

**Promoting Sustainable Tourism in North America's Natural  
Areas: The Steps Forward**

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# Promoting Sustainable Tourism in North America's Natural Areas: The Steps Forward

## Executive Summary

This paper describes the Commission for Environmental Cooperation's (CEC) Sustainable Tourism in Natural Areas project. The initiatives described here are based on the experience derived from previous phases of the project. The next steps ensure a concrete, practical approach by focusing on promoting sustainable tourism in North America's natural areas, and protected areas in particular, in regions of high ecological significance as identified by the CEC's Strategic Plan for the Conservation of Biodiversity.

### *Context, definitions and generic issues*

Tourism is currently the world's largest industry and one of its fastest growing. In the Americas, the regional share of total world tourism receipts in 1993 represented 30 percent of the world market. Thus, tourism is a highly valued sector of global and regional economies and one that is actively promoted by all three North American countries. There is a great deal of evidence, however, that many forms of traditional touristic development cause varying degrees of harm to the environment as well as to local populations, especially in areas of natural beauty and in small communities of cultural significance.

Nature travel is the fastest growing sector of the tourism business, with estimates of its growth varying between 10 and 30 percent [per year]. North America is a region of immense natural and cultural wealth and beauty, containing a rich diversity of ecotourism attractions. The increasing numbers of people visiting these regions can lead to their deterioration. The degradation and loss of diversity in these areas will eliminate the very attractions that draw travelers and provide revenue to the industry.

The responsible development and proper management of sustainable tourism in natural areas will benefit the economies of all three nations and has the potential to provide important financial resources to some of North America's poorest regions. The CEC recognizes that it has a role in supporting regional cooperation in the promotion of sustainable forms of tourism in North America.

A serious lack of robust data about the market characteristics of the industry and the lack of consensus or consistency in definitions of terminology hinder concerted efforts to promote sustainable tourism, however. There is no agreed-upon definition, set of criteria, list of indicators, or single recognized seal or certification system for sustainable tourism

in North America. The CEC recognizes that it would be more useful to define the parameters of sustainable tourism and to set out principles to guide sustainable practices in the tourism sector than to seek an agreed-upon definition of the term.

Recognizing the need for a common North American understanding of the guiding principles of sustainable tourism, the CEC will assume the role of exploring common, cooperative or harmonized approaches to sustainable tourism certification in North America. It will begin by producing a compendium of criteria for sustainable tourism in North America, highlighting the common elements of different criteria sets. The project will also assemble examples of 'best practices' that put principles and criteria of sustainable tourism into action.

#### *Concrete implementation phase*

Various management tools exist and have been tried out to implement and monitor sustainable tourism development in natural areas. Among the best practices for sustainable tourism development are intersectoral collaboration and public participation, environmental impact assessments, land use planning and zoning, and indicators.

There is a need to consider how tourism affects all the stakeholders in the industry, public and private, and so to involve their participation in the development, management and assessment of sustainable tourism initiatives. The CEC recognizes the importance of including indigenous communities in the process and that often their intimate knowledge of local ecosystems can provide valuable lessons in best practices.

The CEC's Sustainable Tourism in Natural Areas project will undertake two consecutive pilot projects. The regions in which they will take place will be identified in the CEC's Strategic Plan for the Conservation of Biodiversity and may include protected areas and non-protected areas. In collaboration with interest groups such as indigenous peoples, NGOs, government and academia, the CEC's Strategic Directions for the Conservation of Biodiversity project will identify priority geographical areas or regions for conservation and subsequent Regional Action Plans will be developed. The Sustainable Tourism in Natural Areas project will implement its actions in two of these selected areas, focusing on one ecoregion at a time. It will work in cooperation with the other CEC projects whose actions may focus on the same region (projects related to ecosystem monitoring, green goods and services, and trade in wildlife species). Capacity and consensus building and public participation will be enhanced through such collaboration.

The pilot projects will create a framework in which to explore the use of the management tools outlined above. The framework will facilitate the assessment of the environmental impacts of tourism and the identification of environmental assessment needs for sustainable tourism, including methods to link assessments with carrying capacities of the targeted areas based on existing and future tourism demand and types of tourism activity. It will also help in the determination of the institutional capacities in the regions, identifying various stakeholders with which to collaborate in undertaking 'on-the-ground' analysis.

## I. Introduction

This paper describes the CEC's Sustainable Tourism in Natural Areas project, which will explore ways to promote the 'greening' of tourist services in natural areas in North America. It is part of a suite of documents that outline key issues and opportunities in the development of sustainable tourism in North America. The project was designed to take place in three phases between 1998 and 2002.

The first phase, begun in 1998 and completed at the end of 1999, consisted of a scoping exercise comprised of two main activities. The first was the preparation of a background paper that outlined the state of sustainable tourism in North America and underscored the major issues. *The Development of Sustainable Tourism in Natural Areas in North America: Background, Issues and Opportunities* (CEC 1999a) was prepared in large part as a discussion paper for the participants of a multistakeholder workshop held 27–28 May 1999 in Playa del Carmen, Quintana Roo, México. It was translated into French and Spanish and is posted on the CEC's web page (<http://www.cec.org>). It is hereafter to referred to as the discussion paper.

