

Trends in ecotourism: how businesses can engage in sustainable travel

 By [Eran Feinstein](#)

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Ecotourism is defined by responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people.



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During the last 20 years, ecotourism has been one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism and hospitality industry. With a focus on the impact of tourism on nature and communities, advocates suggest that the impact could be extremely positive. As a result, ecotourism has become more than just a niche market within hospitality and tourism businesses; it has evolved into a set of principles and good practices, closely aligned with the concept of sustainable development.

The basic intent of this style of tourism is to foster mindfulness among travelers about the destinations, and likewise to minimise any negative or adverse impact on the environment or local communities.

Ecotourism is typically seen in regions where cultural heritage and environmental diversity are abundant. The increasing interest in, and demand for, ecotourism makes countries like Tanzania and Kenya more popular destinations.

Increasing demand for ecotourism from consumers

Responsible Travel, an online booking agency for multiple ecotourism organisations around the world, posits that there is an increasing demand among consumers for an adherence to the standards of ecotourism from the travel industry. For example, according to Condé Nast Traveler, 93% of its readers believe that hotels and resorts ought to be responsible for safeguarding the environment they operate in. In the same study, 74.5% said that a hotel's environmental policies could sway their decision on whether or not to stay there.

Considering these statistics, we believe that it is essential for the hospitality industry to embrace ecotourism and

incorporate its vital concepts within its philosophy.

By embracing the core elements of conservation, community, and education in ecotourism, hospitality organisations, such as hotels, hostels, resorts, and restaurants, will see a significant growth in their profits by attracting travelers who are sensitive to environmental awareness and [sustainable travel](#).

Many eco-conscious efforts are working well for the hospitality industry. Here are a few examples:

- **Off-the-beaten-path beats tourism clusters**

Exotic destinations like Zanzibar are seeing a huge increase in tourism, as more and more eco-tourists seek out destinations that are unique and special.

- **Foodies love ecotourism**

For many years the culinary experience wasn't a priority for eco-tourists. However, nowadays a good, organic wine list and locally grown food is essential for any organisation that wants to cater to the high-end eco-friendly market. Indeed, sustainable gastronomy has taken precedence for many eco-tourists, as it ranks high, along with energy and water conservation, as a top priority.

- **Sustainability goes over and beyond**

Towel replacement and energy efficient light bulbs are what we see most often in "green" hotels, but smart hospitality business owners know that "green" means so much more. For example, recycling, local business support, on-demand heating for water, sustainable food and permaculture practices, solar power, and local employment are just a few of the other important ways in which eco-savvy organisations are manifesting a "green" philosophy in their business management.

- **The smaller and more intimate, the better**

Small, privately owned, boutique hotels, inns, and hostels are seeing a boom as a result of ecotourism, as those who are conscious of their local impact typically prefer to support small local businesses. In addition to creating a positive impact on the communities they visit, eco-tourists appreciate the more personalized service they typically find in smaller establishments.

- **Kids become drivers for eco-experiences**

Family vacations become field trips full of biology or geography lessons when children are able to go on safari or visit a national nature reserve. Catering to families with children and providing viable learning experiences for the entire family can massively increase a hotel or tour operator's ecotourism status.

- **Wellness for the body and soul**

Hotels and resorts that focus their spa services on a more holistic approach to mainstream wellness cater well to eco-tourists, especially to those who are resistant to chemicals and commercial spa practices that waste water and energy. By providing outdoor spa services, spa products sourced from natural ingredients, and healthy, locally sourced and organic culinary options, resort spas appeal to the eco-minded guest.

Combining ecotourism and sustainable tourism

Well-traveled and educated guests are looking for more than a stamp that declares a hotel or resort is "green". These eco-conscious travelers understand what hotels and resorts need to do in order to make a difference in the environments where they operate and for the communities they come into contact with.

The hospitality industry should embrace, in theory and in practice, the combined concepts of ecotourism and sustainable tourism. According to Zoe Chafe (2005), "sustainable tourism is the form of tourism that meets the needs of present tourist and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for future."

Some key concepts for the hospitality industry to focus on and promote are the following:

- Respect and protect cultural heritage
- Preservation or restoration of cultural heritage monuments
- Preservation of the natural environment
- Local volunteer opportunities for tourists
- Consumerism of local products
- Promotion of artisanal objects and authentic, locally crafted or sourced souvenirs
- Local employment
- Engagement in efforts to become eco-certified by such organisations as Blue Flag or The Green Key.
- Locally sourced and grown food

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