

ECOTOURISM

Nature tourism is a popular and growing sector of international tourism and holiday activities, but to go one step further, there is ecotourism. This is defined as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education' (TIES, 2015).

The ecotourism industry doesn't focus on zip-lining through the forest or similar activities which we perhaps used to associate with getting closer to nature. Instead, it's about tying in conservation and sustainable travel, engaging in experiences run by local individuals with monies earned going back into their communities - this can help to protect natural and cultural heritages and safeguard biodiversity. By its very nature, this tourism industry is low impact, centred on sustainable development, and embraces small groups of like-minded people who want to preserve these pristine environments. To achieve this, concerted efforts are employed in the careful management of resources, such as water, energy and waste; plus supporting the local populations.

RISKS TO TRAVELLERS

The risks to travellers participating in eco or nature tourism are largely the same as for any other overseas trip and will depend on the itinerary, time of year, the length of the stay, planned activities, and pre-existing health conditions, amongst others.

However, in addition to the typical issues associated with overseas travel, the pursuits favoured in ecotourism are more likely to focus on undertaking risky activities in extreme or remote environments. Activities such as mountain climbing adds the risk of [high altitude illness](#), while decompression sickness is a potential hazard of scuba diving, and travel in a motor vehicle can also be risky when driving through remote regions with poor infrastructure.

Infectious disease dangers to ecotourists in low resource settings are more likely to include intestinal pathogens acquired through faecal-oral transmission, giving rise to [travellers' diarrhoea](#), or even [hepatitis A](#), [typhoid fever](#) or [cholera](#).

Ecotourists must also be mindful of activities which would put them in direct or indirect contact with wildlife. Most regions of the world report [rabies](#), a fatal infection acquired through contact with the saliva or brain tissue of an infected mammal; but other infections which are less commonly known include the risk of histoplasmosis from bat guano – a potential hazard with caving - and the bacterial infection [leptospirosis](#) contracted through exposure of broken skin areas to water contaminated with animal urine. This list is not exhaustive.

MINIMISING IMPACT ON WILDLIFE AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

While we have mentioned the risk that some animals can pose to humans, it is important to note that humans are also responsible for the transmission of pathogens to animals (known as anthroponozoonoses), especially in the setting of ecotourism when tourists experience direct encounters with wildlife. Some non-human primate populations under study in Africa have shown signs of viral infections suspected to have been transmitted from humans. We don't know the full extent of the impact we have in this type of transmission, but the numbers of people visiting wildlife sanctuaries has grown exponentially in recent years and for this reason, it is important that tourists maintain a respectful distance from wild animals. In some settings, tourists must adhere to testing and vaccination requirements in order to protect the animals i.e., [TB](#) and [influenza](#).

Not only does the wildlife face risks from their interactions with eco-travellers, the visitors may pose a threat to local community members in the area. This might involve habitat degradation, the introduction of infectious diseases (including sexually transmitted infections) and invasive species, pollution, overcrowding, and even the facilitation of sex trade.

PRINCIPLES OF ECOTOURISM

Those partaking in ecotourism should adopt the following ecotourism industry principles:

- Diminish physical, social, behavioural, and psychological impacts.
- There should be environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Experiences should be positive for both visitors and hosts.
- There should be a correlation between financial benefits and conservation.
- Financial benefits should be for both local people and private industry.
- Experiences should be memorable to visitors and help raise understanding of host countries' political, environmental and social climates.
- Facilities should be designed and constructed to be low-impact and sustainable.
- The rights and spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous People in the community should be recognised and valued.

ECOTOURISM PARTICIPATION - LEAVE NO TRACE

Together with the principles above, each traveller should maintain minimum standards in managing the local environment: minimal-impact sustainable camping (including responsible garbage disposal), maximising resource conservation and using alternative energy sources whenever possible.

INSURANCE

The ecotourist should ensure their travel insurance will cover them for their planned sports or activities, in case of emergency and/or evacuation, and not just rely on a standard policy or the 'free' one provided by their credit card. It is important to fully declare all specific ecotourist activities in the application - by default most policies don't cover adventurous activities and there will be an option to pay extra for the coverage. Finally, read the policy's product disclosure statement (PDS) carefully and ask questions if you are unsure of any of the information. We stress again that emergency evacuation insurance must be included.

WHAT TO PACK

There are a few extra items ecotourists should consider packing on top of the usual inclusions recommended for overseas travel, with an emphasis on those which will help them make the most of the natural environment while 'Leaving No Trace' i.e. to adhere to sustainable practices and be a responsible ecotourist.

Sunscreen: Pack sunscreen free of oxybenzone to protect reefs and marine life.

Reusable containers for toiletries: Don't use single-use travel-size versions for your personal care products, instead use reusable bottles; also pack biodegradable soap.

A re-usable water bottle: Pack a [water bottle with filter](#), [Steripen](#), [Go Fresh straw](#), &/or [water purification tablets](#) – these are all great ways to reduce waste and ensure you don't get sick from drinking contaminated or environmental water sources.

A lightweight backpack: Taking a smaller backpack will automatically reduce your packing list down to the essentials.

A refuse bag: So you don't leave your rubbish behind.

Versatile clothing: Pack comfortable, easy to match clothing which is useful under most climate and weather conditions - think full-zip pants that convert into shorts and jackets which can be worn with or without an inner layer.

First aid kit: [A first aid kit](#) and one for gastro-intestinal infections, plus any prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines (enough to last your whole trip, plus a little extra, just in case), insect repellent, sunscreen (*see above*) and hand sanitiser. Additional items will depend on the remote nature of your travel: spare batteries and power pack, headlamp, maps, duct tape, safety pins, multi- tool, thermometer, cable ties, toilet paper, matches etc.

The bottom line ... the ecotourism industry centres on three main elements:

- the wellbeing of the local environment
- the wellbeing of the locals while respecting their culture
- a high-quality experience for the tourists

References:

- The International Ecotourism Society (TIES): <https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/>
- Earth 911: <https://earth911.com/living-well-being/travel-living/responsible-tourism-5-tips/>
- ZME Science: <https://www.zmescience.com/other/feature-post/what-is-ecotourism/>
- International Association for Medical Assistance to travellers (IAMAT): How to know the risks of ecotourism <https://www.iamat.org/health-risks-of-ecotourism>