The workshop "A Dialogue on Sustainable Tourism in Natural Areas in North America" comprised the second activity in the scoping phase of the project. It was chaired by Geoffrey Wall, president of the International Academy for the Study of Tourism, and the invited speakers and participants represented government, NGOs, and academia. Approximately 80 key stakeholders from the three countries attended the workshop, which was designed to encourage discussion among a diverse group on some of the issues of importance to the sustainable development of tourism in North America's natural areas. It also helped to lay the groundwork for future work by the CEC's sustainable tourism project and provides information for other collaborative efforts dedicated to developing a synergistic relationship between tourism and environmental conservation. An English version of the meeting's proceedings, including an executive summary, was prepared by the CEC as a working paper and sent to all those who participated in the meeting (CEC 1999b).

The May 1999 workshop highlighted opportunities that exist to foster or modify tourism activities in natural areas in North America so that they contribute to conservation and promote sustainability. The workshop identified numerous gaps in the state of knowledge about tourism and a matching list of potential roles for the CEC in developing sustainable tourism in North America's natural areas.

This present paper, the first initiative in Phase II, highlights some of the key issues raised at the workshop and in other initiatives in this important field, and links possible approaches to promoting sustainable tourism in North America with the CEC's focus on biodiversity conservation. The project's actions as outlined in this summary report ensure a concrete, practical approach by focusing on natural areas, and protected areas in particular, in regions of high ecological significance in North America identified by the CEC's Strategic Plan for the Conservation of Biodiversity. The work plan also reflects

the CEC's wish to build on the considerable work already underway in the area of sustainable tourism and to avoid the duplication of effort. This report is intended for wide distribution to parties with interests in the state of knowledge about sustainable tourism in natural areas in North America and in the best next steps and priorities for its future development. It will be translated into Spanish and French and posted on the CEC's web page in June 2000.

## II. Context: Growth of the Tourism and Nature Tourism Industries

Tourism is currently the world's largest industry and one of its fastest growing. From 1988 to 1997, the number of international arrivals worldwide increased by five percent annually, reaching over 500 million in 1993 (CEC 1999a). Between 1970 and 1990, the tourism and travel industry grew by 260 percent. Future growth is projected to be between 2 and 4.5 percent per year (Wearing and Neil 1999). Consequently, the global travel and tourism economy is booming. It accounted for some US\$3.5 trillion of GDP or 11.7 percent of world GDP in 1999. The industry<sup>1</sup> generated almost 200 million jobs worldwide or 8 percent of total employment in 1999 and is expected to create 5.5 million new jobs per year until 2010 (WTTC 2000).

In the Americas, tourism's regional share of total world receipts in 1993 represented 30 percent of the world market (CEC 1999a). Travel and tourism in North America represented 11.8 percent of total GDP, 11.9 percent of total employment and 9.8 percent of total capital investments in 1999 (Table 1). In Mexico, tourism is the second most important generator of foreign currency, with visitor spending exceeding that of residents, and capital investment in travel and tourism expected to continue growing at an annual rate of 13.8 percent (Chalé Góngora 1999; WTTC 2000). Travel and tourism in the United States produces more than three times the revenues of those of the next-largest producer (Japan), and in Canada, the industry represents a higher percentage of total GDP than it does in the United States or as a world average (WTTC 2000).

**Table 1. The Global Travel and Tourism Economy**

1999 Estimates	Gross Domestic Product			Employment			Capital Investment		
	US\$ Bil.	% of Total	Growth*	Mn Jobs	% of Total	Growth*	US\$ Bil.	% of Total	Growth*
North America	1,170.8	11.8	2.5	21.2	11.9	1.4	188.5	9.8	3.3
Canada	84.7	13.6	3.2	2.2	14.9	2.0	13.8	11.2	5.0
Mexico	19.0	4.5	4.3	1.6	5.3	2.0	7.1	7.2	13.8
United States of America	1,067.1	12.1	2.4	17.5	13.2	1.3	167.6	9.8	2.5

\*1999–2010 Annualized Real Growth Adjusted for Inflation (%)

Source : WTTC 2000

<sup>1</sup> About one third of the jobs are directly related to the tourism industry, while the remainder are from the flow-through effect in other sectors such as retail and construction (WTTC 2000).

These reasons make tourism a highly valued sector of global and regional economies. Tourism is actively promoted by all three North American countries and features especially prominently in Mexico's development strategies (Wearing and Neil 1999). With tourism expected to at least double in the next decade, the opportunities as well as the potential environmental impacts it is likely to create need to be systematically addressed. There is a great deal of evidence that many forms of traditional tourism development cause varying degrees of harm to the environment. Four types of damage can be distinguished:

- restructuring and elimination of land and water resources, such as dredging and filling wetlands;
- waste and pollution generation, such as increases in sewage and solid waste, which when untreated or insufficiently treated can pollute the air, soil, coastal waters, and surface and groundwater supplies;
- direct impacts on biological resources (wildlife and habitats) from traffic and infrastructure: for example, impacts on fragile surfaces such as from walking on coral reefs or use of off-road vehicles in deserts; and
- seasonal increases in population density intensify the above three types of problems and increase the burden on existing local infrastructure systems and practices (CEC 1999a; Benítez 1999).

