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## CULTURAL VALUES IN ECOTOURISM

Series of training resources for bird-related tourism

### Cultural Diversity An Important Value of Ecotourism

Culture is the system of beliefs, knowledge, values, norms, and behaviours that a social group develops over time. These behaviours and values are in response to the natural environment, and reflect the group's survival strategies. Culture is expressed in several ways, such as through architecture, language, gastronomy, community traditions, art, local festivals, and rituals, etc. Culture is transmitted from generation to generation and evolves through time. In the context of developing an ecotourism project, it is important to know and be sensitive to the distinctive cultural traditions found in the region of interest, as it will help to ensure the initiative's success and improve the local benefits. The inclusion of cultural aspects enables the following objectives:

- ✓ Creating opportunities for ecotourism experiences enriched by cultural experiences.
- ✓ Improving the sustainability of economic investments, ensuring community participation and access to the economic benefits created by ecotourism.
- ✓ Reducing possible negative impacts of ecotourism on local cultures.
- ✓ Reducing conflicts by considering the governance and organizational mechanisms that exist in local communities.

Distinctive local cultural traditions are an important component of an ecotourism strategy, as tourists are interested in new and authentic experiences. The perception of authenticity directly influences visitor satisfaction: the more authentic an experience is perceived to be, the higher the satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> The World Tourism Organization estimates that around 40% of international tourists undertake cultural activities during their trip.<sup>2</sup>



## Recognize and Respect Cultural Norms and Traditions

In a place where culture is distinctive and probably sensitive to the presence of ecotourists, it is important to first identify local norms and traditions. This can be done by consulting published information and through

conversations with local figures and community authorities, as well as by observing, and participating in local festivals, meetings and workshops to discuss these issues openly.

## Relevant Cultural Values for Ecotourism Experiences



### Gastronomy

Promote local gastronomy, particularly the use of and local knowledge about plants, animals and their edible by-products.



### Arts and Crafts

Take into account the cost of making crafts by hand and pay a fair price.



### Community Norms

Know the systems of organization and local rules, and respect them during visits.



### Dress

Respect dress codes at traditional or ceremonial sites and other public places when indicated by the authorities or local communities.



### Language

Identify words or concepts that are offensive in the local context. Respect the language variants spoken in each region. Translate communication and interpretation material into the local languages.



### Holy and/or Heritage Sites

Respect holy, ceremonial, or heritage sites, avoiding activities that could affect local customs and practices. Include UNESCO heritage sites whenever possible.



### Beliefs, Rituals and Celebrations

Respect expressed limits on visitor access to local festivities and traditions. Identify ceremonies linked to the use and conservation of nature. Include elements from popular beliefs, traditions, and know-how in the content of culture/nature interpretation and communication material.



### Important Historical Events and Sites

Buildings, museums, and historical sites are a part of a community's history and identity. It is important to respect them and promote their value within the informational material developed for visitors.



Communities may wish to limit how much of their culture they share with visitors or they may be interested in helping to develop the ecotourism experience. Communities might establish limits including denying access to a holy site or place with historical value; allowing attendance at a traditional ceremony while withholding the right to take photographs; and applying a dress code. Local communities and authorities should also be consulted on which aspects of their culture are

most relevant to be included in interpretation guides, communications, promotions, and marketing materials. Any sensitive information about their cultural heritage should be excluded. Once the local communities' limits are defined, it is advisable to prepare a written code of ethics, which ecotourists should be requested to read and sign. Guides and docents must be familiar with the code and ensure that visitors receive an introductory talk, including a presentation on local norms.

## The Social Impact of Tourism

### The Impact on Local Cultures

Tourism can contribute to “cultural erosion”. This is a negative process that occurs especially in indigenous communities, where the influence of visitors’ customs and traditions, as well as the infrastructure put in place to serve ecotourists and their activities, ends up changing local values and practices. “Folklorization” is another risk. This occurs when a commercial value is given to the concrete expressions of the local culture to satisfy the need of some tourists to learn about and imitate local traditions. This can give rise to the mass reproduction of cultural elements, such as artisanal crafts or representations of ceremonies, presented as originals or marketed on a mass scale.

### The Risk of Causing Internal Conflicts

Tourism activities can also generate competition among local individuals and organizations, often related to access to the economic benefits derived from tourism activities. Other conflicts can also arise from the disturbances caused by visitors in the localities, such as generating trash, noise, and intruding onto private property. These risks must be considered when planning events, such as birding festivals, that attract large numbers of visitors.

### The Risk of Increasing Prices<sup>3</sup>

The influx of tourists often brings an increase in the price of goods and services available locally. The greatest impacts are when locally consumed food, the spaces where day-to-day activities are performed, and local land areas all increase in price. Visitors often have a much higher purchasing power than residents, causing inflation.





## Eight Principles for Ecotourism Experiences With Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples<sup>4,5</sup>

### 1. **Communities are consulted.**

Go through the local authorities and systems of governance to ascertain the level of interest in developing an ecotourism activity in the area. The consultation must be done before engaging in activities, and must be handled in an open and informed manner.

### 2. **The revenues generated by ecotourism are distributed fairly.**

The economic benefits of ecotourism must be adequately estimated and communicated to the local people. Agreements must be established for a fair distribution of proceeds.

### 3. **The inventory of cultural and natural resources is done on a participatory basis.**

The sites to be included in the interpretation, including trails and sites for viewing, should be chosen in conjunction with the local people and they should avoid affecting private property or places of local importance or symbolic value.

