

# Chapter 1: What is ecologically sustainable development?

## Introduction

Ecologically sustainable development (ESD) has become a catchcry in many industries over the past decade. The tourism industry in particular has embraced the term, and it sometimes seems to be applied to every new project, from a small-scale ecotourism operation to a mainstream hotel development.

The principles of ESD have become a concern for tourism over the last ten years or so. While tourism undoubtedly creates many positive outcomes for host communities and environments, it can also be very destructive if it is poorly managed. Indeed, in many places rapid and large-scale tourism development has aroused concern about its potential negative impacts. These days both community and consumers are becoming increasingly aware of issues associated with poorly managed tourism. These issues include destruction of the environment, social disruption and cultural upheaval. The result has been restrictions on entry and bans on further development for tourism operators.

For example, in 1991 Club Med purchased an existing resort in Byron Bay, New South Wales, with the intention of funding a major expansion of the property. However, there was strong community resistance to the project on the grounds that it would cause environmental damage and provide few local benefits. Local people also felt that they had not been adequately consulted about the most appropriate form of tourism development in the region. After a drawn-out legal process, the project did not go ahead.

As a tourism operator, it is essential that you learn ways to avoid these pitfalls. By doing so, you will:

- recognise the importance of applying business ethics to your operation
- consider the environment and other stakeholders in your decision making process.
- Running an ethical business can also give you a marketing edge: by gaining the support of your knowledgeable client base, you will have a competitive advantage over less reputable operators.

## Background to ESD

The concept of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) has been with us for over 25 years; however, it has come to international prominence only relatively recently. The significance now accorded to ESD can be traced back to the publication in 1987 of a report by the World Commission on Environment

and Development entitled *Our Common Future* (more commonly referred to as the Brundtland Report, after the Commission's Chair, then Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland). This report was instrumental in raising awareness at the highest levels of government that, globally, we had been 'living beyond our means' in terms of the environmental costs of economic development.

The Brundtland Report provided the impetus for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the 'Rio Summit'), which at the time was the largest-ever single gathering of heads of state ever held. The main outcome of the Rio Summit was the publication of a document entitled *Agenda 21*. This document sought to provide the 'blueprint' for each country to formulate its own ESD policies. The authors of the report recognised that conventional approaches to measuring growth had been inadequate, as they did not take into account the associated environmental costs, such as erosion, extinction and desertification. These problems had been traditionally seen as 'conservation' issues, rather than 'development' issues, hence they were given secondary importance by policy makers. However, the authors of *Agenda 21* saw these environmental problems as a fundamental component of the process of economic development, and as such, delivered a document that sought to integrate environmental, social and cultural values with economic values. They recognised that, at its broadest level, ESD requires restructuring of entire economic and policy-making systems, and integration of decision making both within the various levels of government, and between government and the private sector.

In Australia, ESD came to prominence as a policy issue in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1991, the Commonwealth Government published a series of reports on ESD, which covered several industry sectors, including tourism. These reports were also summarised into a policy document that was released in 1992, which detailed the key issues and initiatives that arose from each report.

By now, you may be thinking that ESD is a concept that applies only to policy-making levels of government. While it is true that a coordinated approach is required on a national and even global scale to make broad-scale ESD policies work, it is equally important that its principles are implemented at the local level as well. In essence, this is the message behind the well-known saying, "think globally, act locally". In the following few sections, we'll look at some definitions and explore the principles of ecologically sustainable development. However, before we do this, let's take a moment to illustrate why ESD is just as important at the local level.

Think about the area in which you work (or a tourism destination that you are familiar with). What special qualities does this place have that have made it a tourist attraction that is worth conserving? For example, does it have special geological features, or provide habitat to an endangered species? Perhaps it includes some objects of cultural significance, such as a rock art site or a

historic home. Or maybe the community has something special that tourists have come to experience, such as an indigenous culture or a local festival. As you are probably aware, it is very easy for poorly managed tourism to develop into a situation whereby these attractions are degraded or destroyed by the very people who wish to experience them. Whatever attractions are associated with your area, it is important to remember that, as a tourism operator, you try to prevent a situation whereby your clients 'love to death' the resources upon which your business depends. Following ESD principles will help you avoid this predicament.

### **Definitions of ESD**

So what does ESD mean? Does ESD actually represent an improved approach to economic growth, or is it just a new name applied to the same old practices?

Over the years, a number of definitions have been developed for ESD. Let's take a brief look at two.

Sustainable development was defined in the Brundtland Report as:

*"... development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"*.

(World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987)

Despite the best intentions of the authors, this definition has been somewhat controversial. Those with a purely economic perspective of measuring wealth have construed this definition to mean that economic development alone should be the measure of growth. According to this interpretation, natural resources should be exploited so far as they are able to generate economic wealth. However, this interpretation has been widely refuted. The most commonly accepted view of sustainable development is referred to as the 'constant natural capital' approach. This means that in the course of our economic activities, natural resources are, at least, conserved so that they are not depleted and, where possible, they are managed to increase over time.