Uncontrolled traditional, conventional or mass tourism development in areas of natural beauty and in small communities of cultural significance is particularly damaging to the environment and to local populations. Today, there is increased diversification of tourism, with a growing interest in traveling to natural settings and less disturbed areas, in more active holiday experiences such as adventure tourism, and in exotic cultures and locations (CEC 1999a). At the same time, travelers interested in nature tourism tend to be more attuned to the need to reduce their environmental impact in natural destinations. Nature travel is the fastest growing sector of the tourism business, with estimates of its growth varying between 10 and 30 percent [per year] (Wearing and Neil 1999). One study estimated that between 40 and 60 percent of international visitors travel to enjoy and appreciate nature (CEC 1999a). Another calculates that nature-based tourism accounts for seven percent of all global tourism (Eagles 1999) and yet another that it accounted for US \$260 billion in revenues in 1995 (McNeely 1999).

North America is a region of immense natural wealth and beauty containing a rich diversity of ecotourism attractions (Ceballos Lascuarain 1999). Canada, Mexico and the United States also share many natural features that attract visitors, including the ecosystems straddling their borders, major geological formations, like the mountain chain stretching from the Canadian Rockies to the Mexican Sierra Madre, and biota, such as migratory whales, birds, and monarch butterflies. The three countries all rely, to varying degrees, on their natural and cultural assets—their mountains, coasts, traditional communities and historic monuments—to attract visitors and generate tourist dollars, and local communities and national governments all stand to benefit from increases in global tourism and nature tourism in particular.

It has been noted that “the increasing interest in nature and adventure tourism is channeling greater numbers of visitors beyond the beach resorts to hitherto undervisited national forests in the Rockies, the rainforests of Yucatan, and the wilderness of the high Arctic” (McNeely 1999, 80). Consequently, there is increasing evidence of over-use and the long-term unsustainability of tourism in some tourist destinations in natural areas throughout the region. Examples in all three North American countries are not hard to find: A report on Canada’s 10 most endangered national parks reveals that Prince Edward Island and Point Pelee national parks, among others, are being ‘loved to death’ due to the high number of visitors (CNF 1999). This conclusion was confirmed in a report by a federal panel in March 2000 (Parks Canada Agency 2000). In Mexico, the development of the Cancun tourist resort complex has caused long-term harm to natural habitats (CEC 1999a), and in the United States, a steady increase in demand for forest recreation in the San Bernadino National Forest, which now receives more visitors than either Yellowstone or Yosemite national parks, has led to erosion, animal deaths and noise pollution from off-road vehicle use (CEC 1999a; Mehta 2000).

The degradation and loss of diversity in areas of natural and cultural significance will ultimately result in the destruction of the assets upon which the nature-based industry depends for its revenues. The tourism industry, and most evidently, nature-based tourism, cannot exist without a healthy environment (CEC 1999a; Hawkins 1999). The three countries share common challenges of dealing with the negative impact of tourism in popular ‘hot spots,’ and development in remote, rural or aboriginal communities that may be ‘off the beaten track.’ The responsible development and proper management of sustainable tourism in natural areas, however, will benefit the economies of all three nations and has the potential to provide important financial resources to some of North America’s poorest regions. Economic assessment of the successful sustainable management of nature tourism has shown that tourism and recreation can often generate more revenue than alternative uses, such as logging. For example, the 9,000 jobs associated with tourism in the Southern Appalachian national forests were found to be five times the number of jobs associated with timber cut in those forests. And the gross economic benefit of nature tourism equaled more than 10 times the gross annual benefits from the extraction of timber (McNeely 1999).

### **Data needs**

As noted above, statistics show that nature-based tourism is expanding rapidly. But there is a serious lack of robust data about the market characteristics of the industry. No definitive studies exist that disentangle the specific demand for ecotourism from conventional tourism in North America. Thus, there is a critical need for more information on tourism in general, and on the different ‘branches’ of the industry, such as ecotourism and nature tourism in particular. Without a system that efficiently collects, shares and disseminates information on the tourism industry, the task of planning projects aimed at the conservation of nature will be more difficult. A system is also needed that records revenues from the different streams of tourism and that can gauge the demand for sustainable tourism activities.



Parks and protected areas constitute a substantial percentage of remaining ‘natural’ regions in North America and so can provide substitute data for numbers of nature-based tourists (Eagles 1999). But there is a pressing need to improve the collection of data related to the use of parks and protected areas (Ceballos Lascurain 1999; Eagles 1999; Nitze 1999). In addition, the level of economic impact of nature-based tourism is very poorly documented (Dixon 1999; Eagles 1999). One of the problems is that the three countries do not separate nature tourism from conventional tourism in their national accounts (CEC 1999a). In addition, effective tools to communicate information are also lacking (Ruge 1999).

Sound market research on the sociodemographic characteristics and travel attitudes of ecotourists or tourists traveling to enjoy nature in North America is also very limited, (CEC 1999a). The discussion paper highlights a number of useful studies that are helpful in defining the nature-tourist market, but concludes that to better manage protected and other natural areas in which tourism is increasing, a greater understanding of the typical nature-oriented tourist is needed. The market characteristics of ecotourism, nature tourism and sustainable tourism are thus difficult to measure. One of the basic difficulties implicated in the dearth of market statistics is the lack of consensus or consistency in the definition of terms. This question is addressed below.

