

**FORUM:** United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

**QUESTION OF:** Discussing the promotion of ecotourism as a tool for biodiversity conservation

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**POSITION:** Deputy President

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Ecotourism is a special type of tourism that involves the tourist's involvement with the natural environment around them, including through learning experiences and varying activity that involves the appreciation and protection of the environment. Evidently, as tourist enterprises are having an ever larger impact on the climate crisis, ecotourism poses as a promising concept for the future of the planet. Ecotourism has the potential to mitigate the consequences of traditional tourism, also known as mass tourism, on the environment.

The ecotourism industry is among the fastest-growing in the world, and is estimated to continue with such trends in coming years. It may seem that this growth is positive for the natural environments of the world, and for their inhabitants. However, there are many factors that may overturn this naïve belief. In practice, ecotourism is difficult to implement due to factors such as exploitation from foreign investors, bribing, or even technological difficulties. Thus, In order to ensure that the environmental benefits associated with ecotourism become reality, the United Nations World Tourism Organization has a duty to define a cohesive set of rules and best practices for the entire industry, and warn each member state about the risks posed.

## **DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS**

### **Ecotourism**

The UNWTO defines ecotourism as a form of nature-based tourism where “the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional

cultures prevailing in natural areas”.<sup>1</sup> Ecotourism can have a widespread impact on both the tourist and the destination.

### **Biodiversity**

At the technical level, biodiversity is a number denoting the amount of unique species that exist in an ecosystem.<sup>2</sup> Biodiversity is not considered an accurate marker of the quality of an ecosystem. This is because biodiversity is not a holistic metric, and it excludes factors like the local climate or terrain. For instance, the Amazon rainforest has a much greater biodiversity than the Sahara desert. However, the Amazon rainforest is in worse shape. Thus, a more accurate marker of the state of an ecosystem is the biodiversity over time, since it allows us to see the effects of various events on an ecosystem, and not just its current state.

### **Mass Tourism**

The term mass tourism refers to the form of tourism which is considered the “standard form of tourism” by most people. Mass tourism is the type of tourism where hundreds of thousands of people visit the same destination, typically in an organized way. This kind of tourism is the tourism that can be observed in popular destinations like Athens or Paris.<sup>3</sup>

### **Natural Reserve**

A natural reserve is some area designated by a government that represents great environmental value. Oftentimes, natural reserves block most commercial activity in an area. This regulation pushes harmful activity out of the natural reserve.

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<sup>1</sup> UNWTO, “Ecotourism and Protected areas”, accessed Jul. 16 2024. web.  
<<https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development/ecotourism-and-protected-areas>>

<sup>2</sup>National Geographic Society, “Biodiversity”, National Geographic, web,  
<<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/biodiversity/>>

<sup>3</sup>Stainton, Hayley, “The mass tourism industry EXPLAINED”, Tourism Teacher, web,  
<<https://tourismteacher.com/mass-tourism>>

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

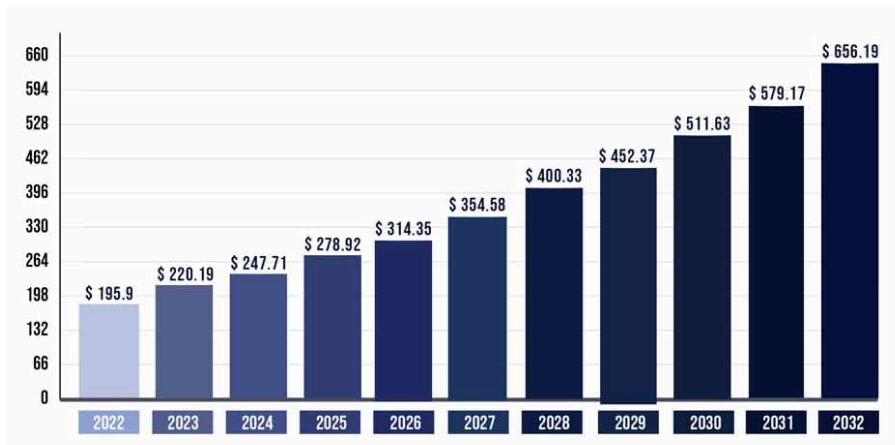


Figure 1: The ecotourism industry is among the fastest-growing in the world, and is estimated to continue to grow with such trends in the coming years.<sup>4</sup>