### 6. **The community is engaged in the design of activities that are part of the ecotourism experience.**

Various sectors of the community should participate in the design and delivery of activities, by sharing local gastronomy, serving as cultural docents, or giving demonstrations of local activities (fishing, artisanal production, etc.).

### 5. **Community members improve their capacity.**

Members of the community receive training according to the tourism program developed, such as skills to work as tour guides, manage services, etc.

### 4. **Communities are partners in the initiative.**

Most of the cultural tourism activity should be in the hands of the local community, and decision-making authority in various aspects of the activities should reside with the community.

### 7. **Local consumption is promoted.**

Information about locally owned restaurants, accommodation, and locally made products is shared with visitors.

### 8. **A code of ethics is established.**

The initiative establishes a code of ethics, which has been approved by the community and is shared with visitors.





## How the Local Culture Can Enrich the Birdwatching Experience

Many communities that still follow nature's pace of life are a storehouse of local knowledge of birds. This empirical knowledge is an important complement to scientific information and provides a basis for developing bird-related ecotourism experiences.

### **Local bird tourism guides**

Local communities are often knowledgeable about the sites where birds rest, nest and congregate, as well as local routes and migratory paths, and even the birds' weather-related behaviour (such as how they behave before a storm). Local bird tourism guides can therefore enrich birdwatching activities with their local knowledge.

### **Birds in local culture**

There are many indigenous oral traditions, songs, stories and legends about wildlife. Birds have names in indigenous languages and are often attributed mystical abilities: they can announce good or bad fortune, sing to bring a good harvest, or guide fishermen to the right fishing spot. Including such aspects from traditional culture in the interpretation material offers visitors a richer and more comprehensive experience and highlights these traditions.

### **Communities as conservation partners for important bird sites**

Engaging with local communities helps to develop a greater understanding of your site. For instance, older community members can often refer to changes in the abundance of certain species. Sharing knowledge can help establish shared values and stronger stewardship of the site.

### **Cultural experiences that complement birdwatching**

Bird and wildlife watchers generally travel alone or with peers who share the same affinity. However, they may also travel with families, in which not all members are birders. To offer more comprehensive travel packages, cultural experiences geared toward the entire family can be included.

### **Birding and cultural festivals**

Bird festivals are events that can build bridges between birdwatching and the local culture. During a festival, traditional artistic activities, culinary exhibitions, historical and cultural routes, local products and other local cultural aspects can be promoted.

## Example of a Code of Conduct for Visitors

The following is a translated excerpt from the "Code of Conduct for Visitors" of the Mexican tour operator Rutopía (formerly Totonal), which is certified in Sustainable Tourism by the Rainforest Alliance.<sup>6</sup>

1.

All travel destinations have a history, a culture and their own values: inform yourself about these aspects before the trip. Avoid attitudes or behaviours that may cause prejudice and demonstrate a respectful attitude during the trip.

2.

Protect the cultural heritage. Appreciate the architecture, monuments and valuable objects without affecting them.

3.

Consume and buy natural and artisanal products from the area. In addition to enjoying authentic local gastronomy and crafts, you will contribute to families' income and support small businesses and local entrepreneurs. Try not to haggle and pay a fair price for these products: they are created by hand and many of them take hours or even days of work to produce.

4.

Live great experiences without disturbing the order and without violating the permitted noise level. Enjoy the place without affecting the integrity and tranquility of its residents.

5.

When visiting an indigenous community, inform yourself first about their customs and traditions, as well as their rules of conduct.

6.

And above all, respect the way of life and customs of the community. Show solidarity, understanding, tolerance and respect for the community. Seek for a human and "equal to equal" relationship that allows for an authentic cultural exchange.





## Additional Resources

Guide for Sustainable Tourism Best Practices, Rainforest Alliance, (chapter 2: socio-cultural).

*Los efectos del turismo en las culturas indígenas de América Latina*, Xerardo Pereiro (Revista Española de Antropología Americana 155-174).

*Lignes directrices nationales à l'égard des expériences culturelles autochtones*, Aboriginal Tourism Marketing Circle, Canada, 2013.

*Manual del emprendedor en Turismo Rural Comunitario*, Ministerio de Comercio exterior y Turismo de Peru, 2008.



## Ecotourism Series

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### About this Work



The Commission for Environmental Cooperation's (CEC) project "Conserving Shorebirds through Community Engagement" aimed to build capacity in communities along North American migration routes to conserve habitat and develop ecotourism linked to bird migration cycles. Bird-related ecotourism can be a significant source of additional income for local economies, and can incentivize communities to sustain conservation efforts. To this end, the project supported the development of education and outreach materials and training to improve knowledge, increase local support and strengthen the capacity of communities to deliver bird-related ecotourism activities such as bird watching, habitat conservation and celebratory events. For more information visit: [www.cec.org](http://www.cec.org)

#### References

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2. UNWTO. 2018. *Tourism and Culture Synergies*. UNWTO, Madrid.
3. Drumm and Moore. 2005. *Desarrollo del Ecoturismo – Un manual para los profesionales de la conservación*. Volume I, Second Edition, The Nature Conservancy, USA.
4. Rutopía. "Sustentabilidad". <<https://rutopia.com/sustentabilidad>>. Accessed 13 March 2024.
5. Báez and Acuña. 1998. *Guía para las mejores prácticas de ecoturismo en las Áreas Protegidas de Centro América*. PROAR-CA/CAPAS, USAID: Costa Rica.
6. Rutopía. "Código de Conducta de los Viajeros: Ámbito socio-cultural" (Translation courtesy of Ecoturismo Genuino/CEC). <<https://rutopia.com/sustentabilidad>>. Accessed 13 March 2024.

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