

# TourismConcern

## research briefing

# Indigenous Peoples & Tourism

Research briefing 2017 • Helen Jennings

## Introduction

Groups of people who originally populated certain parts of the world, now often marginalised by nation states, are called by many names, for example **Aboriginals, First Nations and Native**. In recent years the term **Indigenous peoples** has gained currency to describe these groups, and alongside it has grown the term **Indigenous tourism** – often subsumed within ‘**cultural tourism**’. The ‘**off the beaten path**’ trails once reserved for specialists have now become well-worn paths for millions of tourists searching for ‘**authentic**’ experiences. This can be positive: it can assist cultural revitalisation and be a force for empowerment. On the other hand, it may see the often marginalised people and their villages becoming mere showcases for tourists, their culture reduced to souvenirs for sale, their environment to be photographed and left without real engagement.

This report aims to introduce some of the key issues surrounding Indigenous peoples and tourism. It is split into sections dealing with main themes, offering examples of both good and bad practice. The themes included are: **marketing, ecotourism, spirituality, land rights and control**. Our aim is to promote discussion and offer guidelines for best practice in this growing industry.

## Indigenous peoples?

There are roughly 370 million Indigenous people in the world today, belonging to 5,000 different groups. These groups have their own languages, cultures and traditions, all operating in very different political circumstances. They define themselves as ethnically and culturally distinct from other inhabitants of the countries/regions in which they live. Typically, their cultures and traditions have had to withstand the social, cultural and economic effects of colonialism, industrialisation and more recently, globalisation. Indigenous peoples often have a deep affinity with their lands and natural environment, but have frequently been regarded as ‘inferior’ and ‘under-developed’ by mainstream society. Their individual and collective human rights have often been disregarded in the name of ‘development’. Indigenous peoples tend to be marginalised – geographically, politically, socially and economically. Examples of Indigenous peoples across the world include: **Aboriginals in Australia, First Nations in North America, The Quechua in South America, The Masaai in Kenya, The Karen people in Thailand**.

*Igorot Peoples from the Cordillera, Philippines. © Judy Partlow*



### What is Indigenous tourism?

'Indigenous tourism' often consists of packaged tours, whether for individual tourists or for groups. This is happening in an increasing number of places, such as Kenya, Tanzania, India, Honduras, Ethiopia, Ecuador, Botswana, the Andaman Islands and Australia. A key indicator of whether a particular package is good or bad lies in the degree and nature of the involvement of the Indigenous peoples themselves. When searching for an authentic experience, it is not enough to be simply attracted to something marketed as 'exotic' or deemed to be 'pure'.

There is a whole spectrum of ways in which Indigenous people can be involved in tourism: from effectively being part of a human zoo, performing for the benefit of visitors, to something more credible where they are in greater control of what is on offer. The former has been ridiculed by some of the 'victims' themselves, as with the Mursi in Ethiopia who, in the film *Framing the Other* speak about their 'tourist song' and how they get more money out of visitors when wearing 'strange' and 'exotic' costumes. At the other end of the spectrum, however, we have Indigenous communities deciding to create a safe space where they can learn, teach and share their culture – with their own communities and with the visitors who come to see them. These communities are taking ownership, gaining economic independence and political power, and are fostering pride. Museums, heritage sites, guided walks, land and sea adventures, sampling of the 'outdoor life', local cuisine and customs have all now become common ingredients of Indigenous tourism.



*Xatsull Heritage Village, a tourism project belonging to the Secwepemc Nation in British Columbia, Canada*

Even well-managed tourism comes with a cost. Tourists still bring new diseases, threats to previously 'safe' regions of the world, pollution, and the threat of potential displacement if global enterprise discovers something it 'values' in their lands. Only where host countries and their governments appreciate the role of Indigenous tourism in the economy is there some degree of protection. For some Indigenous peoples, tourism is one of many options available to them to earn a living, and it thus becomes a choice, not a necessity. For others, however, it can be the only 'choice' they have.