### **III. Definitions and Guiding Principles: the Development of Criteria**

Nature-oriented, sustainable and ecotourism are ‘alternative’ forms of tourism in that they are meant to be contrary to conventional, or mass, tourism. Alternative tourism covers a broad range of activities, but in its most general sense has been defined as “forms of tourism that set out to be consistent with natural, social and community values and which allow both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences” (Wearing and Neil 1999, 3). Ecotourism falls under this heading, although it is a special category of tourism that continues to be defined in a variety of ways. It may be described as “low key, minimal impact, interpretative tourism where conservation, understanding and appreciation of the environment and cultures visited is sought” (Wearing and Neil 1999, 3).

The word ‘ecotourism’ was coined by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain in 1983 to capture the notion of the centrality of the natural environment to the traveler, with a recognition that ecotourism could become a very important tool for conservation. Box 1 provides the World Conservation Union’s (IUCN) definition of ecotourism, which also underscores the promotion of conservation as central to the tourist activity. Today, ecotourism is a catchword encompassing other terms, including nature tourism, wilderness tourism, low-impact tourism, and sustainable tourism, among others (Wearing and Neil 1999, 4).

#### **Box 1: Definition of Ecotourism**

Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy, study and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features—both past and present), that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations (Wearing and Neil 1999, 4).

To emphasize the idea that ecotourism should contribute to conservation and to the respect of host communities, that is, to stress that an essential feature of ecotourism is sustainability, the CEC uses the term 'sustainable tourism'. This usage also denotes the CEC's intention that its project promotes sustainable tourism for the conservation of natural areas. However, there is no agreed-upon definition, set of criteria, list of indicators, or single recognized seal or certification system for sustainable tourism in North America. Indeed, no comprehensive analytical reference exists to help frame a situation involving the relationship among environment, tourism and development issues. And there is no one recognized certification process or agency to ensure that sustainable tourism marketing actually delivers environmental benefits. This lack of one definition, common vocabulary and set of assumptions hinders discussions among stakeholders promoting environmentally and socially responsible travel and the conservation of natural areas. Recognizing, promoting and managing 'sustainable tourism' requires that there be some mutual understanding of the meaning of the term among stakeholders.

### **Sustainable Development and Tourism**

Sustainable tourism falls under the umbrella concept of sustainable development (Benítez 1999; Wight 1999), first defined in *Our Common Future* as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987, 8). This concept raises the challenge of maintaining economic growth while preserving the resources and physical environment that make such growth possible. At the same time, the concept implies that ecological integrity is preserved for future populations and that people's needs are and will continue to be met in an equitable manner. If all development activities should be sustainable, so "all tourist activity, without exception, should be sustainable" (Ceballos-Lascurain 1999, 7; see also Inskeep 1999 and Ruge 1999). Box 2 provides the definition of sustainable tourism as developed by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), and the Earth Council.

#### **Box 2: Definition of Sustainable Tourism**

Sustainable tourism meets the needs of present tourist and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life-support systems (CEC 1999a, 6).

As made explicit in this definition, there are three aspects of development that need to be sustained: economic, social and environmental. The federal governments of the three countries each provide definitions of ecotourism that include these three elements (see CEC 1999a, Box 1.1). Tourism activities will likely be sustainable, then, if they generate employment and financial benefits for local communities according to their own needs, and conserve the ecological integrity and scenic and cultural interest of the host environment for the equitable use of present and future generations (Benítez 1999; see also Alvarez Icaza 1999).

## **Sustainable Tourism: Guidelines and Criteria**

The CEC recognizes the need for a process by which to establish a North American understanding of the meaning of sustainable tourism. At the same time, questions about the setting of specific definitions and criteria ought not to deflect attention away from badly needed action based on what is already known. Accordingly, it would be more useful to define the parameters of sustainable tourism and to set out principles to guide sustainable practices in the tourism sector than to seek an agreed-upon definition of the term (Ceballos Lascurain 1999; Benítez 1999; Eagles 1999; Inskeep 1999; Wight 1999). In other words, rather than ask ‘what is sustainable tourism,’ we should start looking for ways in which tourism can promote sustainability in concrete, practical ways. In the words of a leading expert in the field: “We need criteria, indicators, mechanisms of certification and diffusion to promote sustainable tourism development” (Benítez 1999, 19).

A hierarchy by which these parameters could be identified first entails establishing the foundational concepts or principles. As indicated above, the key principle of sustainable tourism is the necessity that tourism as an economic activity be compatible with community and conservation goals. Guidelines flowing from basic principles are “general statements about acceptable courses of action to work towards achieving the principles in a particular location” (Twynam 1999, 53). The discussion paper highlighted excerpts of selected codes of ethics or guidelines for sustainable tourism in North America and other countries (CEC 1999a).

Guidelines often include criteria by which to determine if tourism planning and activity support conservation efforts. To implement the general pronouncements of principles and guidelines, and to adhere to the defined criteria, codes of conduct can then be developed as specific rules about behavior. Codes should be flexible instruments capable of evolving as community values and concerns develop, and so should be based on issues identified in and by specific communities (CEC 1999a). Codes may be addressed generally to tourists, to the tourism industry, and to the host community (CEC 1999a). Codes are voluntary or self-regulated, but may supplement the law by filling gaps in legal requirements. Eventually, enforcement or compliance activities ensure that codes are being followed and monitoring is conducted to assess or evaluate the achievement of expected results (Twynam 1999).

