

LOCAL INVOLVEMENT AS THE KEY TO SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM AND RESOURCES CONSERVATION IN THE CARIBBEAN

THE SOCIETY'S RESOLUTION ON NATURE TOURISM or ecotourism passed at last year's meeting in the Bahamas represents one of our most important resolutions. This resolution is based on the simple premise that ecotourism requires local benefits to ensure its long-term sustainability. More importantly, as the local island community benefits economically from ecotourism, locals will support conservation of resources on which the survival of ecotourism depends. In other words, conservation will become an integral part of the lives of island residents only when natural resources pay tangible economic dividends. Therefore we wish to ensure that foreign ecotourism companies maximize the benefits to the local island communities.

These realistic (but often ignored) assumptions underlie the very successful nature trail constructed and operated by the St. Lucia Forestry Department with assistance from RARE center. This trail, in the central rainforest, has become an important attraction for Saint Lucians and foreign tourists alike. This attraction provides economic benefits from income derived from bus transportation, sale of lunches, commissions, and park entry fees. Moreover, virtually all the economic benefits remain in St. Lucia, as the entrance fee goes to the forestry department and the associated businesses are locally owned and operated. Thus in this instance, nature conservation and education pays, and its contribution to the local economy helps to insure its sustainability.

A few other examples exist in the Caribbean such as the Asa Wright Nature Center in Trinidad, where ecotourism directly employs Trinidadians as well as relying on local goods and services. In addition, the guides used by the ecotourists are all local Trinidadians, many of which have become legendary for their field skills and knowledge and no doubt contribute to the attraction. In this case, the local forestry department does not receive a direct benefit, although the government has recognized the importance of the

nature center by increasing the protected lands surrounding the original reserve. The nature center, with its high tourist visitation rate, obviously contributes to the local economy which should contribute to its sustainability.

We need more of these success stories where ecotourism contributes to sustainable development and conservation. This requires the use of more local guides by visiting ecotourism groups. Therefore we encourage the various foreign tour operators to assist with the training of local guides where appropriately trained folks are currently unavailable. The SCO should participate in this effort by running workshops for training ecotourism guides in the Caribbean. Efforts should also be made in both public and private sectors to quantify the contributions of ecotourism to the local economies. Furthermore, governments must be made aware that ecotourism requires resource conservation for its sustainability. It would also be useful if all entrance fees to government reserves were returned to the government agency managing the reserve. Thus the critical issue is to ensure maximum local benefit from the ecotourism industry so that island benefit leads to conservation of the natural resources on which the industry depends.

Ecotourism, if conducted properly, has the potential to contribute to the sustainable development of ecologically fragile island ecosystems. It is only natural for the SCO to embrace ecotourism as an appropriate economic activity for the Caribbean, given that at one time or another we have all been ecotourists, and because its an economic activity which can have a relatively benign environmental impact. In addition, we want others to develop an appreciation of Caribbean organisms and ecosystems. However, we want ecotourism to be a sustainable economic activity based on local involvement and benefit to guarantee conservation of the island resources on which it is based.

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RESULTS OF SCO ELECTION OF OFFICERS

President: Roeland E. de Kort
Vice-President: Eric Carey
Secretary: Marcia Mundle

GUADELOUPE 1998

The 1998 annual meeting of the Society of Caribbean Ornithology will be held in Guadeloupe. Further details will be sent to members.