Ecotourism first started to be introduced to the public in the early 1980s, when people started to want to explore the environment and exotic destinations without causing damage to the local biosphere.<sup>5</sup> Ecotourism is commonly executed through positioning nature as the central attraction of a trip. Such a mindset leads to creation of minimally invasive infrastructure for the exploration of nature. Also, by creating focus around the environment, tourists develop an environmental awareness that helps prevent some of the other issues that tend to plague natural regions.

### General Benefits of Ecotourism

Ecotourism has multiple environmental benefits. It is less infrastructure intensive, meaning that the barrier for a new region to enter the ecotourism market is comparatively lower. For example, the cost of setting up a mass tourism resort is enormous compared to that of making a few routes and bridges in a forest. This means that Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) can better benefit from their own land, since they don't have to be dependent on foreign investors to allow them to enter the market. This means that these LEDCs get to keep the entirety of their land's value.

<sup>4</sup>Precedence Research, "Ecotourism Market Size", Precedence Research, web, <<https://www.precedenceresearch.com/ecotourism-market>>

<sup>5</sup>IOI Editors, "History of Ecotourism", Intercultural Outreach Initiative, web, <<https://www.ioi.ngo/blog/2016/10/29/history-of-ecotourism>>

Another benefit of ecotourism is that it creates awareness for various environmental issues, including biodiversity. When tourists visit ecotourism sites, environmental issues and awareness is strongly stressed, through various means such as advertisements and campaigns. As a result, they develop their own sense of environmental awareness. This newly developed sense of awareness could be transported internationally as tourists carry the newly-gained information back to their home countries, further benefiting the spread of awareness. The more global awareness and traction a certain issue gains, the better action could be produced out of the public support.

## **Negative Effects and Dangers of Ecotourism**

### **Major International Firm Involvement**

In the modern world, many international firms have developed. When they are involved with the tourism industry, these firms are interested in maximizing their profits. Additionally, their priority is to maximize profits in the short term rather than the long term. These firms often manifest themselves as large hotel chains or hotel groups. Alternatively, they can appear as tourism consultants that function internationally. The key point from all these forms is that they are trying to maximize profits by dipping into new markets around the world.

However, these firms generate issues when they get involved in the ecotourism market. The firms don't have any significant interest in the local wellbeing or the long-term survival of the ecosystem, because of corporate greed. This factor pushes firms to expand into as many prospective markets as they can, while not respecting the local ecosystem and fragile biodiversity. This indicates how these corporations can be capable of exploitative behaviors to the environment and the local inhabitants. Additionally, this exploitation can also extend to political instability and lack of transparency since regulations that protect workers could be lobbied against. Thus, these firms create ecotourism environments that are beneficial only for them. Additionally, the image of typically western firms exploiting LEDCs reminisce of traditional perceptions of neo-colonialism, highlighting how this system is extremely one-sided, in favor of powerful firms

Lastly, the involvement of these firms can have greater impacts. The firms are promoting ecotourism, while actually being harmful and dissonant with the values of ecotourism. Therefore, the firms present a hypocritical position on ecotourism. However, the issue here goes beyond the firms themselves. The result of this can be that such a hypocritical presentation of ecotourism would significantly harm public trust in the ecotourism industry.

