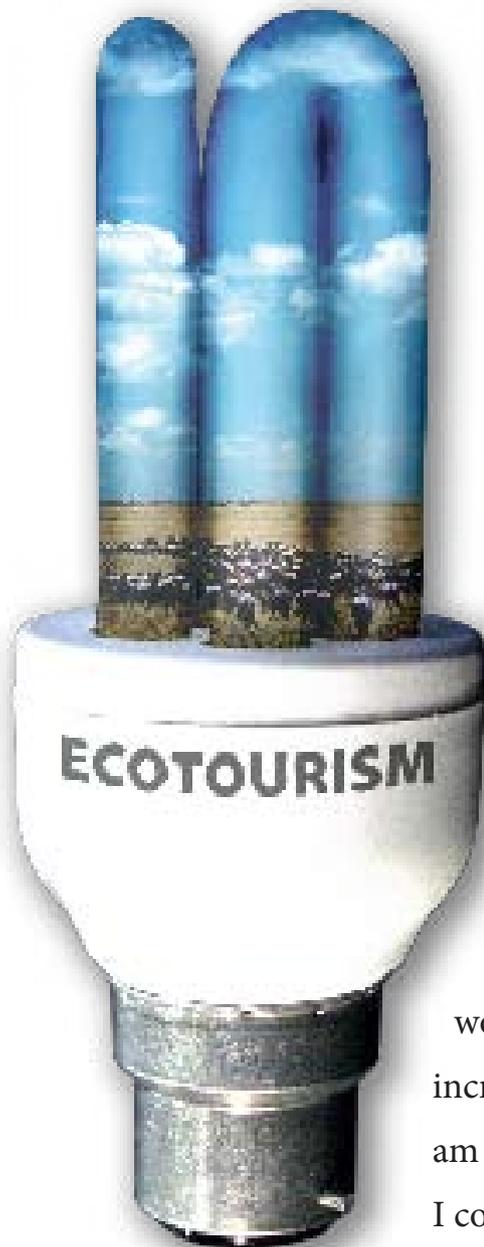


Is ecotourism **WORKING?**



I write, I photograph and I guide. These are my chosen activities, and I do them because they make my life meaningful. I also do them because I believe that our planet and its wilderness areas and wildlife are under threat, and that I have a responsibility to do something about it. I have, by and large, bought into the accepted principles of how best to manage this threat and secure what is left of our natural world. But, of late, I have become increasingly mindful of a quandary: am I part of the solution, or do I contribute to the problem? ▶

Text & photographs by Ian Michler



ABOVE During peak game-viewing months, more than 200 vehicles per day enter the Ngorongoro Crater, which is barely 250 square kilometres.

OPPOSITE, TOP The annual migration, which includes approximately 1.5 million wildebeest, is the major wildlife attraction for visitors to East Africa.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM South Africa's Table Mountain National Park straddles much of the Cape Peninsula, including Cape Point. Last year, it attracted an estimated 1.6 million visitors, a figure forecast to reach three million by 2010.

There is a proverb that says: 'Treat the earth well, it was not given to you by your parents. It was loaned to you by your children.' It encapsulates the conundrum the world faces and, more specifically, it relates to those of us who live and work in the wilderness and are involved in the sector of the tourism industry that promotes usage of natural resources. On one hand, to a greater or lesser degree, we strive to preserve, conserve and protect the wilderness and its diversity of species, as well as respect the people who live in the places we visit. On the other hand, the essence of what we do – supposedly to achieve these aims – seems to be undermining what we believe we are achieving. Is the way we manage our tourism industry part of the solution, or at the heart of the problem?

The first expression of concern about the direction of the tourism industry came from the broad-based 'green movements' that were established in the 1970s and '80s. In general, these movements focused on economic growth patterns and their environmental consequences, but their tenets influenced some members of the tourism industry who started to prioritise the environment and how

it was impacted upon, rather than targeting the desires of the tourist.

There was already a basis for this thinking – that of sustainable development or sustainability, and its co-concept, sustainable utilisation. Although rooted in centuries-old thinking and writing, it can be argued that the concept was brought into mainstream use by the Brundtland Commission. Under the auspices of the United Nations, its 1987 report *Our Common Future* addressed society's growth limits, the population explosion, resource depletion, the poverty situation and ways of balancing socio-economic development needs with environmental concerns.

