ECOTOURISM PLANNING AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT: THEME A

UNEP/WTO Summary of Regional Preparatory Conferences and Discussion Paper for the World Ecotourism Summit
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This report summarises the main outputs of the preparatory conferences leading up to the World Summit in Ecotourism. The outputs discussed policies and planning at a range of scales, from international and national, to local and site specific. In addition, although there are other reports covering the 3 other conference themes, a number of these themes were addressed within some of the planning and policy development themed discussions, including; product development, regulations, costs and benefits, monitoring, and marketing. This seems to reinforce both the complexity of the subject and the interdependent nature of the themes.

1. ISSUES DISCUSSED

Key Overarching Issues and Challenges for Planning and Policy Development

Wide range of issues and challenges formed the the outputs of this Theme in every regional conference. The cross-cutting conference theme of “participation of stakeholders” was also strong. In many cases, the conference summaries seemed to direct their outputs/recommendations to higher government levels. This may be only natural, since it is normally governments which develop most plans and policies, and it is these very plans and policies which impact the ecotourism operator or communities most (no conference summaries examined planning and policy development of ecotourism businesses or projects). Also, those at the “grass roots” tend to feel un-empowered, or at least less involved than they feel they should be. So it may be natural for participants to address their recommendations upward to those who are currently doing the planning and policy development “on” or “for” them (or not, as is sometimes the case).

Note: Just at the WTO meetings more than 200 case studies were presented. A number of issues and challenges were of broad relevance across conference themes, and across most preparatory conferences. These tend to be within the mandate of national levels of government, and to involve multiple agencies, particularly those with protected areas mandates. It is considered that to date, there has been little development and management of the community sector by these managers. In addition, strategies tend to be driven externally, so are not implemented because they are not developed and “owned” locally.

Lacking or Conflicting National Planning and Policy Objectives

This was probably the largest issue that emerged, and was specifically highlighted at every regional preparatory conference. The challenges are multi-layered, and relate in particular to a lack of overall integrative vision by national governments, plus a lack of integration of various sector/ministry policies. The challenge is rooted in a lack of overarching sustainable development goals, perspectives, and mandates at senior government levels. In many cases, there are conflicting goals and mandates even within individual ministries or agencies, which may lead to arbitrary or uncoordinated decision-making.

Inconsistent or Nonexistent Policy/Institutional Frameworks for Ecotourism

A number of regional conferences discussed the need for ecotourism policy frameworks, as well as the related need to conduct careful ecotourism planning, since such destinations are often fragile (culturally or environmentally). All conferences felt it was senior Government’s responsibility to do strategic planning and policy-making for ecotourism.

Need for Transboundary Management

It was recognised at both international and regional levels, that ecotourism activities and resources did not necessarily adhere to administrative boundaries. This is also a challenge for parks and protected
areas. Ecosystems are a better basis for planning and policy making, yet are rarely the administrative area. While biological resources clearly cross administrative boundaries, cultures also cross these boundaries. The indigenous culture was recognised as being part of the ecosystem. The movement of visitors is also understood to cross boundaries, and these flows are being impeded by administrative requirements in some regions (e.g., CIS countries for both ship and land tourism).

Lack of Fiscal Commitment
Every regional conference mentioned the lack of financial resources for: protected areas planning and management; community education and empowerment; capacity building and training; research; and partnering. Budgets may be related to lack of ministry support or priority, but may be due to insufficient priority and resource allocation by the politicians.

Funding sources were also identified as lacking for entrepreneurs. This is difficult in many national economic climates, (particularly in regions with developing economies, such as Andean and Meso-America, African, Asian and Pacific regions). On a slightly different perspective, CIS countries feel that tourism should not be taxed more than other industries (e.g., through border fees, etc.) and the Arctic conference agreed.

Information is Lacking
There was discussion about some of the information required to do appropriate planning and development. In the main, those aspects identified as lacking included: quality research and analysis, resource inventories and other baseline data, and appropriate tools for planning and management of resources, impact, visitors, supply and demand.

Lack of Human Resource Capacity
There are many types of education, training and capacity building required, including government staff (due to lack of appropriate expertise, and to high staff turnover), but comments were mostly aimed at the community level. Capacity for a range of functions is required in individual entrepreneurs, particularly with respect to a broad range of business functions, as well as to knowledge of markets, hospitality, environmental issues, and the importance of socio-cultural perspectives and resource management. Capacity building is required among a range of community members with respect to such topics as hospitality, fulfilling visitor expectations, and how to become directly involved in ecotourism.

