

Mission Programs

Center for Sustainable Destinations

Worldwide Geotourism Alliance Forged at NGS Summit

Business, funders, and nonprofits join to create online network and increase funding.

A global geotourism alliance based on a new Internet-based website and backed by new funding sources was launched at a conference Oct. 14-15 at the headquarters of the National Geographic Society (NGS) in Washington, D.C.

The Geotourism Challenge Summit was attended by some 70 representatives from private firms, nongovernmental organizations, and international agencies. Sponsors were NGS's Center for Sustainable Destinations and Ashoka's Changemakers.

Also at the event senior NGS executives joined in honoring honored winners and finalists of the first Geotourism Challenge Competition for projects that promote and protect natural and cultural heritage.

"Our biggest issue is how to stop loving to death the places we love the most," said Keith Bellows, editor-in-chief of National Geographic Traveler. "The greatest gift we can give our children is the gift of travel that leads to essential and authentic experiences."

In a series of work sessions, summit participants contributed ideas to the new Global Geotourism Network, an Internet-based platform for tourism professionals and travelers to share information for developing projects and setting new standards for destination stewardship. The network will be launched in 2009 in collaboration with the Montreal-based Centre of Excellence for Destinations (CED) and CSD.

"The geotourism concept may have originated here at the NGS, but it's for everyone to use," said Jonathan Tourtellot, CSD director. "The network will help people get what they need to do geotourism."

A foremost network goal should be to expand the geotourism community, according to many participants. "Geotourism must be inclusive, not exclusive," said Leonard Cordiner, CEO of Worldhotel-link.com Ltd, "and avoid the pitfalls of ecotourism," which he said appeals to a minority of the traveling public. "Most travelers don't want hard beds and bad food. They want to enjoy themselves," he said.

"The network open a dialogue with stakeholders that are largely outside of the geotourism family, such as communities and tour agencies," said Sharon Price of Rare, a conservation group specializing in social marketing.

"Unless we reach out to local people and increase their stake in conservation projects we risk repeating the failures of the past," said Terry Garcia, NGS executive vice president for mission programs.

Others stressed the network's potential as a marketing tool. "So often we have really good products, but they're often marketed to the wrong people," said Jim Dion, CSD associate director of field operations. "Marketing is all about energizing consumers and gauging their satisfaction. This also means directing our message at all market segments, because the backpackers of today are the high-end tourists of tomorrow."

Others focused on the need to quantify geotourism benefits. "We have to explain geotourism to the business community in language that fits with their matrices," said Andy Dumain of Shrinking Foot Print. "Tourism is good at measuring heads and beds, but not at putting a value on an old barn in New England."

The network will draw on the National Geographic Society's special expertise by "helping to link private sector providers with the tourism market," said John Francis, NGS vice president for research, conservation and exploration.

New funding support

During the summit, NGS and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) signed a memorandum of understanding in which the bank will help finance innovative programs that promote geotourism principles. The IDB will contribute up \$10 million in grants from its Multilateral Investment Fund (MIF) to leverage support from public and private companies, including airlines and hotel chains.

MIF currently manages 25 sustainable tourism projects in 20 countries with the help of \$50 million in grant funding, according to Santiago Soler, the fund's sustainable tourism coordinator. The projects are organized as "tourism clusters" in which stakeholders interact and exchange knowledge.

The World Bank is also increasing funding for sustainable tourism, according to Tova Maria Solo, tourism coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean. She said that the bank has eliminated its tourism department to better integrate the sector in the institution's full range of lending operations.

The importance of private sector involvement was highlighted by Pamela P. Flaherty, president and CEO of Citi Foundation. "Official financial flows are dwarfed by lending from private institutions," she told participants, adding that the geotourism needs the expertise that these firms can provide.

In the end, funders must be convinced that a project has the potential to generate income, according to John McKenzie, president of the Geotourism Development Foundation (GDF) and principal operations officer at the International Finance Corporation. Geotourism has a "huge potential" for attracting grants and donations for nontraditional projects, he said.

The GDF, with the support of the IFC in conjunction with NGS and Ashoka, will carry out a pilot program to show how revenue can be generated by more closely linking what McKenzie called "the most ignored parts of the tourism equation, which is the host and the guest," through increased sale of services and products. An eventual revolving fund will finance project preparation and product development through partnerships with financial and microfinance institutions.

Geotourism fund?

Geotourism innovators honored

The three winners and 12 finalists of Ashoka's Changemakers Geotourism Challenge each briefed summit participants on their projects' innovative approaches for protecting natural and cultural heritage while improving the welfare of local people. The winners, who received \$5,000 each, were the Yachana Foundation of Ecuador, 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking of Nepal, and Rios Tropicales of Costa Rica.

"Tourism has become one of the main legs of the economic model of many countries," said John Fahey, president of the National Geographic Society, in making the presentations. "Geotourism has been very important in getting us to understand how important it is to balance economic opportunities with protection of cultural and natural heritage."

Ashoka Chairman and CEO Bill Drayton challenged the participants to work to transform the tourism industry. "The National Geographic society saw that solutions of today will be obsolete tomorrow," he said. "Our job now is to not to merely capture the market, but to change the world."

The next Ashoka-NGS Geotourism Challenge will be launched this January with the participation of the IDB's Multilateral Investment Fund.

Sven Lindblad, president and founder of Lindblad Expeditions, gave the concluding presentation. "We must motivate big organizations to think in the long term," he said, "by getting the public to demand change."