### Why do governments like it?

New heritage attractions are springing up in all parts of the world, catering for the interests of local and foreign visitors keen to hear stories of alternative ways of living. Government aid is frequently provided to assist in the work of such attractions, since they have the potential to bring employment, pride and engagement in regions that might need such a boost. In a wider context too, when done well, tourism may contribute positively to

economic independence, cultural revival, education and can create opportunities for effective cross-cultural encounters. It has been argued that 'tourism in its broadest generic sense can do more to develop understanding among people, provide jobs, create foreign exchange and raise living standards than any other economic force known.' (Kaiser and Leib, 1978).

### What are the concerns?

One challenge relates to the argument that Indigenous tourism is another form of cultural imperialism (Nash, 1989). There are many cases throughout history where tourism has proven to be disastrous for communities, and especially Indigenous groups, resulting in conflict, violence, and even displacement (Colchester, 2004). For example, McLaren (1999) reported that beach hotels had displaced traditional fishing communities that lived on the coasts of Penang in Malaysia and Phuket in Thailand. Similarly, a Mohawk uprising in Canada was sparked by plans to extend a golf course on their burial grounds. And native Sioux were employed as low wage labourers in a white owned tourist industry that claimed to promote their land and culture.

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## Indigenous tourism

MacCannell (1984) warned that 'when an ethnic group begins to sell itself ... as an ethnic attraction, it ceases to evolve naturally... the group members begin to think of themselves ... as a living representative of an authentic way of life. With that in mind, any decision made regarding lifestyle is not a mere question of practical utility but a weighty question which has economic and political implications for the entire group'.

This approach is synonymous with 'otherness', where the dominant culture is seen as incompatible with the 'original' culture and thus has a negative effect on it, something exploitative, silencing even, and obliterating. This deception might influence the 'performers' who are 'forced to act in ways they never quite were' (Hunter, 2014). Such tourism ignores how Indigenous peoples themselves feel about their involvement in the industry, and overlooks the fact that all cultures are concurrently being renegotiated and redefined, a process in which tourism plays a part. (Schele & Weber, 2001)

Tourism is a vast industry and governments and organisations have understandably recognised its economic value. However, the tourist industry is often dominated by outside interests – companies that retain most of the benefits and yet leave the host destinations to carry the economic, environmental and cultural costs. This often seems to entail viewing landscapes and people as consumer products to be bought and sold.

A desire to see 'real, authentic' Indigenous peoples can be problematic. All too often tourists are not looking for more than superficial contact, and the cultural practices and traditions of Indigenous peoples may be

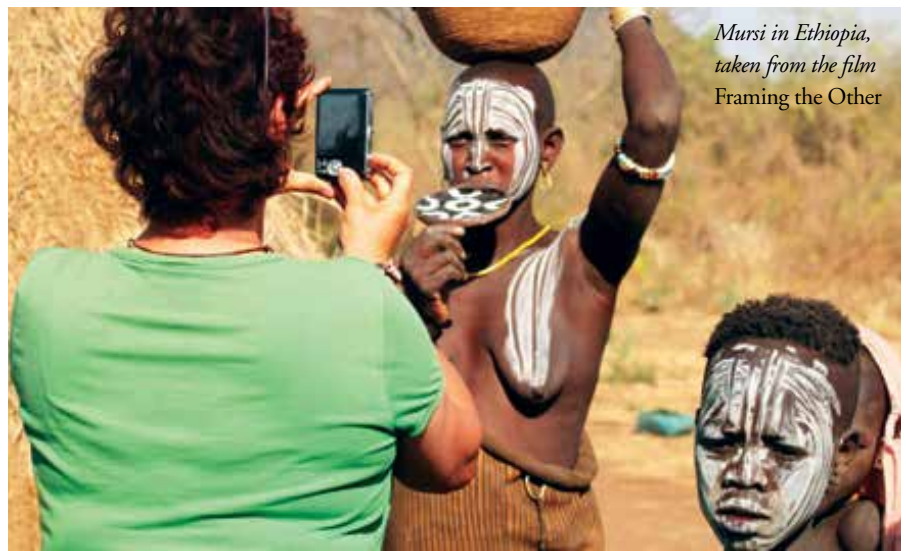
transformed into performances for popular consumption. Heritage can be reduced to trinkets, devoid of meaning and valued only as commodities. At the same time, traditional modes of sustaining a living have been abandoned, leaving Indigenous peoples dependent on outside visitors – often a precarious livelihood. It is true that, for many Indigenous peoples around the world, traditional livelihoods were already eroded – mainly due to colonialism – long before tourism became an option. The reality of life for many Indigenous peoples can be far from the romantic images held in the West. Yet tourists may not wish to be faced with the stark reality of the real lives of their hosts, leaving Indigenous peoples with the conundrum of how to share their culture without compromising their integrity.

