

The Impact of Wildlife Tourism

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DESCRIPTION

Wildlife tourism is a challenging, but critically essential, part of the tourism industry. It may be useful to consider the historical context when considering people like seeing wildlife. After all, only one or two generations ago, most of people saw a variety of wild and tamed animals almost every day. Our globe had just approximately a fourth of the population it has today 100 years ago, and great cities were few and far between. There were flocks of birds so numerous that they clouded the sky, teeming herds of antelope travelling over the savannas, and fish so thick that the sea appeared solid with life in some places.

Today, most people 'enjoy' the world's wildlife resources through television, and electronics has become the normal method for many people to do so. This allows people to see photos of the world's biodiversity in ways that were previously inconceivable, however at the expense of authenticity. People used to be intimately familiar with local animals and only vaguely (if at all) aware of the odd beasts that inhabited other regions of the globe. People nowadays are rarely exposed to wild animals other than commensal species such as pigeons and sparrows, but they are intimately familiar with the lives of koalas, great white sharks, tigers, gigantic pandas, flamingos, giant otters, migrating caribou, and so on.

People may be more mentally attached to at least certain aspects of wildlife than ever before, despite being essentially out of touch with nature in any physical sense. Tourism to regions where animals live and can be seen behaving as they always have could be a tool for bringing virtual reality closer to reality as it was experienced. After seeing a species in the wild, witnessing more detailed portrayals on television or in the movies, even in cartoon form, takes on a whole new significance.

The issues of wildlife tourism are exacerbated by the fact that half of the world's population now lives in cities, and their contact with the natural world is remote, if not mythical. But wildlife tourism allows city dwellers to reconnect with their wild

side, whether it's watching a cheetah sprint across the Serengeti Plain in pursuit of a fleeing wildebeest, scuba diving among a school of barracuda off the coast of Sulawesi, casting for trout in a free-flowing mountain stream in the Rocks, or watching flocks of parrots take to the air above the Amazon rainforest.

While most city dwellers are unlikely to return to a life without the modern conveniences of refrigeration, electricity, and virtually unlimited amounts of information, many are voting with their time and money to support at least a temporary return to nature by visiting the world's last remaining wild areas to enjoy wildlife tourism. It's no coincidence that, as the world's population has doubled in the last 40 years or so, the area of animal habitat protected by law has nearly tripled, accounting for nearly 12% of the planet's land surface. Many, if not all, of these protected places are specifically meant to attract to domestic and international tourists.

Indeed, there is a strong case to be made that wildlife tourism has been a key motivator for governments to take the required steps to protect the world's biodiversity. Furthermore, wildlife tourism offers major economic benefits to landowners who want to keep wild animals on their property. In many regions of the world, private nature reserves are serving as useful complements to government-protected areas. In many other cases, establishing wildlife tourist protected areas results in considerable changes to the surrounding lands, increasing the proportion of employment in the service and retail sectors while significantly limiting the use of natural resources for consumptive purposes.

It is the first systematic compilation and synthesis of wildlife tourism challenges, bringing together studies from a wide range of fields. It helps us understand better use this emerging industry to nourish a continuing intimate relationship between people and the rest of nature, even as some of us isolate ourselves in concrete jungles when we are not being wildlife tourists, by building on the concept of Triple Bottom Line sustainability.

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