In 1992, the Commonwealth Government offered its own definition:

*"(Ecologically sustainable development is) using, conserving, and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained, and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased"*.

(Cwth of Australia 1992)

This definition follows a similar theme to the accepted interpretation of the Brundtland definition—it recognises that the aim of ESD is to meet the needs of people today, without harming the environment so that opportunities for future generations are destroyed.

## Principles of ESD

The definitions we just looked at give us a broad view of ESD, but how do we put the concept into practice? To do this, we need to gain a more in-depth picture of ESD's underlying principles.

The principles of ESD as they apply to tourism operations are as follows:

- **Improvement in material and non-material well-being**

- *'...a sustainable tourism industry will measure the quality of its success not through visitor numbers but by the maintenance and improvement of the tourists' experiences over time'.*

(ESDWG 1991)

- Tourism development is usually measured in economic terms such as visitor numbers, room nights or expenditure levels. While measurements such as these are undoubtedly essential for measuring our economic growth - our material well-being - they do not always provide the full picture of the total well-being of an industry. For example, they do not measure whether the tourism experience is declining due to visitor impacts, or whether new developments meet ESD criteria. Therefore, it is equally important to consider other measures of quality, through less tangible aspects such as the quality of the visitor experience.

- **Intergenerational and intragenerational equity**

- *'...an ecologically sustainable tourism development or industry would be one that would not diminish the range of activities available to present or future generations...'*

(ESDWG 1991)

- This principle recognises that it is the responsibility of our generation to maintain an ethic of stewardship over natural resources and conserve them for the next generation. By doing this, we help to ensure that the opportunities and experiences we gain from the natural environment are passed on, undiminished, to future generations. For example, if an insensitively planned and managed tourism operation was to cause unalterable changes to a wilderness setting (such as the destruction of a habitat), it would be by definition unsustainable. As a result of its poor environmental management, the operation would destroy opportunities for future generations to have the same tourism and recreation experiences enjoyed by the current generation. Therefore, the key factor to consider when dealing with this principle is the need to proceed cautiously where there is the potential of irreversible change.

- **The protection of biological diversity and the maintenance of ecological processes and systems**

- *'Maintenance of the natural environment, including the conservation of biological diversity and the protection of ecological integrity, will be a*

*fundamental constraint on activity in an ecologically sustainable society. Tourism development in such a society will occur in such a way that maintains biodiversity and supports the maintenance of ecological processes.'*

(ESDWG 1991)

- This principle is arguably the most important aspect of ESD, since without it none of its other aspects can be accomplished. It recognises that there must be some limits to tourism and other development, to ensure that an area's ecological processes are maintained, and that all species are retained throughout the tourism development process. In Australia particularly, this is a critical ESD principle, as so many of our native species are either locally endemic, or occur in fragmented, isolated populations. Therefore, if a tourism development was to put a species at risk, there may be no second chances - there may be no possibility of repopulating the area with other individuals from a different location.

- **The global dimension**

*'An ecologically sustainable tourism industry ought not to contribute to non-sustainable activities elsewhere through the use of inputs derived from unsustainable activities or the actions of outbound tourists.'*

(ESDWG 1991)

This principle recognises that tourism operations in Australia also have some impact on global environmental problems. For example, greenhouse emissions from the use of non-renewable resources contribute to global warming. Wherever possible, tourist operations should seek to ensure that they don't contribute to such problems, for example, by using renewable energy sources (such as solar energy) in preference to non-renewable energy.

## How does ESD apply to tourism?

The above principles provide the broad framework upon which we can begin to build our plan for an ecologically sustainable tourism operation. However, before we move on, it's important to consider just how the concept of sustainability relates to tourism. When ESD is applied to a such a multifaceted industry as tourism, it becomes a very broad concept—it encompasses not only environmental aspects, but also experiential, sociocultural and economic dimensions. Let's take a closer look at these dimensions of sustainability, and how some tourism businesses have incorporated them into their operations.

- **Environmental sustainability**—Running an environmentally sustainable tourism operation means managing our operations to ensure that natural resources are conserved and, where possible, increased over time. Environmental sustainability is a vital concept in our business, as traditional approaches to tourism development have tended to focus more heavily on the

economic dimension such as measures of visitor numbers or export earnings.

Environmental sustainability is concerned with questions like:

- Are the resources we are using renewable or recyclable?
- Are we using them in the most productive way?
- It recognises that natural resources are the raw materials for the tourism industry, just as they are for mining and logging. Some ways in which tourism can help achieve environmental sustainability are through the establishment of national parks, by providing an alternative to extractive industries, and by increasing public awareness of environmental issues.

### Example—Couran Cove Resort, Queensland

Couran Cove Resort, a large scale development on South Stradbroke Island in Queensland, illustrates some ways in which developers must now take considerations of environmental sustainability into account if their plans are to get off the ground. The original plans for Couran Cove Resort were drawn up about 20 years ago, and included features that were not sympathetic to the site, such as a golf course, a marina and Hawaiian village-style accommodation. On purchasing the site in 1990, the developer, Interpacific Resorts, understood that the environmental features of the site had to be taken into account to both comply with environmental regulations, and to provide environmentally aware consumers with a nature-based experience. Consequently, a number of environmental measures were put in place during the construction of the resort, such as installation of solar powered cabins, identification and mapping of significant trees, strategies to manage acid sulphate soils, and an integrated water management system. As a result of many of these management strategies, the resort has become an industry leader in environmentally sensitive technologies.