Some tourists carry preconceptions about what they are going to see and come away disappointed. For others, witnessing real hardship can leave them distressed about the real conditions faced by Indigenous peoples. As with any form of tourism, visitors should always weigh up the pros and cons of their visit and the extent to which it will help or hinder their hosts. This is a complicated choice that will vary by place and by time.

### Section Summary

One guiding maxim in this report is that so long as Indigenous peoples themselves are directly involved in the decision making process, tourism can be a real force for good. Over the past two decades, community-based approaches have gained popularity and can make an important contribution to sustainable development. They help to improve local infrastructure and generally contribute to a positive interaction between visitor and local communities, thereby promoting increased cultural awareness and respect. It is crucial to adhere to the principle of free, prior and informed consent, ensuring that Indigenous peoples are fully aware of planned tourism activities on their lands, which they themselves authorise and benefit from.

Indigenous tourism is at a tentative stage of development. There are many understandable reasons for Indigenous peoples to be fearful of tourism and reluctant to take risks. They have good historical reasons not to trust in government, either central or local: their individual and collective human rights have often been disregarded in the name of 'development'. Yet when cultural tourism is owned and operated by Indigenous people themselves, it can work differently for all concerned, boosting both community morale and cultural self-awareness. (Markwick, 2001).



*Mursi in Ethiopia,  
taken from the film  
Framing the Other*

## Ecotourism

### KEY QUESTIONS

Does ecotourism benefit Indigenous peoples?

Is ecotourism necessarily more ethical and environmentally friendly than other forms of tourism?

**Ecotourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the travel industry, having gained prominence in the 1980s in the USA and Europe. The aim was for this to be a form of tourism that would benefit local people and the environment. However it can sometimes be little more than an effective marketing strategy. The appeal of the name is obvious, but the assumption that ecotourism is synonymous with ethical travel is a dangerous one. Homes have been demolished, communities displaced, and people injured, all in the name of ecotourism. On the other hand, however, ecotourism can have positive impacts – providing an economic and sustainable alternative to logging, oil production or ranching for example. Ecotourism now has a huge impact on Indigenous peoples in both positive and negative ways and it is therefore important to choose from ecotourist sites carefully. This chapter will highlight connections between Indigenous peoples and ecotourism, note concerns as well as benefits, and offer some examples of best practice.**

### Ecotourism and Indigenous peoples

Ecotourist destinations are typically located in wilderness areas. The Amazon rainforest, for example, is increasingly popular as a tourist destination, while also being home to peoples who depend on the forest for food, building materials and medicine. Although frequently promoted as a useful development model

for such areas – offering job opportunities, money, and the potential revival of cultures and crafts – ecotourism can also cause disruptive competition for land and resources, and can threaten traditions and practices.

In the name of ecotourism, Indigenous peoples have experienced eviction from traditional lands, and the destruction of their habitat.

*'No longer satisfied with lying on a beach for two weeks, we want to trek through the Andes, take to horseback through the Okavango Delta, climb Kilimanjaro and live like a head-hunter in a Borneo longhouse.'*

Davies, 2002

The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous peoples acknowledged in 2003 that ecotourism had severely damaged Indigenous lands. Yet the driving forces of ecotourism are access to clean, untouched nature and 'authentic' Indigenous cultures. The KLM Dutch airlines in-flight magazine sums it up well: *'no longer satisfied with lying on a beach for two weeks, we want to trek through the Andes, take to horseback through the Okavango Delta, climb Kilimanjaro and live like a head-hunter in a Borneo longhouse.'* (Davies, 2002). The world is our playground – yet all these destinations are Indigenous people's lands.