Empowerment of Local Communities Needed
The previous point is closely related to this need to see communities able to take more control in the management of ecotourism. It was agreed that communities should be involved in managing resources and benefits (directly and indirectly). Many regional conferences felt that ecotourism projects could be used to complement intensively-used destinations, reducing visitor pressures (which reduces disadvantages in other areas, e.g., Mountain areas, Europe). This included showing communities how they could be involved in planning and policy making processes, the benefits that might accrue, as well as how to benefit from ownership and control of ecotourism either directly, or through ecotourism planning and policy making initiatives, or through shaping ecotourism to galvanise local economies through a range of products, as well as to perform important conservation functions.

Enabling Participation of all Stakeholders
It was felt that planning and policy development is not carried out with much stakeholder involvement, and that often what stakeholder participation exists, tends to be unmeaningful. So strategies are often not implemented because they are not developed and “owned” locally. Meaningful involvement would lessen some related issues, such as concerns about maintaining
authenticity of social systems, indigenous and other cultures. It was felt that planners and policy developers should give stakeholders an opportunity to participate in non-conventional ways.

**Land Tenure**
A particularly important issue in Africa is the need to identify land tenure. It is difficult or impossible for indigenous peoples to develop land or facility based ecotourism if they cannot establish rights to the land. Legal mechanisms need to be in place for land rights to be recorded and established.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Key Crosscutting Recommendations**

The recommendations are presented as they relate to the main issues and challenges above.

**Use National and International Transboundary Management Approaches**
- International ecotourism planning and policies should be integrated across national and international boundaries, with respect to resource planning and management, and to visitor movement. Ecosystems are the appropriate management units, even if outside protected area boundaries.

**Government Should Take Responsibility in Planning and Policy Development**
- National level leadership and guidance should be demonstrated through consistent departmental and interdepartmental vision and objectives. Planning and policy development for ecotourism should be in the context of sustainable development objectives.
- Tourism planning and policy development should address all resources, and involve many sectors/departments (particularly for protected areas). For example, coastal area planning and management should include integrated strategies for air and water. Similarly, the tourism and culture sectors should collaborate (e.g., archaeological site conservation or presentation).
- Tourism planning (and protected area planning) should include clear goals for community development (e.g., community-owned micro-enterprise creation and development).
- In some regional conferences, ecotourism planning was said to be part of a larger sustainable tourism/development approach, while in other conferences, it was recommended that specific corridors and areas be delimited for ecotourism.

**Develop Appropriate Tools for Planning and Management**
- Tourism planning and management should incorporate a range of appropriate tools. E.g., environmental assessments, vision development, determining acceptable numbers/types of visitors in protected areas, land use planning, appropriate places/timing of visitors, pricing policies, zoning mechanisms, facility controls, interpretive tools, guidelines and codes.
- The development of an inventory of tourism assets, together with appropriate research, including biodiversity threats, and endangered species, should be part of ecotourism and broader planning.

**Plan Systematically for Protected Areas**
- Protection of critical areas was considered to be a foundation of ecotourism development and planning, and a primary goal of protected areas management (vs. visitor satisfaction). A protected areas planning framework should be developed for all countries/regions, within the context of an overall vision.
• Zoning is a strong tool that should be used in protected areas planning (including incorporating core areas and reserves, low and medium impact areas, and buffers). Zones should have strict regulations, and infrastructure and facilities should be in peripheral areas

Commit Adequate Financial Resources and Develop Appropriate Funding Mechanisms

• Government should view small-scale projects particularly favourably, through loans, grants, or other mechanisms, so as to ease/enable the entry of these enterprises into the marketplace. Support or subsidies should be done conditional on performance and impact monitoring related to ecotourism goals (e.g., defining targets, indicators, data collection, or biological conservation efforts)

• Adequate funding should be made available for ecotourism planning in protected areas, and government policies should mandate returning revenues to conservation of the protected areas (rather than to general revenues)

• Create appropriate funding mechanisms to help sustain partnerships (e.g., NGOs could act as a conduit for funding for projects or partnerships)