### Infrastructural Centralization

Major parts of the infrastructure that is needed for any type of tourism are dependent on centralization – the tendency to have a center – of infrastructure. What this means is that infrastructure is more useful when there is some “central station”. For example, air travel is a mode of transportation that is much more efficient when it has a centralized hub. This means that airlines will have more customers and more profits if they make a single, low-cost, and high-frequency flight to a single central city. This factor leads to ecotourism losing one of its unique qualities, being spread out.<sup>6</sup>

This means that for ecotourism to flourish, air traffic and other types of infrastructure that lead to centralization must be tightly regulated. More such regulation and policy however is prone to corruption, and this must be taken into account when implementing this policy.

### Trendiness

Ecotourism is beneficial because the people who do it are usually more educated, or at least approaching tourism with an attitude of learning. There is a risk to this situation if tourism becomes “trendy”, however. Trendiness is set to attract the exact opposite type of individuals to those that ecotourism thrives from: consumerist, spontaneous, and more easily affected by media. Tourist mindsets like these would reduce benefits of ecotourism, therefore any kind of policy regarding ecotourism must be aware of the special conditions that allow ecotourism to work in the first place.

### Factors Affecting Biodiversity

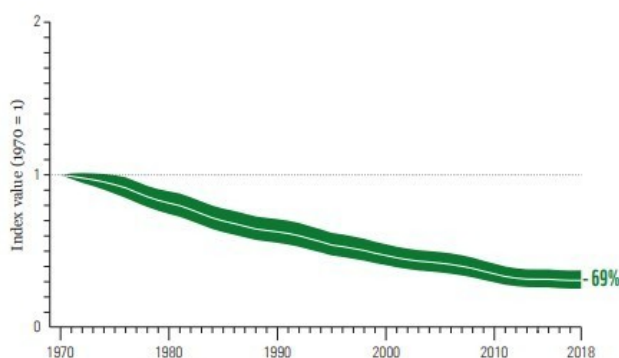


Figure 2: The global living planet index (a measure of biodiversity) over time. There is a noticeable declining trend.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Gohar, Amir and Kondolf, Mathias, “How Eco is Eco-Tourism? A Systematic Assessment of Resorts on the Red Sea, Egypt”, Department of Landscape Architecture & Environmental Planning, University of California at Berkeley, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su122310139>

<sup>7</sup>“The Global Living Planet Index”, weforum, web, <[https://assets.weforum.org/editor/klq2N6BbU8spbfwqM73-d2MMi0fH0\\_ivybUzvdZhsh8.jpg](https://assets.weforum.org/editor/klq2N6BbU8spbfwqM73-d2MMi0fH0_ivybUzvdZhsh8.jpg)>

Biodiversity is an important measure for the planet, and it is noticeably dropping over the past years (fig. 1). This decline has occurred because of several concurrent factors, including climate change and other metrics that are more closely tied to trends like mass tourism. However, in areas where the largest biodiversity loss occurs, such as South America, the root of the issue could be identified as general urbanization and destruction of the environment, as opposed to tourism.<sup>8</sup>

### Climate Change

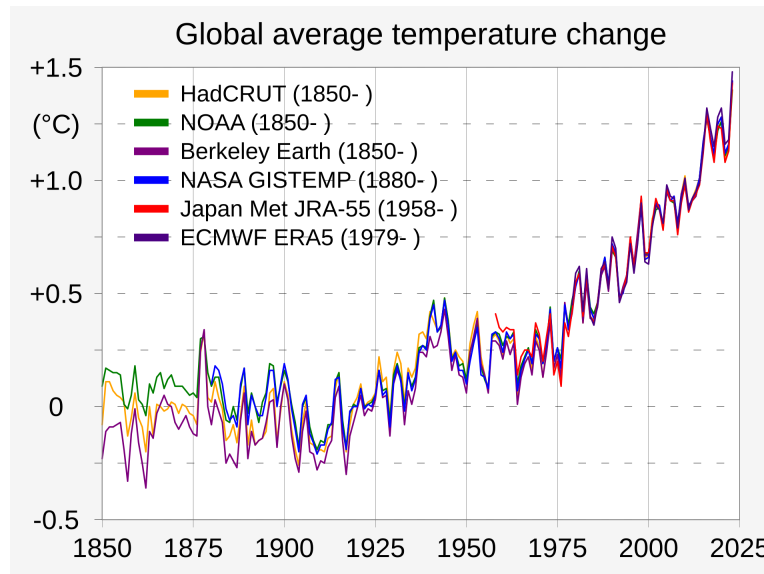


Figure 3: The increasing trend of average global temperature highlights the current strain on the environment.<sup>9</sup>

