

## Ecotourism: Fueling Development in Southern Africa

*“Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people” – the Ecotourism Society*

### What is ecotourism ?

Tourism may be the world’s largest industry, but if poorly managed, the costs of tourism often outweigh the benefits as large numbers of tourists contribute to environmental degradation and most of the profits are made by foreign-owned travel companies and airlines. Although international tourism earns foreign exchange for developing countries, the World Resources Institute estimated that 55 cents of every dollar spent in developing countries by tourists leaks back to developed countries as imports. There can also be negative influences on local art, languages and culture and increases in crime and prostitution.

Ecotourism is meant to be different. Originally used to denote nature travel, “ecotourism”, in its strictest sense means travel which makes a low impact on the environment whilst contributing to local sustainable development and encouraging environmental conservation.

### Contributing to rural development in southern Africa

Real ecotourism is potentially a powerful tool for economic development in the South, especially as it is the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry - with an estimated growth rate of 10 - 15 % per year. When well-managed, ecotourism —

- creates jobs and training opportunities for local residents;
- stimulates the local economy -
  - directly through tourism revenues;
  - through secondary sectors (by the provision of food and transport for example); and
  - in the informal sector - through the selling of handicrafts and souvenirs;
- promotes environmental education and awareness as well as conservation; and
- brings in significant amounts of foreign currency.

There are already early indications of how useful ecotourism can be in fuelling economic growth —

- The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) calculated that, out of US\$55 billion earned by tourism in developing countries in 1988, about \$12 billion came from ecotourism;
- South magazine estimated that 50 million people already hold tourism-related jobs in developing countries and this will grow as the number of ecotourists in the region increases.

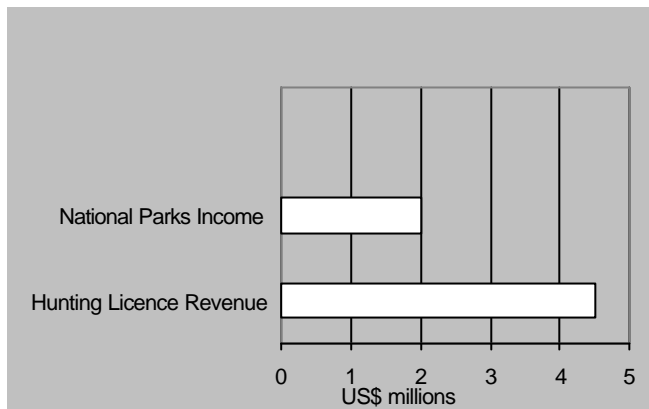
Field studies have shown that ecotourism can successfully contribute to sustainable rural development provided it is well-regulated and managed by local communities who receive direct benefits from the tourists, both in terms of finances and employment (**Box 1**).

#### **Box 1 : Community-based tourism development in Senegal**

*Thirteen rural communities in Senegal are charting the course of their development using profits received from ecotourism. Each community has set up and manages a tourist facility where foreign visitors come to stay and enjoy the natural scenery and learn about local culture. Some visitors even volunteer in agricultural and construction projects. In 1990 about 20,000 tourists generated about US\$253,000 which was distributed by locally elected committees for community development projects such as building maternity clinics and schools, and interest-free loans to villagers to start income-generation projects and investing in local industries such as market gardening and furniture making. One committee used the funds to build a training centre to teach people how to fish sustainably and another invested in water cisterns. Twenty years after the first sites were established, the project has resulted in tangible development benefits for the communities as well as increased environmental awareness and local participation in conservation.*

## Trophy hunters in southern Africa : the ultimate ecotourists?

It may come as a surprise that trophy hunters are hailed as “the ultimate ecotourists” in southern Africa. Recent studies report that over 90% of the revenues earned by rural communities from wildlife come from foreign trophy hunters who come to the region to hunt elephant, buffalo or lion. Hunters have a much lower impact on the environment than photographic tourists as they do not demand such high standards of accommodation and transport and tend to travel in smaller numbers. They also pay much higher fees (**Fig 1**) which can be used to fund local development projects.



**Figure 1:** Comparison of revenues from hunting licences with national parks income in Tanzania in 1990.

In addition to contributing financially to rural development, hunting has added conservation benefits. For most rural Africans there is little incentive to preserve wildlife, as large animals such as elephant and lion prey on their livestock and trample their crops and are a serious threat to their livelihood and sometimes their lives. However, given a steady income from trophy hunting, they have the incentive to conserve their wildlife as well as the resources to protect their villages and crops. The **CAMPFIRE** programme in Zimbabwe (see **Box 2** below) is an example of such a system.

### ***Box 2 : Hunting contributes to development in Dande Communal Land, Zimbabwe***

*Under Zimbabwe's innovative CAMPFIRE programme, the people of Masoka village in north-eastern Zimbabwe have built a primary school, a shop and a clinic on proceeds generated through hunting on their communal lands. Together with NGOs and government agencies, every year the community determines the quota of large game available on its lands for hunting and leases its hunting concession to a professional safari hunting company. Each year about 200 villagers receive one third of the profits from hunting and, in 1993, this amounted to some US\$40,500. The villagers decide themselves on how much they will retain as household dividends and how much they will invest in community development projects.*

## The way forward

To realise the full potential of ecotourism as a tool for sustainable development in the South, there are several important steps that must be taken —

- land tenure and natural resource use-rights must be restored to local communities;
- local communities must be encouraged to participate in designing ecotourism management plans in their regions (this needs training in environmental management, tourism and sustainable development);
- international standard guidelines for ecotourism must be developed and adhered to; and
- trophy hunting must be recognised as a legitimate form of ecotourism.