For example, guidelines and codes of conduct have already been developed for Arctic tourism to limit the impacts on the natural environment and local communities of large numbers of visitors arriving at the same time on large ships. Another project evaluated the development of codes of conduct for marine tourism in the Caribbean. These projects were aimed at maximizing the benefits to local communities from tourism. They involved a number of different stakeholders through consultation and negotiation and produced tourism guidelines and codes of conduct for both tourists and operators (Twynam 1999). The real question is not whether guidelines and principles are ‘perfect,’ but whether they can be translated into action. This is the focus of the CEC’s work in linking its

sustainable tourism initiatives with its work related to regions of biodiversity significance.

## **Certification**

The United Nations Environment Programme suggests that eventually codes may “need to become, to some degree, enforceable if they are to become primary management tools” (UNEP, cited in CEC 1999a, 79). Indeed, guidelines and criteria for sustainable tourism are voluntary initiatives that may be used in the subsequent establishment of accreditation or certification programs that measure the compliance of tourism sites and services to certain standards (CEC 1999a).

The issue of environmental and sustainability certification is complicated by questions of which party is responsible for overseeing the implementation of standards and the verification of enforcement. First-party verification is not looked upon as a viable option, since sustainable tourism requires businesses to change their operating procedures. Implementing a certification process for sustainable tourism activities is an important, but not necessarily a sufficient, means of ensuring environmental objectives. Indeed, certification works in tandem with legislation. Such legislation could begin with a set of criteria for sustainable tourism, and then a list of several sub-categories that would specify a range of potentially sustainable activities under the rubrics of ecotourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism, and sustainable and conservation tourism. By using legislation to ensure that tourism is a sustainable activity, certification becomes the burden of the government, which may be better equipped to certify tour operators and which provides the security of legitimacy (CEC 1999b).

These questions are not limited to tourism-related certification, but have characterized environmental labeling and certification issues for the past decade. An important area of the CEC’s work in green goods is supporting environmental labeling. In 1999, the CEC produced *Supporting Green Markets: Environmental Labeling, Certification and Procurement Schemes in Canada, Mexico and the United States* (CEC 1999c), which describes the important environmental labeling schemes in all three countries. It notes that both environmental certification and environmental purchasing appear to be expanding and suggests that the growing emphasis on certification and institutional procurement may be the result of an encouraging shift in many businesses from control of environmental harm to prevention. The diversity of schemes, however, may contribute to a bewildering array of choices for consumers and the inability of one or two labels to carve a dominant market niche (CEC 1999c).

In theory, the economic incentives that certification may provide operators could be substantial. Once certified, operators could legitimately use the image of ‘ecotourism’ or sustainable tourism to attract a segment of the tourist population whose spending habits tend to be above average. Certification could also be linked to the reception of tax incentives or subsidies. At the same time, accreditation could also stifle industry innovation. Operators who had attained accreditation could use their new status as part of a market strategy to block other market entrants, which could result in a decline in the

market share of small-scale local providers who may be operating in a sustainable manner but are unable to afford the costs associated with accreditation. The loss of local operations would seriously affect the share of tourism dollars that remain in the hands of the community (CEC 1999b). Moreover, the actual demand for sustainable tourism and the price premium tourists are willing to pay for 'green' tourism remain important gaps in our knowledge and will form part of the CEC's future work in green goods and services.

A number of accreditation programs already exist. An example of an international certification initiative is the World Travel and Tourism Council's Green Globe (GG) Certification Programme. It is linked to Agenda 21 principles and emphasizes improving environmental performance at the same time as acting as a marketing incentive for businesses wishing to attract environmentally aware travelers through the certification label (CEC 1999a). Mexico is the only North American country that has a national ecotourism association that has adopted a seal of approval—the Mexican Association of Adventure Travel and Ecotourism (AMTAVE) proposes the creation of a national agency for ecotourism and adventure tourism and the eventual recognition of the AMTAVE seal (Ehrenberg Enriquez 1999).

Work in sustainable tourism should be seen within the broader context of environmental labeling and certification. There are at least 25 important environmental labeling schemes in place in the United States. These schemes cover 156 product categories and approximately 310 actual products. In Canada, the principal environmental labeling program is Environmental Choice. Owned by the federal government, it is operated by an independent agency, TerraChoice Inc. Approximately 2,000 products and services have Environmental Choice labels, representing 200 firms. The Hotel Association of Canada's Green Leaf Eco-Rating Program for Lodging Facilities was developed in association with TerraChoice. And Mexico continues to develop environmental labels. Examples already in operation include labels for recycled paper and energy savings on electrical appliances (CEC 1999c).

### **The Role of the CEC in Defining Sustainable Tourism in North America**

It has been noted that the CEC has a role in exploring a common, cooperative or harmonized approaches to sustainable certification in North America. The mechanism for certification could be designed to accommodate the large variety of ecosystems found across North America and could eventually be standardized across the continent. The CEC's work in green goods includes the preparation of a database of criteria related to shade, organic and fairtrade coffee production that has helped stakeholders to recognize the many criteria that overlap among the schemes. This initiative helped provide a model for listing and analyzing criteria for other green goods and services. The CEC is now preparing a database of office-product certification programs and criteria in North America.