Climate change is an overarching theme when discussing environmental issues. In the case of biodiversity loss, the changing climates of certain regions causes extinction of species and secondary issues, like forest fires, which in turn can lead to habitat destruction which worsens biodiversity loss.

### Urbanization

Urbanization is a particularly hurtful phenomenon, since it results in huge material needs and massive modification of the environment. Urbanization can impact ecosystems in a number of ways. First, the development of a city means the local populations of fauna and flora are displaced. This decreases their numbers, which makes them more susceptible to natural extinction, and can even directly cause extinction.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Living Planet Index, World. Our World in Data. 13 October 2022.

<<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/global-living-planet-index>>

<sup>9</sup>RCraig09, "Global Average Temperature Change", Wikimedia Commons, web,

<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=88535596>>

<sup>10</sup>Daniel Sol Rueda et al., "Urbanization and Biodiversity", CREA, web,

<<https://www.crea.cat/global-change/urbanization-and-biodiversity>>

Another impact of urbanization on biodiversity is the sourcing of raw materials. Cities need a larger amount of industrially collected materials for expansion. For instance, the need for lumber in construction severely damages biodiversity. As a result, entire ecosystems can be completely destroyed. Additionally, cities emit large amounts of noise, light, and pollution which can impact how well a species can survive. This can also cause the populations to decline, in areas that can be substantial.

### Habitat Destruction

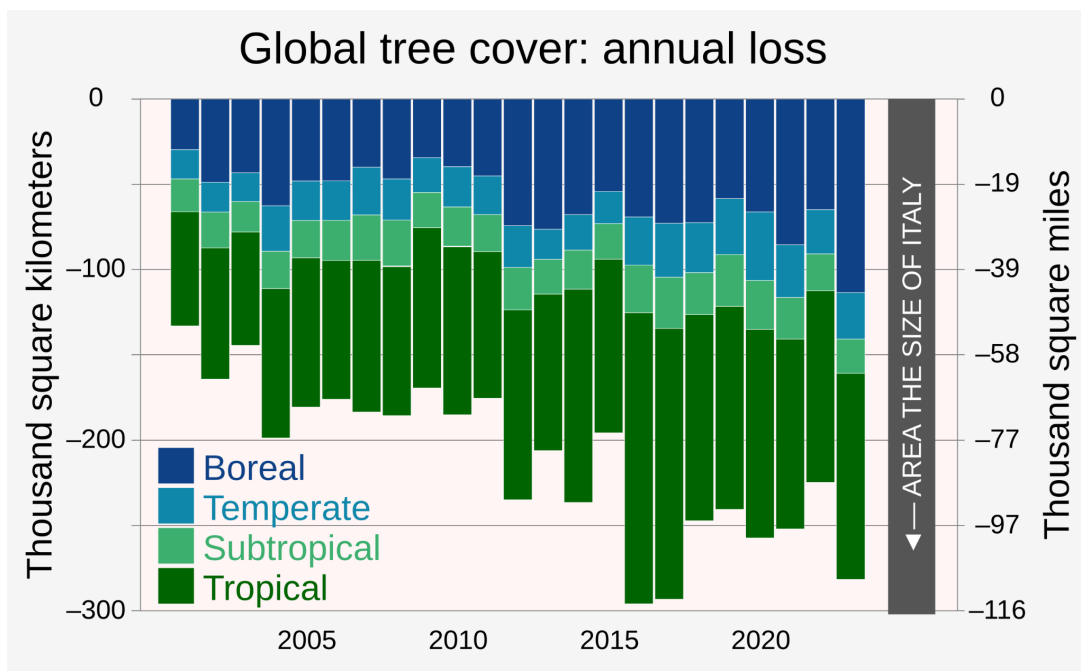


Figure 4: Annual loss of tree coverage, a measure that may correspond to animal habitat loss<sup>11</sup>