- **Experiential sustainability**—Tourism impacts, if not controlled, can cause the visitor experience to decline over time. For example, without effective visitor management, heavily used tracks will eventually begin to show signs of degradation. This means that while the visitors you are taking on a tour today may have a thoroughly enjoyable experience, those who book your tours in two or three years' time may have to contend with bogs, potholes and gully erosion, not to mention possible exclusion from high-use areas. Some ways in which experiential sustainability can be achieved are through effective visitor management and interpretation.

### Example—Quicksilver Connections, Queensland

Quicksilver Connections is a Cairns-based tour operator that runs day tours to the Great Barrier Reef. Quicksilver has initiated several visitor management strategies that help to ensure that the reef is not damaged by tourism, thus

enabling the company to provide a nature-based experience that is sustainable over the long term. For example, the company has installed pontoons at the reef, which mean that the boats do not have to anchor once they have reached their destination. On their way out to the reef, all guests are given a briefing about appropriate behaviour while snorkelling, such as not standing on the corals. This briefing is available in eight different languages. The company has also installed a signposted scuba dive trail, which channels visitors away from the most fragile corals.

- **Sociocultural sustainability**—Local communities, including indigenous communities, have the right to have their wishes taken into account in the tourism development process. For a successful and unique tourism product to develop over the long term, community support and involvement are vital. As we saw in the case of Club Med, projects may not even get off the ground without community support. Some ways to achieve sociocultural sustainability are by providing employment opportunities, ensuring that direct and indirect income flows to the community, helping preserve historic sites, and encouraging a revitalisation of cultural practices.

## Example—EcoNetwork, New South Wales

Port Stephens is a community on the New South Wales coast that became increasingly popular during the 1980s and early 1990s with tourists, and consequently, tourism developers. This situation had led to conflict between many of the community's stakeholders, as local residents felt that they were not being adequately consulted about the nature and scope of development. In an effort to overcome the sometimes hostile atmosphere between residents and developers, several community groups organised a workshop to help ascertain how the various stakeholder groups could benefit from tourism development. As a result of the workshop, an organisation called EcoNetwork was formed. EcoNetwork consists of representatives from Port Stephens' community groups. It acts as a filter for new projects, with the aim of providing incentives for what the community sees as appropriate tourism development. The improved level of community consultation that has resulted from the formation of the network has ensured that expertise is shared amongst the community, and that adequate feedback is gained on all new developments.

- **Economic sustainability**—This is often the only aspect that people think of when they talk about 'sustainable development'. Of course, economic sustainability is a vital component of the ESD picture; nobody can afford to be in the tourism industry for purely altruistic reasons. However, it is also important to view ESD as a holistic concept, of which economic sustainability is one facet. Often it is difficult to put a monetary value on the other aspects of ESD, which is why we must give them equal consideration. Economic sustainability can be achieved in a tourism business through effective product development and the production of financial, business and marketing plans.

## Example—Earth Sanctuaries, South Australia

Earth Sanctuaries is a company that operates a network of privately-owned sanctuaries, set up with the aim of conserving native wildlife species. The company has eradicated exotic species from all of its properties, and has erected fencing that excludes feral animals from each sanctuary. To fund its conservation efforts, the company offers a mix of ecotourism products including accommodation, tours, and an environmental education program. These products are managed to provide the ongoing profit needed to run the sanctuaries, and to provide dividends to the company's shareholders.

- At this stage, you are probably thinking that ecological sustainability is a lot for one tourism operator to take on board! However, ecologically sustainable tourism is based on a few relatively simple principles with one common thread: **the need to work within the limitations of your environment**. Once you have an understanding of these principles, it is really only a matter of taking them into consideration as part of your planning process.

### Optional reading

- Pages 190–195 of McKercher (1998) provide another perspective on ecologically sustainable tourism.

## ACTIVITY 1.1

Think about some ways in which you, as a tourism operator, could incorporate ESD principles into the planning process for your business. Don't worry if you can't think of many ways at this stage—the aim of this activity is just to get you thinking about ecologically sustainable tourism.

## Review

In this chapter we have gained an understanding of the principles of ecologically sustainable development. We have learned that ESD in tourism is a multifaceted concept that incorporates environmental, experiential, sociocultural and economic aspects into each of these principles. However, we have also learned that ESD is based on the relatively simple premise of operating within the limitations of our environment. As tourism operators we have also learned that a knowledge of these principles is essential if we are to run a responsible and viable business.

Now that we have an understanding of the underlying principles of ESD, we can explore the ways in which they can be incorporated into our business. In the next chapter we will look at how ESD principles can form the basis of the strategic planning process.