Recognizing the need for a common North American understanding of the guiding principles of sustainable tourism and that the CEC could provide the forum for

developing these, and armed with its experience in developing criteria databases, the CEC will undertake producing a compendium of criteria for sustainable tourism in North America.

Thus, one of the objectives of Phase II of the CEC's project is to prepare a compendium of criteria that are being used to define sustainable tourism, drawing on work by the World Tourism Organization, IUCN, UNEP and others, as well as on the expertise of the workshop participants. Multistakeholder groups of representatives from government, the tourism industry, indigenous communities and NGOs will direct the development of these guidelines. Based on this compendium, a database of criteria for sustainable tourism in North America will be developed, highlighting the common elements of different criteria. The CEC database will be made available on the Commission's home page later in 2000.

It is understood that harmonization or standardization of guidelines for tourism across North America should be pursued with caution, however. While a homogenous set of guidelines and definitions for sustainable tourism may help address the definitional issue noted earlier, ecological conditions differ from site to site, and these differences must be respected in the planning and management of projects. People travel to see places that differ from their own surroundings, so if 'the sustainable tourism project' becomes an 'off-the-shelf' destination, it will be unable to attract visitors. Planning, the use of indicators, and monitoring efforts should ensure the preservation of a site while maintaining its distinctive qualities. The uniqueness of natural areas and of the local communities within them is the greatest resource associated with nature tourism (CEC 1999b).

At the generic and definitional levels, the CEC's project will also assemble examples of 'best practices' that put principles and criteria of sustainable tourism into action. Environmental best practices "provide the highest possible standard of operation for a given tourism sector or activity with respect to maintaining or enhancing environmental integrity" (Oceans Blue Foundation 1999). One expert has noted that "the first step is to learn from existing experience to document and compare those examples of best practice and other tools and then find new applications for them. It is critical to understand existing successes and make sure that we have appropriate communication and networking to share those lessons, [to identify] where there are gaps or barriers, ...and to innovate and create new tools to achieve and promote sustainable tourism" (CEC 1999b, 109).

#### **IV. The Pilot Project Approach and Management Tools**

##### **Pilot Projects in Priority Regions**

Moving from generic or definitional issues to the concrete implementation phase, the CEC's project will link regional work with pilot projects in specific areas. Pilot projects bring together funding bodies, tourism agencies, indigenous and other communities, and local operators, thus providing the opportunity to examine existing management tools,

and to draw overall lessons about best practices such as monitoring, funding, and training mechanisms. They are also practical local arenas in which to test the viability of criteria through the implementation of standards and guidelines.

Pilot projects may be initiated in areas in which the ecology is particularly threatened by tourist impacts and in those natural areas that offer significant opportunities for developing tourist activities that contribute to environmental and cultural conservation. There are a number of examples of priority regions in which there is a potential for sustainable tourism to catalyze conservation efforts. For example, Mexico has established priority regions for conservation and a map depicting places in which there are opportunities to supply environmental services and the development of sustainable tourism. Three examples of locations with high ecotourism potential are the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, and El Vizcain Desert (Alvarez Icaza 1999).

One model does not apply to all areas, however, so pilot projects need to be adapted to local needs (Wolcott 1999). An example of such an initiative is the establishment of ecotourism projects in a variety of different ecosystems, for instance mountain, coastal area, desert and forest projects, spread across Canada, Mexico and the United States. Such a variety of projects ensures that the broadest possible range of information is collected.

### **Management Tools**

Various management tools exist and have been tried out to implement and monitor sustainable tourism development in natural areas. Among the best practices for sustainable tourism development are intersectoral collaboration and public participation, environmental impact assessments, land use planning and zoning, and indicators.

#### *Collaboration, Consensus Building and Public Participation*

It is vital that the public and private sectors are both involved in all discussions regarding sustainable tourism development so as to balance the economic aspects of the industry with the need to protect environmental resources (Hawkins 1999). An example of an endeavor to create partnerships to build consensus between these two sectors is the Sustainable Travel and Tourism Roundtable. It was convened to develop a framework for the tourism industry to promote and implement sustainable practices, focusing initially on cooperation at the national level, but with future efforts to concentrate on the local level. One of the goals of discussions is to involve stakeholders such as consumers, businesses, non-profit organizations and governments in order to enhance their understanding, respect and practice of responsible environmental protection and stewardship techniques (Hawkins 1999).

Implicit in the definition of sustainable tourism is the notion that the values and needs of host communities will be accounted for through public participation in the development and implementation of sustainable tourism management plans and through the fair

sharing of proceeds. Indeed, public participation has been officially recognized by many governments and international agencies as essential to sustainable development and is integral to the functioning of the CEC's projects (CEC 1999a; Inskeep 1999; Marcelli 1999; Spalding 1999). Participation is generally understood to mean a process "through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them" (World Bank, cited in CEC 1999a).

All too often, however, lip service is paid to the participation of local communities, but they remain 'voiceless' as passive bystanders (CEC 1999a; Marcelli 1999). Indeed, in many cases, tourism is actually developed to the detriment of the local people (Spalding 1999).