Problems occur – as with all types of tourism – when the industry offers little room for essential local control. When ecotourism is used as a marketing strategy rather than a working tourism practice, local communities are unlikely to benefit. There tends to be very little regulation to promote high standards in this field and, like the industry as a whole, there may be restricted room for the smaller operators. Sadly, many in the industry seem to view international laws on both the environment and human rights as annoying obstacles to be circumvented.

Ecotourism *can* offer economic alternatives and provide income without compromising culture and traditions. For it to work, Indigenous peoples must be partners in the process and be given the opportunity to share

*Left: 'our dance, our identity' – Wayeyi traditional dance from Okavango Delta, Botswana*



the benefits, both economically and socially. A community in Ecuador, for example, is using ecotourism as a means of preventing oil prospectors from taking over their land. In the Philippines certain communities are benefiting enormously from the economic advantages brought about by bird watchers coming to their island. Responsible approaches to ecotourism can generate positive impacts from tourism. Ideally, ecotourism both takes account of the interests of Indigenous peoples and offers hope for sustainability.

Capirona (see next page) is a great example of what Indigenous peoples can do to work together for the long-term benefit of the community, especially with generous support and guidance. Indigenous ownership isn't the only way to ensure that an ecotourism project works to the benefit of all. The crux of this seems to lie both in ensuring Indigenous people give their free, prior and informed consent before tourism is developed, and in listening to them and empowering them to play a key part in any development that may follow.

### Fresh Eyes Strategy

Andy Rutherford is the founder of Fresh Eyes, a responsible not-for-profit travel company and member of Tourism Concern's Ethical Tour Operators Group. Andy works with different Indigenous organisations and is clear that relationships between hosts and guests revolve around perceptions of power and identity. In his work with community-based partners he encourages thoughtful, respectful and responsible travel. This also entails working with travellers before they book so that they can understand the impact of



Ratargui Swamp, Bangladesh

their visit. He adheres to a *Just Price* commitment – ensuring all travellers and partners know what everyone pays and is being paid, what a just tour costs and who receives what. Fresh Eyes commits to sharing the expectations of their partners who are invariably drawn from the communities in which they are working. The partnerships are carefully monitored with a constant eye to improvement; local experts report on any adverse effects of visits; and funds are used for the direct benefit of the community. This approach aims to ensure that a given market/environment is not over saturated.

### Section Summary

In the right hands, ecotourism can be really positive for all concerned. The lesson here is not to take the name at face value. For every example of good ecotourism, there are sadly others that reveal bad practice. Tourists need to be aware that information they are given in advance of any tour is likely to be marketing material. Asking searching questions about their business models and about regulations should help to ascertain whether the tour will be run ethically. Fortunately, as this market expands, regulatory bodies are doing more to buttress best practice.

### ECOTOURISM: POINTS TO PONDER

**Most ecotourism sites are on Indigenous land**

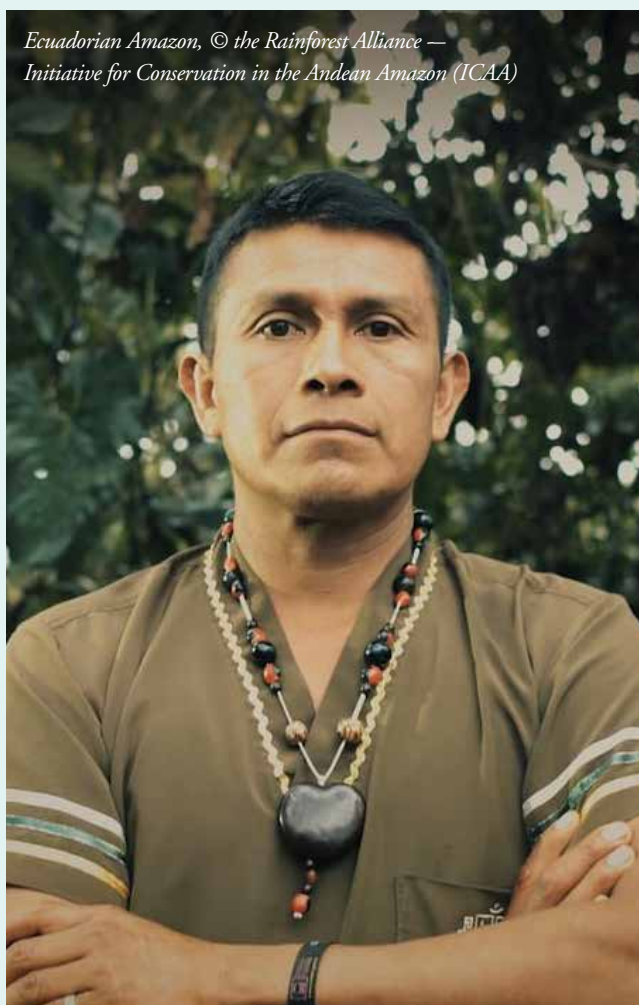
**Don't take the label 'ecotourism' at face value – it is not necessarily beneficial – ecotourism has been responsible for the displacement of Indigenous peoples and the destruction of their land**

