use of natural resources.

^v International guidelines for activities related to sustainable tourism development in vulnerable terrestrial, marine and coastal ecosystems and habitats of major importance for biological diversity and protected areas, including fragile riparian and mountain ecosystems (Adopted in 2004; www.cbd.int/programmes/socio-eco/tourism/guidelines.asp).



The International Ecotourism Society

*Uniting Conservation, Communities
and Sustainable Travel*