Habitat destruction has been referenced a few times by the previous factors, because it is considered the largest direct cause of biodiversity loss.<sup>12</sup> Habitat destruction leads to biodiversity loss in quite a straightforward way. If an animal has nowhere to live, it gets forced to either move to some new area (which will have as a side effect the depletion of its numbers), or if no such new area exists, its population vanishes.

All of the world's biodiversity hotspots are currently being impacted by habitat destruction. This fact highlights that the world is in dire need of help, and that ecotourism should be strongly considered.

<sup>11</sup>RCraig09, "Loss of forest and grassland to grazing and crops", Wikimedia Commons, web, <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=139897500>>

<sup>12</sup> Calizza, Edoardo; Costantini, Maria Letizia; Careddu, Giulio; Rossi, Loreto (17 June 2017). "Effect of habitat degradation on competition, carrying capacity, and species assemblage stability". *Ecology and Evolution*. 7 (15). Wiley: 5784–5796.

## Links between Effects of Ecotourism and Biodiversity

### Possible Dangers

By considering the major causes of biodiversity loss and the effects of ecotourism, we can construct comprehensive connections between the two, and also policies regarding how to ensure that ecotourism does not have the effects that could negatively impact biodiversity.

Firstly, urbanization is a considerable danger when talking about tourism. But urbanization would only happen if there was mass tourism, right? Not exactly. A few tourists visiting a random village won't have much of an impact, but what if these few tourists become an organized group? And what if the organized group brings more and more people, until the village is forced to urbanize? In that case, it is clear that unregulated ecotourism can transform itself into mass tourism, and end up having dire consequences, like urbanization.

Ecotourism however, has an additional danger that plain mass tourism tends to have less of: direct habitat destruction. Since the entire *theme* of ecotourism is nature, that means that there is a larger likelihood of habitat destruction occurring directly by tourists, if they e.g. trample the grounds. Additionally, development due to tourism will happen in close proximity to natural environments, meaning that they may be destroyed, or the commotion may make the ecosystems uninhabitable.

Tourism can bring other consequences to an ecosystem too. Not only do tourists trample lands, but they cause littering, they urge developers to build more infrastructure, etc. But even after all that, another danger of tourism is the fact that if a few tourists visit an area, they may invite more and more, leading to exponential growth of tourism, which is not beneficial for the local nor for the environment.

### Uses of ecotourism for biodiversity

In contrast to the previous paragraphs, if we take the benefits of ecotourism and see how they intersect with the factors of biodiversity loss, we can develop more productive policies. However, none of these benefits will have any value without first preventing the risks.

The primary way that ecotourism would help biodiversity is by removing some of the pressures that "standard" mass tourism creates. For example, ecotourism being a spread-out form of tourism avoids "trendy" tourist hotspots that end up impacting nature. But once again, for this ideal to be preserved, a lot of wisely thought-out policy must be implemented.



A last major benefit that can be derived from ecotourism in respect to biodiversity is awareness. If more people visit areas and learn their stories, then there is a higher chance they will adopt the mindsets of natural preservation and protection.

## **MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED**

### **Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)**

GSTC is a Non Profit Organization (NPO) which releases standards and criteria for hotels, destinations, and other tourism-related entities. The criteria they release include standards for environmental safety.<sup>13</sup> An example of standards for hotels issued by the GSTC may include demonstration of awareness of biodiversity, monetary support for biodiversity, and mitigation of negative impacts. The impact that this work has is that it specifies an agreed-upon standard that help organizations direct themselves toward an effective effort.