There is a need to consider how tourism affects all the stakeholders in the industry and so to involve their participation in the development, management and assessment of sustainable tourism initiatives. The involvement of tour operators, for example, is crucial to the successful 'transformation' of the industry from one that practices unsustainable resource exploitation to one actively involved in the conservation and preservation of the resources upon which it depends. Sustainable tourism planning should be intersectoral, including the government and all other relevant stakeholders, and the approach should be one of cooperation and networking. This implies "an affirmative gathering to achieve a common result" (Wolcott 1999, 28). The United States' 'mountain resort' sector of its Sustainable Industry Program is an example of a successful initiative that brings together the various stakeholders to build trust, respect and understanding to the issue of environmental management, and one that may provide a model for other sectors, such as coastal resorts (Wolcott 1999).

NGOs can have a variety of roles in helping to promote sustainable tourism, given the many niches they typically occupy, from working at the grassroots with local communities to collaborating with governments or in the role of watchdog.

There are already a number of tourist development projects in North America in which NGOs play significant roles in promoting sustainability. Sustainable tourism projects are among the many NGO initiatives funded by the CEC's North American Fund for Environmental Cooperation (NAFEC). This funding program supports projects that are community-based (involve a clearly defined community of stakeholders who actively participate in the design and implementation of the project); respond to a specific issue or problem and lead to concrete results; reflect cooperative and equitable partnerships between or among organizations from different sectors and/or countries within North America; meet the objectives of the CEC (by complementing the current CEC program); strengthen and build the capacities of local people, organizations and institutions; emphasize sustainability; link environmental, social and economic issues; and leverage additional support, but are unlikely to obtain full funding from other sources.

Since 1996, NAFEC has made 142 grants totaling US\$5.4 million to community-based initiatives contributing to the conservation, protection and enhancement of the North



American environment. The following are two examples of those related to ecotourism development.

The Southeastern Arizona Bird Observatory in Bisbee Arizona received about \$US 90,000 in 1998 to support an ecotourism project designed to extend an ecotourist birding itinerary from southern Arizona into Sonora, Mexico. It fosters cooperative relationships between ecotourism operators on both sides of the border, protects natural habitat, and capitalizes on the growing popularity of birding so that visitors can appreciate birds in a cross-border region and better their understanding of inter-related ecosystems and cultures.

Another project, in Oaxaca, Mexico, received \$US 50,000 in 1999 to promote biodiversity conservation in natural areas through community-based ecotourism projects. The group, *Proyectos Productivos Sierra Norte de Oaxaca*, helped to set up an education and job-creation program that included creating interpretation paths, training local guides, setting up a community ecotourism agency, and starting 4 ecotourist lodges.

There are other examples of ecotourism projects taking place throughout North America initiated by NGOs. The Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve is an example in which the group Friends of Sian Ka'an was able to fill a gap in the management plan, which was well developed for government lands and marine areas, but did not account for privately-owned property. The group has been involved with helping to make zoning orders better tools to protect the coastline, in developing indicators of sustainability to inhibit development that exceeds the carrying capacity, and in interweaving visitor education about sensitive ecological sites within the ecosystem management plan. The aims are to ensure that inhabitants share the benefits of tourism and to transfer the final program of public use to the legal and regulatory sector (Bezaury Creel 1999).

Public participation in sustainable tourism is also achieved through training and education projects for local communities. Examples in Mexico include those taking place at the Biosphere Reserves of Celestún and Ría Lagartos. A growing tourism industry has been established in these reserves by offering flamingo-watching tours in biologically rich lagoons that are sensitive to overuse. New tours were developed through Pronatura-RARE training workshops that provide a unique educational program in conservation designed to teach adults to work as nature guides and to become conservationist leaders within their communities (González-Castilla 1999).

In Canada, the Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park is an example of participatory management with local stakeholders, including aboriginal communities and NGOs as well as different levels of government. The conservation plan aims to ensure the integrated ecological management of the park in conjunction with the stakeholders involved by identifying concerns, management strategies and conservational priorities and by the concerted implementation of action plans (Boivin 1999).

Mexico has a large number of different indigenous populations that are known to have demonstrated sound ways of preserving their natural resources. Such peoples, therefore, are able to lend their expertise to projects that aspire to sustainability goals (Manning

1999; Marcelli 1999). Another example of the important role played by NGOs is a case study of certain projects involving peasant organizations and indigenous associations. *Ecosolar*, for example, helps a community make its living from sea turtles, crocodiles and resources from mangroves in main tourist sites that are also protected areas on the Oaxaca shoreline in Mexico. The result is a conservation program implemented by the local population that allows for the sustainable exploitation of products that generate revenues from tourists. This project is also one of a number in small communities in sensitive ecosystems that demonstrate a move to diversifying the revenue base to incorporate other activities such as rural enterprises, agroecology and complementary services, so as not to depend entirely on visitor dollars (Marcelli 1999).

