

Conservation Tourism

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Conclusions

As outlined in Chapter 1, there are a number of different mechanisms by which tourism can, potentially at least, make positive net contributions to conservation. Subsequent chapters reconsider these mechanisms from a variety of different perspectives, at scales from individual companies, communities and conservation organizations to entire countries. The aim of this concluding chapter, therefore, is to evaluate the evidence relevant to each of the mechanisms outlined in Chapter 1, using the cases and country studies presented in the later chapters.

In this volume, we have presented a selection of case studies worldwide either where commercial tourism has, in so far as we can judge, made some contribution to conservation by one of a variety of mechanisms; or, in a few cases, where it was designed to do so but apparently did not succeed. Before attempting to draw any general conclusions, we must first note that these case studies were deliberately selected as some of the best-documented examples of conservation tourism worldwide. They are not in any way representative of the global tourism industry as a whole. They show what is possible, not what is routine. In so far as we can judge, most of the case studies presented in this volume are world leaders in conservation tourism. With these caveats in mind, and drawing also on other literature in this field as reviewed in Chapter 1, the following conclusions can be reached:

- 1.** Conservation tourism does exist. There are examples, around the world, where commercial tourism operations are making a net positive contribution to conservation of biological diversity and ecosystem services.
- 2.** Conservation tourism is small. The examples presented in this volume, and others which resemble them but for which no reliable data yet exist, currently constitute only a tiny fraction of the total tourism industry worldwide. In some cases their achievements have been leveraged well beyond their immediate local impacts. The bulk of the mainstream tourism industry, however, remains very different from the small subsector presented here.
- 3.** Conservation tourism is important none the less. While tourism and conservation are largely independent throughout most of the world, in those instances where they overlap, the interaction is important to both (Buckley, 2008b). In many cases that interaction is very

one-sided, with the tourism sector gaining at the expense of conservation. The case studies in this volume represent the much smaller proportion where there is indeed a gain for conservation, and generally also for local communities, in addition to the commercial tourism operators.

4. Conservation tourism adds to parks. There are many countries, developed as well as developing, where public-sector protected area agencies face shortfalls in finance and resources, lack of political power relative to other sectors or lack of access to land of high conservation value. In these circumstances, commercial tourism can, under appropriate conditions, play a significant role in supporting conservation on either private, community or public lands. As efforts to improve landscape-scale conservation connectivity gain momentum as one mechanism to adapt to climate change, conservation tourism will become increasingly significant.

5. Conservation tourism is not accurately accounted for. The net economic, social or environmental contributions of conservation tourism enterprises, either individually or in aggregate, are largely unknown: first, because of incomplete information on the set of enterprises to be included; second, since there is not yet any well-established accounting protocol to measure, compare and aggregate the social and environmental contributions; and, third since the raw data for such accounting exercises are rarely available. There are only a small number of individual private reserves whose achievements have been analysed in detail (Buckley, 2003a; Sims-Castley *et al.*, 2005; Langholz and Kerley, 2006).

6. Conservation tourism mechanisms differ in significance. While there are many different potential mechanisms for commercial tourism to contribute to conservation, in practice some are far more significant ecologically than others. Different mechanisms may be more or less significant at different spatial scales. Broadly, mechanisms which involve minor modifications to commercial tourism operations in order to reduce local environmental impacts, or small cash or in-kind contributions to conservation groups, local communities or parks agencies, are unlikely to make any major contribution to conservation, even though they are promoted heavily by tourism industry organizations. Similarly, despite the industry emphasis on eco-certification and awards, there is little or no evidence that these actually yield any net marginal contribution to conservation, especially since they focus principally on environmental management technologies.

7. Political mechanisms are most far-reaching. The mechanisms which are most significant in a global conservation context are those which involve large-scale political lobbying, land-use or land tenure changes; where commercial tourism forms one of a suite of tools which, taken together, can effectively increase the overall area of the global conservation estate. Positive political effects can occur when tourism provides an incentive for governments to provide protection for ecologically valuable areas which are under threat from other sectors. Negative political effects can also occur, however, notably when property developers use ecotourism as an excuse to build high-impact infrastructure and private resorts inside protected areas. The scale of such effects depends particularly on the longevity and permanence of the structures concerned.

