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Ecotourism: Enjoyable, Economical, and Environmentally Friendly

Barbara Ward, one of the first advocates of sustainable development, wrote in the January 1973 edition of the UNESCO Courier that humanity has "forgotten how to be good guests, how to walk lightly on the earth as its other creatures do"(Ward). Nations across the globe forget that their tenancy of the world must be one of stewardship, not self-service. Through ignorance of or inability to embrace sustainable lifestyles, humans across the globe threaten to destroy the world's greatest features—the natural habitats. Ecotourism, or environmentally responsible travel focused on bringing awareness to and preserving natural habitats, holds the potential to mitigate the effects of an increasing global economy (Clarkin).

Ignorance poses massive challenges to protecting natural habitats. Due to lack of education, many citizens fail to recognize the danger posed to natural habitats. According to a 2016 Pew research poll, 24% of Americans responded as "not particularly concerned about helping the environment" on a day to day basis (Anderson). This apathy stems not from ill-will towards the environment, but from ignorance. Living with very little direct contact with the natural world, Americans lose sight of the beauty of the natural world. Connecting with the need for preservation in today's world grows increasingly challenging as society becomes more detached from the environment. Everyone, when faced with natural beauty such as the pristine depths of Lake Superior, the clear Northern Michigan skies, or a bald eagle gracefully cutting across the sky, would view the Earth in its glory and wish for its conservation.

An increase in ecotourism will result in greater awareness of the risk that society poses to natural habitats by creating more opportunities for individuals to witness the wonders of the natural world. By developing ecotourism as an industry across the world, access to life-changing experiences will increase. Many small scuba businesses in the South Pacific currently coordinate diving

experiences for ecotourists with research expeditions. The "citizen-scientists" pay for exclusive spots aboard research expeditions and provide assistance with simple research tasks such as collecting samples on dives (Obura). Not only do sight-seers receive a unique small-group experience, but underfunded researchers finish projects faster and cheaper. If this business model were applied more frequently, the tourism industry could shift from indulgent, selfish vices to providing relaxing, inspiring interactions with the environment.

In many third world countries, high poverty rates counteract many conservation efforts, which effectively destroys many unique ecosystems. Inability to sustainably provide for one's family drives many members of society to deplete natural resources at alarming rates. A poor economy frequently results in poaching, which overtaxes natural habitats by reducing gene pool size, separating mothers from their young, and pushing species to the brink of extinction (Ramsey). Furthermore, poaching disrupts all flora and fauna in the food chain, not just one specific species. It is impossible to protect a natural habitat if critical species keep disappearing due to poaching!

By increasing ecotourism, the economies of third-world countries will grow, allowing more citizens to sustainably support their families. Suppose a wildlife park opens in a poor rural area. Immediately, the owners hire community-members to act as guides, chefs, maids, and handymen. As the village gains business from tourism, artisans and entrepreneurs sell their wares. A school opens, and before long the community of subsistence farmers transforms into a moderately successful village with a stable economy and prospering biome. With enough jobs to support the community, no one views the rewards of poaching as worth the risk. In addition, the natural habitat represents a significant portion of the community's income, so conservation efforts will receive plenty of support.

Man's natural inclination to innovate and expand often places the environment at risk, but the education and economic boost provided by ecotourism will help preserve the world for future generations. Of course, ecotourism alone will not negate all challenges posed to the environment, and

as with all solutions, ecotourism poses, as well as solves, problems. Unlike other ideas proposed, however, ecotourism provides practical ways to begin solving challenges in protecting natural habitats. It balances prosperity, preservation, and pride in the wonderful world that God gave humanity.

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