Amongst other things, the report proposed that substantial development was needed to raise the standard of living of the poor in a manner that was not detrimental to the environment. The concept of sustainable development was hailed as the way forward, and was defined as: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. There were sceptics but, generally, it was received enthusiastically across the globe. It became entrenched at the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, and was further endorsed at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The first mention of 'sustainable use' dates back to a 1980 report released by the IUCN and WWF entitled *World Conservation Strategy*, which referred to the 'rational use of natural resources'. The term became a staple of the 1990s, when the same agencies published *Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living*. Promoting the sustainable harvesting of wildlife and plants, its tone struck a chord with most of the conservation and tourism world as the preservationist approach – leaving wilderness untouched and undeveloped – was falling into disfavour.

In southern and East Africa, sustainable utilisation has become the cornerstone for conservation, wildlife management and tourism policies, and is endorsed by most private operators and environmental and conservation agencies. It is also one of the core



objectives of the IUCN's Convention on Biological Diversity, which has been signed by more than 100 countries.

It was at around this time – the early 1990s – that the 'Wise Use' movement gained momentum in the US. Founded as a counter to environmental movements, it promoted the commercial exploitation of all natural resources and spoke for those who owned and worked the 'middle landscape' – the land between industrialised urban centres and true wilderness. In Africa, the paradigm that merged ecology with economics had already taken root, particularly in South Africa and Zimbabwe, but it was given a major boost by the Wise Use philosophy. Many private game-farm owners became instant converts, and various southern African organisations were soon touting the 'if it pays, it stays' line.

It was inevitable, then, that the notion of the ecologically aware traveller or 'ecotourist' would be linked to the sustainability banner, and that all related wilderness and wildlife pursuits would become bedfellows.



The term 'ecotourism' emerged in 1983 and is generally attributed to the Mexican architect and environmentalist Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin (who still serves as a Special Advisor on Ecotourism to the IUCN and World Tourism Organisation). Like sustainability, its definition has ►

In southern and East Africa, sustainable utilisation has become the cornerstone for conservation, wildlife management and tourism policies



After almost two decades of sustainable utilisation and ecotourism, how effective have these twin concepts been in protecting and conserving the wilderness?



ABOVE Although Botswana prides itself in having a low-volume tourism policy, destinations such as the Savuti Marsh (above) and the Chobe River waterfront can become overcrowded during peak game-viewing periods.

OPPOSITE, TOP The Zanzibari tourism industry flourishes because of the high number of Europeans and South Africans who visit the islands on inexpensive week-long package tours.

OPPOSITE If it pays, it stays. Gorilla-focused ecotourism is all that protects the fragile boundary of the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest from slash-and-burn agriculture.

evolved over the years, but in its uncorrupted form, ecotourism embraces the following principles: responsible and low-impact travel, adherence to ecological principles, conservation of biodiversity, respect for local laws and cultures, benefit-sharing for local communities with their informed consent, and educational input.

The concept gained ground during the 1990s, and reached global acceptance as a niche market in 2002 with the UN-designated International Year of Ecotourism. Other phrases have also come into use within the industry, such as sustainable tourism, adventure tourism, geotourism, safari tourism, ecotravel and Neat (nature, eco- and adventure tourism). More recently, and because of the onerous nature of the definitions, some operators are moving away from ecotourism altogether, preferring 'nature-based' tourism instead.

Often used interchangeably, ecotourism and sustainable utilisation are quoted by almost anyone within tourism and conservation who seeks validation for their operation. So ubiquitous have these terms become that it could be argued that they are now devoid of meaning. An ecotourist, for example, could be anyone from a lone hiker in the Rwenzori Mountains of Uganda to a member of a 4x4 convoy in the Moremi Game Reserve in Botswana, or a trophy hunter shooting a lion in Namibia. Ecotourism operators would include a Samburu warrior offering his services as a birding guide in northern Kenya, a large hotel on the edge of the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania, and a farmer conducting tours of cages filled with captive-bred predators in South Africa's 'middle landscape'.

Although there are as many codes of conduct, charters and certification programmes as there are definitions

within the industry, most have no sound verification process and none has legally binding consequences. 'Greenwashing' is increasingly commonplace.

Both southern and East Africa have a vast range of operations that are regarded as ecotourism destinations – low-budget campsites, adventure operators and multi-use community projects through to super-luxury lodges and hotels in national parks and private wildlife areas. Most are linked, in some way, to conservation initiatives and wildlife management projects, and a number have legitimate community participation schemes in place.