**International market dominance makes it hard for the Indigenous voice to be heard.**

**However, Ecotourism can provide an economic alternative to industrial development and boost self-sufficiency.**

### Capirona – community ecotourism project in Ecuador

Capirona is an ecotourism project operated solely by an Indigenous community in Ecuador's Amazon basin. Capirona is comprised of a community of 24 Quechua families who inhabit the Napo province of Ecuador. This Indigenous community has traditionally survived by growing and selling subsistence crops. As seed and transport costs increased, the community was forced to seek a new income stream. For this community, logging was a last resort as they depended on the forest for their food and medicine so they decided to start a small-scale ecotourism programme. The community is not easy to get to: it is deep in the lowland tropical forest, the only access is on foot or by canoe – appealing only to a certain type of traveller. However, they knew that there was a market already, as travel agents were already bringing tourists to the forest – albeit with no direct benefit to them. So they designed a project that would give them much-needed income, and more control over what happened in the



*Ecuadorian Amazon, © the Rainforest Alliance – Initiative for Conservation in the Andean Amazon (ICAA)*



*Tourists visiting the ecotourism project  
© www.elnomad.com*

forest, whilst minimising any impact. With a small loan from the provincial Indigenous federation, they purchased the materials to build a visitor's centre. They decided to build in the traditional way, as they sensed that this would appeal to tourists. Everyone in the village participated in the construction of the tourist facilities. With the help of a German NGO, Capirona printed flyers about their project and distributed them in the capital (Colvin, J, 1996).

The project continues to be a communal effort. Women from different families rotate the responsibility of preparing meals for visitors. Men from the village operate the canoes and act as guides through the forest. Some individuals are responsible for keeping accounts while others monitor supplies. Even the village shaman participates by sharing his special knowledge of the forest, telling local legends, and demonstrating some of the traditional ceremonies. Everyone joins in the farewell party for visitors. Since the programme's emphasis is on cultural exchange, visitors are asked to share something of their culture at the farewell party, where traditional Quechuan music and dance are offered. Community members also manage the accounts, determine how much to charge, decide what groups to receive and when and, most important, decide together how to use the financial gains. Profits from the project have paid for medical emergencies, provided loans to community members, purchased an outboard motor for the communal canoe, and capitalised a small store that sells basic staples to visitors and community members (Colvin, J, 1996).

## The Indigenous Image

### KEY QUESTIONS

How should Indigenous peoples be best presented for tourists?

Who should control such representations and marketing in general?

**A central issue with all tourism is the way in which experiences are packaged and presented to an outside audience. A dominant culture – a typical western country – presents itself in a huge variety of ways: through art, architecture, literature, theatre, dance, music, history and material culture. And it does so through a whole gamut of theatres, galleries, museums, exhibitions and concert halls. The problem for Indigenous people is that they have fewer opportunities to share their culture. They are often typecast as ‘left-over’ from the past, and associated with romantic, idealised images. They tend to be given a status similar to that of a museum exhibit. It is implied that being ‘Indigenous’ is the opposite of being ‘modern’, and the myth of the ‘noble savage’ is an easy one to perpetuate. The challenge for all concerned is therefore how to present images of a living culture, which celebrates the past, rightly noting past repression, but which also describes a diverse present and points to a positive future.**

### The Image

The ‘exotic other’ has long been subject to the ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry, 1990) – probably for as long as ‘tourism’ has existed. This is part of something we can describe as ‘the cultural trap’ for Indigenous peoples. In many countries lively Indigenous images have been used to promote tourist destinations; but this is fraught with difficulties.

