

Geotourism

In an age where travel is becoming more popular by the upcoming generations, the problem of location deterioration is becoming a larger issue. The deterioration of travel destinations is occurring due to the rising numbers of visitors, over-crowding of facilities and tourist hot-spots and damage to historical locations. In addition to physical and location diminishment, local cultures have also begun to erode due to an influx in exterior cultures and customs. In an effort to reestablish local cultures, and fix damages that has been caused to historical and environmental destinations, a new element in the traveling industry has emerged – geotourism.

Geotourism is “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of place.” Essentially, it is tourism that enhances environments, local cultures, heritages, and the well-being of residents. In a time where companies have shifted focus to environmental sustainability and cultural awareness, the world has created a new way of thinking about travel.

Travelers are a powerful force in economies and they are often times looking for a sense of inspiration. Geotourism not only allows travelers to satisfy their needs and requirements, but it also allows local economies to benefit and flourish and works towards the preservation of historical sites and cultural history; it has become the future of destination travel. The National Geographic Center for Sustainable Destinations is one of the leading groups dealing with geotourism. They are working with local communities, governments, tourist bureaus, and private businesses to sustain destinations’ distinct characteristics in order to maintain positive cultural and historical significance. Their effects can be seen in multiple organizations globally.

One environmentally-focused organization is the Rios Tropicales lodge in Costa Rica. They provide travelers with activities such as: white-water rafting, hiking, horse-back riding, or simply relaxing in the lush rainforest. Not only is this lodge a traveler destination, it is a conservative organization and provides great value to the economy and education of local people. Since 1985, the lodge has hired and trained locals to manage operations, accompanied by teaching business skills and providing guests with the opportunities to learn about the local culture first-hand. Environmentally, a reforestation campaign has been launched by the lodge –

Geotourism

supplied by business profits – along with a nationwide elementary school program in order to teach future generations of Costa Ricans to be responsible and sustainable land managers.

Across the globe, 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking of Nepal has been making similar strides in geotourism. These sisters have established a goal to train and empower women through adventure tourism and to guide the development of responsible tourism practices in new areas. Over the last eight years, the 3 Sisters have trained more than six-hundred women to be trekking guides and tourism professionals. Advocates of responsible trekking, the 3 Sisters are a progressive tourism organization with an environmentally-friendly approach.

Leave Nepal, head southwest, and you will run into Blue Adventures of Madagascar. Prior to their establishment, no scientific data was available for the local fish population, which is a critical to the local population. By teaching scuba-diving, Blue Adventures works with travelers to conduct research on the local fish populations, forming the backbone of local marine conservation efforts. Through Blue Adventures, visitors and locals have been trained to protect their natural resources.

While only several geotourism organizations have been discussed, The National Geographic Center for Sustainable Destinations is continuing its work with organizations to develop geotourism among destination communities – focused on protecting the world's distinctive places.

Having been lucky enough to be able to travel several times to a variety of countries, I can envision and embrace the need for organizations such as National Geographic to help solve some of the issues that have become prevalent with the increase of travel. My first international trip was to Mexico, more specifically Ensenada. While I was there, there was an initial sense of bewilderment. If I had been blindfolded and driven there, I would never have imagined that I left the United States. The city had transformed so much, to appeal to the tourism industry, that it had appeared to lose its cultural identity. It didn't seem like I was in Mexico - that I was experiencing a new country. With organizations focused on geotourism, cities like Ensenada could be transformed back to what it was prior to the emergence of tourism in the region.

My second international travel destination of my life was to The Bahamas – talk about a lack of cultural identity! The only thing I could see that was unique to The Bahamas was the

Geotourism

weather. Large resort communities, office buildings, an urban environment... Was I in the middle of the Caribbean or in Miami? The Bahamas is such a desirable and traveled vacation destination, that outside influences and cultures have taken over what used to be present.

I believe that the point of traveling is to experience other cultures, not to be in a culture like you have at home, but in a different location. We as a society need to embrace outside religions, cultures and historical significance in order to become better, more whole-rounded people. With the help of National Geographic, I believe that we will be able to achieve this characteristic.