Governments, Agencies, NGOs and Others Should Build Local Capacity

• Training is the prime capacity building mechanism which is recommended to increase local employment, to add to product value, and to increase local business capabilities

• Training should be developed appropriately in terms of content, to reflect destination needs (e.g., CIS countries suggested accommodation management, guiding, languages). Similarly, the manner of delivery, training methods, and time frames, should be developed to suit the destination/recipient’s cultural and learning style and needs. Hands-on, and train-the-trainer, may be particularly appropriate

• Capacity building should be a focus (especially in Africa and South America) to enable better participation in the planning and policy development process, as well as to provide better planning results. Mechanisms should be developed which “translate and explain” the implications/meaning of proposed policies and plans to communities

Conserve Material Resources at all Levels

• Plans and policies should ensure that conservation of resources is included, via more effective and efficient use of resources, and measures to encourage energy conservation (use of renewable sources); water conservation (and storage); waste management (3Rs); sustainable biological resource use; and reduced imported materials (especially into islands). Use incentives, education, or other measures

• In Mountain regions and Europe particularly, sustainable transportation should be built into destinations, vacation resorts, and other areas by planners and policy makers. Similarly, tour packagers should include sustainable transportation into their products, and should feature this as a consumer benefit/convenience in their package

• It is recommended that environmental or community standards or guidelines be developed (e.g., for eco-accommodation in Asia-Pacific, or for activity limits in Andean South America)

Build multi-Stakeholder Participation into Planning and Policy Development Processes

• Consulting a wide range of stakeholders (including those at the destination, and those outside the destination) should be built into any tourism or other planning process, as well as into policy development, to develop a sense of community and ownership. In particular, there should be community input into regulation development. Consultation processes should be inclusive and transparent, with particular efforts to include the disadvantaged or the traditionally voiceless (e.g.,
indigenous groups, women, elders or youth). Planning for communities should incorporate a range of benefits and goals for the community, and should ensure a bottom-up/community approach.

- The manner of consultation and participation mechanisms should be culturally appropriate to the target groups, and may vary within one planning or policy development process.

**Recommendations for Environmental Conservation**

**Educate Communities about Biodiversity and Conservation**

- Participatory processes should be used to educate local people about the value of diversity in ecotourism development, and on how they can conserve at operation/community levels.

- Private companies (water or land operators) should pursue voluntary initiatives with stakeholders to promote consumer awareness of environmentally and socially responsible tourism, and what would work for both parties in the destination.

**Manage Impacts**

- Apply a range of approaches and tools for impact management. Carrying capacity studies were recommended to manage impact. Many conferences were focussed on this approach, but they did not seem aware of the very large number of alternative tools to address problems of growth, impact or visitor activities and behaviour. Recommendations generally mentioned such specific and limited resource variables as water supply (in desert or island areas) or numbers of beds available locally, where carrying capacity (or identifying limiting variable threshold) might be a valuable tool.

- Curb unbridled growth through a range of other mechanisms (than a numbers limit). This was recommended as appropriate to deal with specific problems, such as managing group size or group frequency or other use intensity management tools.

**Manage Visitors**

- On the one hand, visitor management was recommended to reduce/manage impact, while on the other, it was recommended that protected areas or even countries/regions not have such complex rules that visitation is “choked off”. Demand management (in terms of type, numbers, concentration, and spread) was recommended, so some areas might be developed as tourist nodes or “compact tourist destinations”; while other areas may encourage more visitor spread (e.g., to disadvantaged rural or mountain areas).

- Use information and education as strong management tools (e.g., via signposts, alternative routes, different entry points, information centres, interpretive centres, guides, interpretation).

**Recommendations for Economic Development**

**Build Small Business Capacities and Competencies**

- Strengthen small and medium sized (SME) and micro enterprises, to position them for success (particularly recommended in Africa). Such training programs might include business start-up, hospitality, investment, entrepreneurial activities, management, accommodations management, market analysis, marketing and sustainability. Other types of training programs should include tour guiding, interpretation, and responses to specific local needs.
**Provide Government and other Support for Community Level Ecotourism**

- Infrastructural support should be provided (adjacent to parks and protected areas or within designated zones) that assist local communities in ecotourism development (e.g., signage, accommodation, routes, transportation, etc.).

