

Mission Programs

Center for Sustainable Destinations

About Geotourism

The relatively new concept of geotourism is attracting increasing interest around the world. Although the term has been in use informally since 1997, the 2002 *Geotourism Study*, sponsored by *National Geographic Traveler* magazine and conducted by the Travel Industry Association of America, constituted its public debut. Here is the definition:

geotourism (n): *Tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place — its environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and the well-being of its residents.*

Geotourism is sustainable tourism energized. It sustains, but it can also *enhance*—by means of restorative and constructive forms of tourism that fit the nature of the destination. Tourist revenue can help to restore historic districts, for instance, and support local craftspeople. It can help to preserve and develop local cuisines, based on distinctively local ingredients supplied by local farmers. It can help to retain traditional cultural celebrations and performing arts that would otherwise disappear. It can help to beautify ugly places and enrich poor places. It does those things best when focused on the distinctiveness of a place, avoiding the destructive pitfalls of undifferentiated global mass tourism.

The phrase *geographical character* is a unifying umbrella. It encompasses the entire combination of natural and human attributes that makes a place worth visiting. Geography—from which “geotourism” derives—is not just about *where* places are. It’s also about *what* places are. It’s about what makes one place different from the next. That includes not only flora and fauna, which is the realm of ecotourism, but also historic structures and archaeological sites, scenic landscapes, traditional architecture, and locally grown music, cuisine, crafts, dances, and other arts. Many people sum up that combination of elements as “sense of place.” Since most tourists travel with a variety of interests, geotourism’s holistic approach provides a synergistic effect unavailable to niches like adventure, eco-, or historic tourism. Geotourism speaks to the widest possible market that is compatible with sustaining a destination’s distinctive qualities.

The last part of the definition, the *well-being of residents*, is the critical link: Tourism revenues can provide a real, bottom-line incentive for residents to protect what tourists are coming to experience. In turn, informed, involved, prospering residents create a more welcoming environment for tourists.

Implicit in the geotourism definition are several additional principles:

- Geotourism must provide an enjoyable, enriching experience for visitors.
- Accordingly, it calls for visitors to receive high-quality, appealingly presented information about the place — known in the trade as “interpretation.”
- Geotourism requires the involvement of the host community in numerous ways. They include discovering and presenting that interpretive information. This can build local pride. A woman on Maui who had recently taken a guiding course said, “I’ve lived on this island all my life, and I had no idea how much was here.” She was talking about the unique species there, the cultural history, and the folklore underlying almost every point of interest. Most places have such backstories, unrealized and underappreciated. One of geotourism’s benefits to host communities, then, is the pride that comes with deeper knowledge of local natural and cultural heritage.

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— Another community benefit, of course, is financial. It can come from providing geographically appropriate tourist goods and services. It can come from employment that includes avenues for career advancement. As a leader in Belize once said, “I don’t intend to preside over a nation of maids and busboys.”

— To sustain those benefits indefinitely, host communities must practice good destination stewardship. That means adopting policies that protect the locale’s environment and heritage, and it means managing tourism to achieve maximum benefit with minimum disruption. Geotourism accepts, therefore, that limits on tourist traffic may in some situations be necessary to avoid the “loved-to-death” syndrome. In tourism, quantity tends to drive out quality. Success is therefore best measured not by counting tourist arrivals, but by counting tourist benefits to the destination—economic, social, environmental.

In summary, then:

— Geotourism is environmentally responsible, committed to conserving resources and maintaining biodiversity.

— Geotourism is culturally responsible, committed to respecting local sensibilities and building on local heritage.

— And while geotourism is incompatible with loss of natural or cultural diversity, it does not seek to stop the clock and preserve a destination in amber. What it does seek to preserve is geographical diversity, the distinctiveness of a locale. Destinations that offer nothing but look-alike international franchises lose their distinctiveness and appeal. They end up vulnerable to a package-resort mass tourism market that seeks only the cheapest price.

The first step in geotourism is to get on the agenda. The wording of the definition provides a convenient test for any community’s tourism development project: “Does this project sustain or enhance the character of our destination?” That leaves plenty of room for discussion about types of tourism and their effects. The important thing is that there be such discussion.

Everyone has a role to play—tourism professionals, host communities, and the tourists themselves.

Tourism professionals, whether in private or public sectors, can seek ways to protect the character of the destinations they promote—in effect, to ensure quality control of the product that they are selling.

Residents of host communities can plan for types of tourism that will support the kind of locale that they want to live in.

And tourists can decide, simply by where they open their wallets, what kinds of facilities and activities to encourage. As public awareness builds, those decisions will provide a market advantage to geotouristic operations. According to the *Geotourism Study*,

- Over half the American traveling public thinks it’s harder to find unspoiled places than it used to be.
- Almost three quarters don’t want their visits to harm the environment at their destinations.

In short, the survey suggests that substantial segments of the American tourist market—65 million households—are predisposed to support the principles of geotourism.

For More Information

- For the National Geographic’s Center for Sustainable Destinations, go to www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable
- To learn about the 2008-2010 Ashoka’s Changemakers Geotourism Challenge, go to www.changemakers.com/geotourismchallenge