It is of crucial importance that indigenous communities are involved in all aspects of the sustainable tourism development process, from meetings and conferences to the management and ownership of operations, including the provision of training and education. Indigenous peoples often possess an intimate knowledge of local ecosystems, and can make unique and valuable contributions to the sustainable management of natural resources. The CEC recognizes that the lessons and practices of indigenous communities are an excellent resource for understanding best practices. In March 2000, it held a consultative workshop of key indigenous groups from throughout North America, asking them which issues affect the conservation and sustainable use of North America's marine and terrestrial biodiversity. Their responses provided important input into the CEC's strategic plan for biodiversity conservation, thus affecting the eventual choice of an ecoregion for the focus of its sustainable tourism pilot projects.

### *Environmental Impact Assessments*

Another factual need is that of accurate baseline information concerning environmental degradation caused by tourists. Such baseline information helps to identify information gaps and to increase the sensitivity of monitoring programs. An evaluation of the impact of tourism differs from that of other industries. For example, many of the impacts of tourism are cumulative, arising not from one major development but rather from the succession of smaller ones that alone may seem insignificant. Furthermore, assessment of impacts must include not only the obvious immediate ones, but also those of related activities. For example, when assessing the impacts of the use of hotel accommodation, it is necessary to look beyond site-specific ones and take account of the impacts of activities that cater to the hotel's guests. The effects of increased airport activity, ground travel, and use of natural environments and built infrastructure should also be considered. The complexity of these inter-related activities requires specialized impact assessment mechanisms and frameworks that cover all the relevant aspects of the tourism industry (CEC 1999b). The environmental impact assessment (EIA) is a key instrument for regulating activities in natural areas. In Mexico, for example, EIA tools help to determine how a project will impact a given region and what mechanisms are available to mitigate those impacts (Alvarez Icaza 1999).

### *Land Use Planning and Zoning*

One of the legal tools available at international, national, regional and local levels for implementing sustainable tourism in natural areas is land use planning and zoning. Planning and zoning are tools to attract ecotourists to specific sites and accommodate them there while conserving natural resources. They establish ground rules and objectives for the development and monitoring of sustainable tourism. The term 'land use planning' covers zoning, the control and use of real estate developments, and environmental impact studies. Zoning predesignates uses of land by limiting or restricting uses. Zoning for sustainable tourism requires meeting objectives to both preserve the environment and to provide recreation for the public. Today, zoning has become the dominant approach to wilderness protection in the developing world. Mexico's Biosphere Reserves, for example, were established to conserve the country's natural wealth while allowing some use for tourism and other economically productive activities (Spalding 1999).

Biosphere Reserves are special designations of the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB) that have three complementary roles: conservation, logistics and development. Three zones allow for these activities: a protected core for conservation and research purposes only, a buffer zone in which activity is severely limited and a transition zone in which the sustainable use of resources by locals is permitted. Biosphere Reserves have a large potential for tourism based on the natural environment and sustainable tourism, since they allow people to continue to live and work in natural protected areas and research on sustainable resource use encourages local communities to participate in conservation efforts (Spalding 1999).

In the context of sustainable tourism, land use planning and zoning may be used for three main purposes: to set aside both terrestrial and marine parks and reserves; to undertake site planning and management, which can help to resolve conflicting use demands and to limit times of use and distance between uses, among other benefits; and to adopt controls to mitigate harm, such as establishing safe distances between observers and animal attractions like whales (Spalding 1999).

### *Indicators*

Indicators can be developed to address difficult issues such as carrying capacity and the number of tourists that exceed a site's carrying capacity. Carrying capacity estimates are determined by environmental, social and managerial indicators. Indicators are signals of upcoming problems, current issues, need for action or the results of actions. They highlight the environment-tourism links and associated impacts. Local knowledge and the participation of key stakeholders are critical to developing indicators. (McNeely 1999).

A means by which to develop a set of indicators that can anticipate and prevent the problems associated with over-capacity of the number of tourists in a particular area is being prepared through the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and has been tested in ten countries. It is a risk-identification process that focuses on a set of 12 basic indicators that include such variables as the number of tourists that visit a site and the availability of

adequate water supplies. A second set of indicators addresses the variables related to specific types of sites, such as those of high ecological importance, managed wildlife preserves, small traditional communities, and coastal, mountain and culturally significant sites (Manning 1999).

### **The CEC's Pilot Projects**

The CEC's Sustainable Tourism in Natural Areas project will undertake two consecutive pilot projects. The regions in which they will take place will be identified in the CEC's Strategic Plan for the Conservation of Biodiversity and may include protected areas and non-protected areas. In collaboration with interest groups such as indigenous peoples, NGOs, government and academia, the CEC's Strategic Directions for the Conservation of Biodiversity project will identify priority geographical areas or regions for conservation and subsequent Regional Action Plans will be developed. The Sustainable Tourism in Natural Areas project will implement its actions in two of these selected areas, focusing on one ecoregion at a time. It will work in cooperation with the various interest groups involved and with the other CEC projects whose actions may focus on the same region (projects related to ecosystem monitoring, green goods and services and trade in wildlife species). Capacity and consensus building and public participation will be enhanced through such collaboration.

The pilot projects will create a framework in which to explore the use of the management tools outlined above. The framework will facilitate the assessment of the environmental impacts of tourism and the identification of environmental assessment needs for sustainable tourism, including methods to link assessments with carrying capacities of the areas based on existing and future tourism demand and types of tourism activity. It will also help in the determination of the institutional capacities in the region, identifying various stakeholders with which to collaborate in undertaking 'on-the-ground' analysis.

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