### **Costa Rica**

Costa Rica is one of the most major ecotourism destinations, and they could be considered an exemplary case study for creating policies on ecotourism.<sup>14</sup> Ecotourism in Costa Rica is managed in a few ways. First, Costa Rica dissolved its military in 1949, leading them to reallocate their funding with priority to natural conservation. This has led to the creation of very strong ministries of tourism and of environment. Another policy that has helped them manage any risk associated with ecotourism is their renewable energy focus. 98% of Costa Rica's energy is produced by renewable means.<sup>15</sup> This means that even if the ecotourism industry resulted in higher energy consumption, that impact would be negligible.

One additional factor that has allowed Costa Rica's ecotourism industry to prosper is its laws regarding foreign law ownership. These restrictions aren't particularly strict in general, however when considering environmentally protected areas, they protect the land from getting used by foreigners. The risk of foreign buyers is not completely gone, though. The Costa Rican Government has to be actively aware of risks and update environmentally protected areas appropriately.

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<sup>13</sup>GSTC Website Editors, "About the GSTC", GSTC, web, <<https://www.gstcouncil.org/about/>>

<sup>14</sup>Simon, Katherine, "Ecotourism in Costa Rica", Global Studies Website on Shorthand, web, <<https://global-studies.shorthandstories.com/ecotourism-in-costa-rica/index.html>>

<sup>15</sup>US International Trade Administration Editors, "Energy Resource Guide: Costa Rica- Renewable Energy", US International Trade Administration, web, <<https://www.trade.gov/energy-resource-guide-renewable-energy-costa-rica>>

## Jordan

Jordan is a large player in the ecotourism world, with a comparatively unique situation, because of the large number of Bedouins, which are nomadic Arab tribes.<sup>16</sup> The model employed in Jordan has allowed for a lot of employment, especially for Bedouins. The focuses in the Jordanian model are mainly centered around respecting the locals and their cultures. This highlights how Jordan understands how one of the main focuses is the Bedouin tribe. Overall, Jordan can provide insight for how to successfully implement ecotourism in areas where there are native tribes.

### TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of Event
1980s	The concept of ecotourism first gets introduced, with organizations like the International Union for Conservation of Nature playing a role in its advocacy.
1992	Ecotourism is recognized as a sustainable development strategy at the United Nation Conference on Environment and Development.
1997	UNESCO threatened to delist the Galapagos islands by adding them to a list of World Heritage Sites in danger because of the excessive ecotourism.
2002	The international year of ecotourism, as declared by the UN. The goal of the initiative was to expand the awareness and knowledge of ecotourism, along with its benefits.
2010	In 2010, a controversy arose which highlighted possible dangers of ecotourism. The main issue was that despite the Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya practicing ecotourism, the high volume of tourists caused issues regarding the environment. <sup>17</sup>
2018	The GSTC develops global ecotourism guidelines to ensure that ecotourism has a positive impact on the environment and biodiversity.

<sup>16</sup>Abuamoud, Ismaiel. (2015). Impacts of Ecotourism in Jordan: Wadi Rum. European Journal of Social Sciences. 50. 119-130. web, <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292147577\\_Impacts\\_of\\_Ecotourism\\_in\\_Jordan\\_Wadi\\_Rum](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292147577_Impacts_of_Ecotourism_in_Jordan_Wadi_Rum)>

<sup>17</sup>J. Onchwati, H. Sommerville & N. Brockway, "Sustainable tourism development in the Masai Mara National Reserve, Kenya, East Africa", Hotel and Tourism Management Institute, web, <<https://www.witpress.com/Secure/elibrary/papers/ST10/ST10028FU1.pdf>>

## UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

### Resolution A/RES/77/178<sup>18</sup>

This resolution recognizes ecotourism and promotes it in general, including several more specific instructions around indigenous peoples, their culture, environmental impact, collaboration, and health. It also highlights how sustainable tourism helps impoverished people, and how these effects can be optimized. This resolution primarily affirms ecotourism's existence. It additionally provides a definition that shows the agreed-upon standard of what ecotourism is.

### UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)<sup>19</sup>

During the UNCED, Agenda 21 was published. Agenda 21 is a plan of action that protects the environment by proposing strategies. One of the proposed strategies was the promotion of ecotourism. Although not many more practical specifications were proposed, Agenda 21 was a very strong first step and recognition of the power that ecotourism holds. The UNCED highlights that ecotourism is something that most Member States are willing to pursue. Also, it provides context for the way that Member States are willing to go in order to solve this issue.

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

### Management of corruption through tight oversight and transparency

It is important to consider corruption as an issue that may arise in any level of the protection of the environment regarding tourism. It is very much possible and already commonplace in many areas of the world for corruption to influence the performance of a body that is responsible for managing tourism. This is why measures need to be taken to ensure that these bodies have their intended effect.

For example, transparency should be enforced at all times, so that any decision that is made is completely understood, and that corruption occurs, in the form of bribery for instance, it will be clear that something was not exactly in order, and further investigation can happen. This higher risk for firms trying to corrupt bodies will deter them, resulting in less of a problem when trying to enforce policies to protect the environment.

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<sup>18</sup>The UN General Assembly, "Resolution A/RES/77/178", United Nations, web <<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n22/755/73/pdf/n2275573.pdf>>

<sup>19</sup>UN Website Editors, "United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992", United Nations, web, <<https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/rio1992>>

### **Creating a body responsible for designation of protected areas**

The environment is a constantly evolving system which needs to be protected. Therefore, protected areas / natural reserves can get created, which can be connected with other policies. An issue arises however, when considering how these areas will be designated.

A powerful tool that can be used to make sure that these areas are reflecting reality is a supervisory body / commission that is responsible for designating these areas. This body should be composed of experts, since they are the most potent for understanding which natural areas really need protection. Additionally, there should be strict policies involving transparency, since the work that this body would be doing may have large implications for stakeholders in the broader tourism industry.

### **Reallocate funding to other biodiversity conservation initiatives**

If a Member State believes that it is too risky to fund ecotourism *as a means* to conserve biodiversity, it may be simpler and safer to fund biodiversity itself. The funding may be reallocated from tourism in general, from an existing ecotourism system, or from some other source, but this reallocation should mark the shift from ecotourism to directly helping biodiversity.

Additionally, it is important to consider side effects of this reallocation. There should be consideration for employment losses etc. Also, some prospective methods of utilizing the new funds should be mentioned too.

### **Enforcement of Measures in Protected Areas**

First, the primary location of biodiversity loss is regions where there is preexisting biodiversity. Additionally, tourism is likely to have large impacts on the environment and is very hard to regulate. Therefore, tourism should be controlled in certain areas where the risk is too high to allow tourism to interfere and possibly have an impact on the biodiversity.

When applying this policy, it is important for the impacts on the existing tourism firms operating in the area to be considered. Smaller businesses which are more likely to economically depend on ecotourism in their area should receive some compensation, along with workers employed by tourism. Additionally, programs can be considered by policymakers to redirect the tourism market from protected regions to other areas that may be less at risk from tourism.

Second, the reason that some areas may be protected is that the natural environment in them is too precious to be under the risk of pollution. Thus, if some kind of ecotourism existed in

these protected areas, the infrastructure that it would require (roads, electricity, water lines) would interfere with the environment, making the concept of a protected area essentially pointless.

Therefore, any tourism firm that would like to establish itself within a protected area should follow very strict guidelines. Of course, these guidelines may deter some part of the prospective tourism market, but this small economic loss is something that should be tolerated for the sake of the natural environment and biodiversity. And either way, the tourism industry is dependent on the existence of a natural environment, so unsustainable tourism that ruins the environment should not be enabled.

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