But, after almost two decades of sustainable utilisation and ecotourism, how effective have these twin concepts been in protecting and conserving the wilderness and its wildlife? Have they merely become convenient catch phrases hiding cumulative impacts? To what extent have they been a model for true, substantive community participation, ownership and poverty reduction, or are they simply a case of lip service?

Some things are certain: the number of tourists and tourism destinations is growing and our demands on the wilderness are intensifying. Traditional communities are becoming increasingly commoditised and our impact levels or 'ecological footprints' are mounting. Natural habitat

continues to be destroyed, species extinction is occurring at unparalleled rates and income disparity is wider than ever.

So where is it going wrong? With the vagaries and deceptions that exist in the definitions, it is hardly surprising that there are substantial shortcomings in the way ecotourism and sustainable development are practised. For many lodge owners and travel operators, this means adhering to sound ecological principles in the field. But who, when visiting national parks and well-frequented private reserves throughout southern and East Africa, has not experienced guides behaving inexcusably at game sightings? While the more reputable operators in private concessions and reserves exercise some control, the melee that exists around animals in many parks is one of the most outrageous aspects within the photographic safari industry, yet it continues.

And, even when operators do comply in the field, have they followed environmentally sensitive methods in constructing a lodge or camp? Building methods, the materials used, waste disposal, insensitive use of generators and wasting water and electricity are areas where many operators and lodges fall woefully short. This is not helped by an inclination to pander to the excessive demands of tourists.

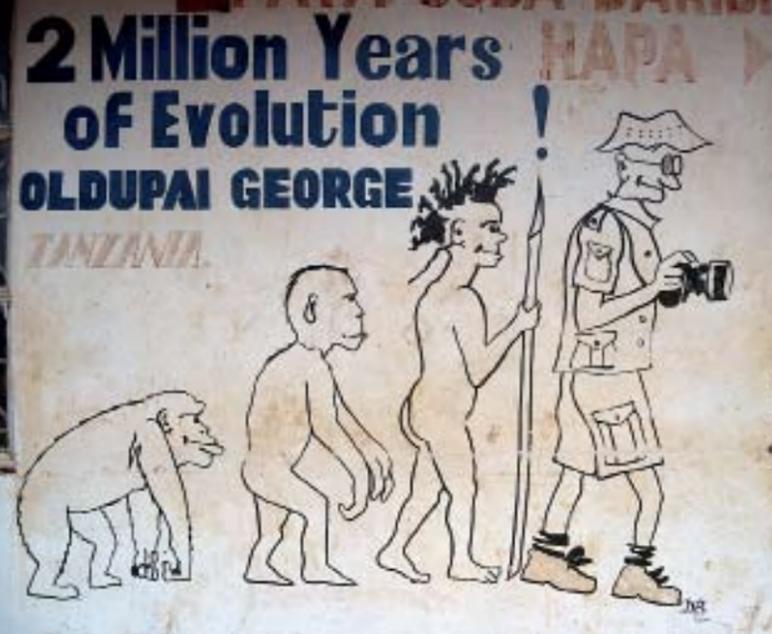
Modern luxury conveniences, such as air-conditioning and swimming pools for every room, compromise many intentions of running an ecologically sound operation.

The issue of size, whether determined by beds or game-drive vehicles, needs closer attention. Should it be a determining factor in ecotourism, and if so, what is an acceptable cut-off? How many more vehicles can the Ngorongoro Crater take, how many more lodges should be allowed in the Sabi Sand, and how many more people can be crammed into the Masai Mara during the annual river crossings? The number and size of hotels and resorts that blight the east coast of Zanzibar (and they are still going up) has obliterated any chance of community participation taking hold there, not to mention the severe environmental pressures that they place on the land and coral kingdom.

On an operational level, there are issues too: the use of low-flying helicopters or light aircraft over wildlife; the merits of motorised boats versus self-propelled water craft; large or small game-drive vehicles; the curio and artefacts industry; and the failure of many community tourism projects.

If we remind ourselves that we are in this to conserve and protect the wilderness, why do we allow these practices to persist, and why is there still no comprehensive, reliable and





ABOVE Is ecotourism a case of one step forward and two steps back? This parody appears on the wall of a restaurant in Karatu, Tanzania.