8. Effective conservation tourism tools show regional signatures. The mechanisms which are the most widespread and effective differ between countries and regions, depending on both political and economic factors. That is, there are regional signatures in the conservation tourism sector, as identified for ecotourism (Buckley, 2003a, 2009b) but not adventure tourism (Buckley, 2006, 2010). Experiments by companies such as &Beyond (2010) to transfer African models to other continents are thus of particular interest for future research in this field.

9. Private reserves are key in rich stable countries, where both wealth and stability are relative measures which must be considered in a regional context. In countries with strong economies, stable land tenure systems and a high proportion of land in private ownership, the most effective mechanism is the establishment of private reserves funded by upmarket lodges. This model is used in countries which fulfil those three conditions, especially in southern Africa and Latin America.

10. Community partnerships are key for communal land tenure. Many countries have large areas of relatively undeveloped land held under various forms of communal tenure. These may represent an unbroken descent of traditional tenure systems, as in several South Pacific nations; or modern government recognition of minority indigenous rights, as in parts of Australia and the Americas; or modern codification of majority land-use systems, as in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In each of these cases, conservation tourism can only operate effectively through partnerships with existing community control systems, even if those

partnerships also involve private tour operators, NGOs or national and international government agencies.

11. In less wealthy nations, tourism can support public protected areas. Many developing countries have parks which exist on paper but are very poorly resourced for on-ground management, because national governments are indebted, impoverished, ineffective or have other priorities. Such parks are commonly subject to encroachment and illegal use. Tourism is often the only or least destructive local land use which can provide both local economic incentives and the on-ground human presence to protect parks and endangered species against such impacts.

12. In developed nations, commercial tourism forms a small proportion of recreational visitation to existing public protected areas, and small-scale commercial tour operators are managed largely in line with independent visitors. Parks agencies believe that recreational use provides them with an ongoing political constituency, but there is no actual evidence for this, and in fact it seems more likely that the conservation constituency is far more widespread and diffuse than local recreational users. Pressures for access to public parks by large-scale tourism developers create continuing political difficulties for conservation. Private reserves do contribute to conservation in some developed nations. In many nations, only a small proportion of these are currently funded by tourism, but the role of tourism may well become more widespread in future.

13. Conservation tourism will be affected by climate change. Efforts to mitigate climate change will increase the costs of international travel and may also change its social perception in northern nations which generate outbound tourism. The relative attractiveness of different tourist destinations may also change (Buckley, 2008c). Conservation efforts which rely on income from international nature and wildlife tourists may falter if these flows are cut or reduced. This has already happened in areas where tourism has been reduced through political instabilities or disease.

14. Conservation tourism will be increasingly important under climate change. The world's protected area systems are necessary but not sufficient to protect global biodiversity and ecosystem services. Their effectiveness may be reduced further by climate change, especially in areas experiencing more intense and frequent droughts or changed temperature regimes.

Many hundreds of species-scale ecological effects of climate change have already been identified, and many more involving decoupling of interspecies interactions. One of the few possible adaptive responses by human social systems is to improve landscape-scale connectivity, and off-reserve conservation tourism is one key component of these efforts (Buckley, 2008a; Gallo *et al.*, 2009). Another key response, however, is to improve the resilience of ecosystems in existing protected areas, and one key step is to reduce the impacts of tourism.

15. From a policy perspective, it appears that conservation tourism is indeed growing at present and will indeed become a more significant component of both the tourism and conservation sectors in future. From a research perspective, this volume barely begins to catalogue the many newly formed conservation tourism enterprises. We need to compile a much more comprehensive set, with more complete social, economic and environmental information, and attempt a global-scale comparative analysis of net outcomes and the factors that influence them. A number of cooperative research efforts are already under way, in various countries, with this aim in mind; and we invite all of our colleagues worldwide who share these interests to contact us with their own insights and examples