Who decides which is the best way to represent a culture or people? Pictures chosen can often perpetuate ‘traditional’ images. Indigenous peoples are associated with notions of peacefulness, spirituality, living in harmony with nature – essentially the ‘noble savage’. For groups that are struggling for recognition of their rights, such images can offer opportunities but can also be a cage. In claiming to be Indigenous they may be seen to be setting themselves apart from modernity, an issue which is often reduced to being a matter of development.

*‘The very idea of Indigenous authenticity has deep racist colonial roots. They continue to shape state policies and practices that affect the everyday lives of Indigenous peoples... who come under pressure to ‘revive’ ‘traditions’ and customs for the benefit of tourists.’*

A related problem is that, while governments encourage the involvement of Indigenous peoples in tourism for economic reasons, they often fail to provide the full picture. For economic reasons they often cherry-pick images that highlight the most striking and glamorous aspects of these often marginalised groups.

Honest treatment of Indigenous groups should surely be matched by realistic representations of how



### The Sámi people, Sám̄i

Sám̄i (*Sámi land, spanning across Scandinavia and the Kola peninsula in Russia*) has long attracted visitors from all over the world, and today it is visited by millions of tourists every year. In spite of this bustling tourist activity, and even though Sámi traditions are frequently portrayed through various media, today we sadly see very few successful Sámi tourism companies. This means that the images of the Sámi people are being put on display in the worldwide market, but the revenue from tourism ends up in other people’s pockets.

Only comparatively recently have Indigenous peoples started to become more actively involved, as they have taken greater control of what has been occurring, playing their own part in mediating exchanges. So how best might Indigenous peoples be represented in any travel brochure? This is ‘a \$64,000 question’ to which there is no easy answer. This represents obvious manipulation for commercial reasons, but can become more sinister when images selected run counter to how Indigenous peoples are actually being treated in different countries. Then it becomes a matter of further exploitation.

### The Mursi of Ethiopia

The Mursi of Ethiopia famously wear large lip plates – a body modification only adopted by the women. Does tourism play a part in the perpetuation of this tradition? Would these practices continue if tourists didn't enjoy seeing them as much? Much like the Kayan people of Northern Thailand, the Mursi are marginalised within their country and have little choice for income other than tourism. The money they receive from tourists has become such a lifeline that it has become a rather mercenary transaction: as if to say, "We'll be as exotic as you like, so please take your photograph quickly and let the next group through". The Mursi's engagement in tourism is thus complex: what are the ethics of this exchange?



*Man from Mursi community, Ethiopia*

### The Kayan people of Thailand

Owing to civil war, the Kayan people (also known as Paudang) fled from Myanmar to Thailand where they were granted temporary stay under 'conflict refugee status'. Today 500 or so Kayans live in guarded villages on the northern Thai border. This Indigenous community is known for a custom where some women wear rings to create the appearance of a long neck. This practice has attracted tourists and thus helped them to earn a living. Many tour companies visit these villages and lots of pictures are taken of these long-necked women. Kayans have become an important tourist symbol for Thailand and yet they do not have Thai citizenship, despite their great efforts every year to obtain that right. Without citizenship, Kayans have limited access to utilities such as electricity, roads, healthcare and schools for education. Furthermore, Thai authorities refuse to allow Kayans to resettle outside tourist villages, claiming they are economic migrants and not real refugees.



*Kayan women wearing neck rings. Originally from Burma, many Kayan now live in Northern Thailand.*

they are currently faring in society. Moreover, such marketing should surely be in the hands of the Indigenous peoples themselves?