BELOW 'Sustainable use' is a philosophy that informs ecotourism practices, but distinguishing between the real and the greenwashed can be difficult. Here, crafters make a living selling their wares to tourists, but they are using threatened hard wood species.

binding method of measuring the ecological footprints of respective operators or lodges?

Tourism has a powerful and influential supporting cast that makes a tidy living off its presence and products. Journalists, photographers, film-makers and agents – as effective marketers as any in the industry – set the latest trends in tourism and are able to shine the light of acceptance or suspicion.

Are we, the media, sufficiently enquiring of our hosts and of the state of ecotourism? Do we observe environmental principles when going about our own business? As journalists, we are often guilty of accepting a freebie to a luxurious lodge or exotic destination in exchange for an article that overlooks obvious shortcomings and transgressions. There are photographers and film-makers that overstep the bounds of acceptability and ethics, inciting animals into uncharacteristic behaviour, all for the perfect shot. Agents, too, play a crucial role in influencing the final itinerary choice of travellers – and need to be educated themselves if they are to fulfil it.



Governments are also involved. Because they follow agendas that are dictated by economic solutions and the next election, long-term decisions about safeguarding the environment are often not priorities. This is particularly relevant in less-developed nations where environmental sustainability has been coupled directly with socio-economic development, yet competes for funding and resources. Environmental postings are regarded as junior portfolios and budgetary funding is minimal when compared with that of other ministries.

And what of the money? We are told that much of the revenue generation is used to protect the environment further, but does anyone, for example,

Have we bluffed ourselves into thinking that our right to utilisation is an open-ended and unconstrained relationship with the wilderness?

know what turnover the Ngorongoro Conservation Area generates annually and how much of it goes back into the conservation budget? Has anyone seen the audited income and expenditure statements from the Kenya Wildlife Services? How much are Namibian authorities really spending on research and park maintenance in Etosha National Park?

And so we come to the heart of it. Has this uncomfortable state of affairs arisen because notions of sustainability have been misunderstood and misapplied? Given the plethora of complex definitions, we could be forgiven for thinking so. But, I believe that the twin concepts underpinning ecotourism – sustainable development and utilisation – are themselves flawed.

They are human-centric initiatives that are driven by economic considerations. They speak primarily in terms of consumption, growth, cost benefits and self-sufficiency and they are ultimately measured by returns on investment and profit levels. They meet the needs of one species only, that of *Homo sapiens*, and they contradict the aims we have set for conservation.

The loophole is in the ambiguity of the definitions, which allows us, as adherents, to place the emphasis on development rather than sustainability without accountability for our actions. Surely we cannot believe that tourism, in whatever form, feeds off an infinite



resource? Or, to put it another way, have we bluffed ourselves into thinking that our right to utilisation is an open-ended and unconstrained relationship with the wilderness?

Implicit in all the definitions is the notion that wilderness only has value and integrity if it can be used for financial benefit. This is particularly apparent in the trophy hunting sphere and amongst the larger tourism operators where the existence of wildlife and conservation efforts is judged purely in monetary terms. It is an assumption that leads, as we have seen, to over-utilisation.

On this basis, our most valuable asset is not reflected in the balance sheets of accountability, and there is no provision for our moral and ethical obligation towards environmental sustainability. Under the pressure of commercialisation, it is not unrealistic to imagine golf courses and casinos in South Africa's major national parks, a mega-lift system up Mt Kilimanjaro and corporate naming rights on the Masai Mara. These are extreme examples, but utilisation must be emphasised in a way that includes

explicit constraints. Limits to usage and access are essential and a strict, universally applied auditing system must be in place before we can make any reference to sustainability.

The core definitions and the aims and objectives of ecotourism need to be redefined. Consumptive use should include all forms of utilisation, whether it is hunting, community harvesting, ranching or photographic-based safari tourism; non-consumptive use should be designated as exactly that – areas of wilderness where no form of human activity is allowed.

In a bygone era, those naturalists, explorers, guides and trophy hunters who opened up the wilderness areas to tourism were pioneers of a sort. Popular literature and films marvelled at their exploits, but their time has long gone. Those presently involved in these arenas, whether it is through conservation or wildlife-based tourism, need to be pioneers of a far more decisive and less glamorous type. They are working under the relentless pressures of resource and land-use competition, and environments in decline. ■

This Samburu guide in northern Kenya earns a living from ecotourism. Besides subsistence agriculture, it is often the only form of economic activity in rural areas.