- Support should include building on existing subsistence or economic activities. Ecotourism activities should be used to support development of disadvantaged areas and alleviate poverty reduction (e.g., on Islands, or in rural poor areas), through planning and decision-making. Means could include resource use/development policies, affirmative action policies, capacity building, and focussed education. Micro-credit programs should be developed to assist small scale enterprises. The Americas conference recommended that businesses with community involvement should be favoured over multi-national companies

- Government should not be involved in actual ecotourism business operations/delivery. This enables entrepreneurial capabilities to flourish, and monitoring and regulation to be easier

**Recommendations for Social and Cultural Benefits**

**Involve Communities and Give Ownership**

- Encourage community involvement in social and cultural programming, to provide direct economic and cultural benefits, as well as to enhance visitor experiences

- Involve communities and all operators in monitoring impacts, or other feedback requirements

- Obtain community input about traditional and cultural activities, to determine the activities of value to them, to sustain these via planning and policy development, and to preserve critical elements of a culture (e.g., aboriginal land based economic activities)

**Training and Education**

- Education and awareness-building need to be directed to the full range of stakeholders, and need to address all elements of sustainability – conservation and protection; economic feasibility; and socio-cultural benefits of ecotourism. Awareness campaigns are needed (directed towards communities) about ecotourism regulations and policies

- Training should be given not only to those directly involved in ecotourism, but to general community residents, particularly related to tourism pros and cons, hospitality training, how to obtain added value from visitors, and how to manage and take control of tourism locally

- Ensure that governments, agencies, tour operators, and “outside” companies, know that they have some responsibilities/opportunities in “unblocking” certain problems which communities have (which come from “outside” the communities, since locals are often only in control of “internal” elements of their current condition

**Recommendations for Multi-Stakeholder Participation**

**Joint Ventures:**

- Facilitation of community level joint ventures should occur, particularly with the private sector (such ventures could be related to providing services or goods for sale). This could be built into planning, or into policy initiatives through incentives, subsidies, demonstrations, training programs, etc.
Planning and Policy Development Activities

- NGOs should develop more short-term planning processes that could be transferred effectively to communities for their future use
- Cruise ships could take the initiative to make contact and work with a range of stakeholders, to ensure that measures are implemented that realise environmental protection (Arctic conference). By the same token, federal (or senior levels of) government should take the initiative to involve other levels (including communities). Conditions of operation should be established for marine based operations as well as terrestrial operators.

3. POINTS FOR FURTHER DEBATE

Many of the preparatory conference planning and policy development recommendations summarised above are relatively general, as well as directed at what “others” should do, particularly senior levels of government, and especially with respect to coordinating activities both horizontally (between agencies), and vertically (from national to community levels). Discussions at the World Ecotourism Summit may wish to consider the fact that there is a need for good practices to be highlighted in this area, as well as specific tools to enable appropriate implementation. Suggested topics for discussion might include:

- The need to manage impact or to limit tourists, and how to do this, is a difficult issue. More specific discussion or examples of multiple approaches and mechanisms would be useful
- The approach of participatory and adaptive (co)-management could be a fruitful line of discussion
- There is a need for good practices to be highlighted in development of legislative, regulatory and policy tools, which address community-based problems
- While discussions focussed on communities to a large extent, there is little evidence of a focus on the needs and perspectives of indigenous peoples. How to empower them through planning and policy development would be a helpful discussion, as well as all the topic areas
- Those mechanisms which achieve both environmental and socio-cultural benefits should be explored
- How to persuade those who “don’t know they don’t know” to become involved in generating solutions should be addressed
- How to involve politicians, persuade them of the benefits of a more integrated approach, and to make them care about environmental values.
- Practical suggestions for how communities can take control of their future
5. Short Biographical Note

Pamela Wight is CEO of Pam Wight & Associates, an international consultancy based in Canada and specialising in Sustainable Tourism planning and development, with a focus on aboriginal projects, parks and protected areas, ecotourism, impact management, and business and destination planning and development. In addition, participatory approaches, training, and capacity building for developing communities are a hallmark. The primary focus is on practical approaches to real-world situations, and related to this, she has produced a range of works focusing on Best Practices in sustainable tourism.

Clients range from the private sector to NGOs to all levels of government, including the World Tourism Organisation and United Nations Environment Programme. Pamela began consulting in 1974, has published extensively, spent 7 years in government, and volunteers in many related areas, including sitting on The International Ecotourism Advisory Board.