Aboriginal Tourism British Columbia, an accrediting body for Indigenous tourism ventures in Canada offers guidelines on how sites should be promoted, offering work by reputable photographers and marketing personnel. The brochures produced perhaps offer an honest way forward. In some cases they have a portrait picture of a First Nations person with the heading 'our story, your experience'. Each brochure emphasises the nature of the different cultures along with stories that go with it. Many mention an 'authentic', 'tranquil' experience. The pictures are a mix of landscape, nature, and people – images which, although playing to tourist desires, are not over exotic or exaggerated for the sake of marketing.

### The matter of 'authenticity'

Indigenous peoples are under great pressure to uphold a level of 'authenticity' and 'image' that western perceptions have created for and imposed on them. The very idea of Indigenous authenticity has deeply racist colonial roots; yet it continues to shape state policies and practices that affect the everyday lives of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, in some contexts, expectations of Indigenous cultural purity or environmental naturalness are fostered to get citizenship, political recognition and access to resources and services. Indigenous peoples can therefore come under pressure to revive 'traditions' and customs for the benefit of tourists. This may range from continued bodily modification by some



peoples, to the ubiquitous tepee image associated with Native Americans, all for the consumption of tourists.

It is not entirely clear how a culture could be seen to be 'authentic'. No culture has remained static through time. This may be a useful term when speaking about furniture, but it has little meaning with regard to people and culture. One thing we can all learn from the experience of Indigenous peoples is greater understanding of the concept of 'difference' – the notion of 'them and us' – and an awareness of how we all possess multiple identities. In the process of visiting a site designed to capture the experiences of what is essentially a minority culture, we may all perceive ways in which we are ourselves both 'captured' and 'liberated' by our own past. It can be valuable to appreciate how we have got where we are today, at what cost, and where we wish to be in the future. Indigenous tourism gives us a window into alternative constructs of an increasingly homogenised world.

### Section Summary

Fulfilling tourism requires a 'contract' between hosts and guests. For the hosts this might entail providing honest literature on what is offered, open engagement with the problem of 'authenticity', the display and sale of 'genuine' artefacts, and the mounting of exhibitions and ceremonies with due reverence, explanation and respect. Visitors and guests, for their part, need to consider carefully their motives and intentions, their selection of sites to visit, and ponder the challenges to their customary ways of thinking that they might encounter. There needs to be a willingness to suspend belief and step out of western shoes.

### The Maasai of Kenya

In Kenya, the economy is driven by tourist dollars. Seventy per cent of the nation's tourist parks are located on Maasai land; the image of the Maasai warrior often 'spearheads' international advertising campaigns. Yet few tourists are aware that most of the Maasai receive absolutely no financial benefit from the industry and are even excluded from the game reserves. Travel brochures give the impression that Maasai live as they once did, and much of the marketing material depicts them hunting in traditional ways. Yet such hunting is now actually prohibited. The truth is that the mistreatment of the Maasai by successive Kenyan governments goes back a long time. This is an Indigenous community that has been aggressively displaced and denied fundamental human rights. Many groups like Survival International have called for a boycott until the treatment of the Maasai has improved, a decision individual tourists must make for themselves. Certainly a significant outcome for the Maasai would be the freedom to determine what the world knows of them and the plight of those still trying to live in their traditional homelands.

*Maasai men with tourists*



### THE INDIGENOUS IMAGE: POINTS TO PONDER

**Beware of stereotypical images, particularly romanticisation**

**Honest treatment of Indigenous groups should be matched by realistic representations of how they are currently faring in society**

**Marketing should ideally be in the hands of the Indigenous people themselves.**

## Indigenous Peoples and Sacred & Spiritual Tourism

### KEY QUESTIONS

How do we define a sacred site?

How should we behave when visiting such sites?

**Around the world sacred sites are often used to attract tourists. In turn this means that local communities may have to fight hard to protect them. From Ayers Rock in Australia to Table Mountain in South Africa, sacred places are misappropriated, defamed or disrespected. They are important to Indigenous people, providing meaning to life, comfort, moral guidance and a sense of security. While many sacred sites in more 'developed' countries form part of the built environment, elsewhere in the world they are part of the natural environment – beautiful and breath-taking sites. They are also less easy to protect than buildings like cathedrals. Likewise, the ceremonies conducted at such places are more easily abused, often being open and loosely choreographed. Tourists flock to such sites eager to witness an older, somehow more 'pure' form of spirituality with strong links to the past. Believers and tourists alike jostle in the ceremonies that are held at these sites, often leaving a bitter taste regarding what has occurred, particularly where the sites have become heavily commercialised. What do Indigenous people make of tourists' apparent eagerness to partake in their ceremonies? At what point does a visitor's presence at a religious ceremony become an intrusion? This chapter discusses 'spiritual tourism', explores why it has come into vogue, and the issues it raises about ownership of, and respect for, sacred sites.**

### Who do these sites belong to?

The idea that certain sites associated with great religious prophets or events belong to mankind in general is legitimised by the idea that such knowledge is valuable to all and thus should be accessible to all. What is important in these debates is the power structures that exist. In Puerto Rico (Boriké), for example, the country persists in its public displays of Indigenous ancestral grounds, while simultaneously denying the very existence of the present day Indigenous peoples. It is clear why Indigenous groups would therefore be unwilling

to share such important parts of their culture. Many tour companies seem to divest themselves of any responsibility for spiritual sensitivity. There is little connection in much of their marketing material to the Indigenous peoples themselves, their histories, struggles, meaning. Few offer advice or protocol on how to respect such places.

In South Dakota, USA, the Lakota people boycotted and blockaded the re-enactment of the 'Lewis and Clark expedition' organised to celebrate the 200th anniversary of their trek. To the Lakota this was the glorification of their own genocide ([www.lewisandclark200.org](http://www.lewisandclark200.org)).

*"People of European heritage, out of hunger for what their culture lacks, may unwittingly become spiritual strip miners, damaging other cultures in superficial attempts to uncover their mystical treasures. Understanding the suppression ... can help people with European ancestors avoid flocking to the sad tribe of Wannabes, – want to be Indians, want to be Africans, want to be anything but what we are."*  
Starhawk, 1989

This captures a common problem in the promotion of Indigenous tourism, namely the contradiction inherent in glorifying past genocide whilst seeking to treasure past civilisations. Similarly, petroglyphs and pictographs are sensationalised as primitive art – even if they have become defaced over time – and yet are simultaneously held up as monuments of ancient peoples rich with spiritual meaning.

'People of European heritage, out of hunger for what their culture lacks, may unwittingly become spiritual strip miners, damaging other cultures in superficial attempts to uncover their mystical treasures. Understanding the suppression and grounding ourselves in the surviving knowledge of the European traditions can help people with European ancestors avoid flocking to the sad tribe of Wannabes, – want to be Indians, want to be Africans, want to be anything but what we are, and, of course, any real spiritual power we gain from any tradition carries with it a responsibility. If we learn from African drum rhythms or the Lakota sweat lodge, we have incurred an obligation not to romanticize but to participate in the very real struggles being waged for liberation, land and cultural survival.' (Starhawk, 1989)

When it comes to understanding ritual and sacred activities, context is vital in order to

understand fully what is going on. There are tensions in the writings of those who both refer to Indigenous peoples in terms of the 'noble savage', with ancient knowledge that might save the developed world, while also trapping them in a role which exists for the benefit of the 'West'. (Hendry, 2005).

This is a hangover from the days of colonialism, with all the confusion that that entails: a sense of cultural and material theft mixed with awe and respect for Indigenous peoples, whilst turning those people into victims. What this perhaps ignores is the way in which all cultures have interacted since the days of colonialism. The sense of a 'mysterious other', which might contain values important for us all has been heightened for those in the west as the power of main stream religions have waned.

### Should the sacred be for sale?

A particularly contentious issue centres on the appropriateness of including tourists in 'sweat lodge ceremonies'. A 'sweat' is a physical and spiritual cleansing, the significance of which may vary widely between groups, communities and leaders. First Nation elders communicated an unequivocal message to the tourist industry about this in the late 1990s: 'aboriginal spirituality is not for sale and there is no place for spiritual ceremonies in tourism products' (Notzke, 2010:47). The distrust and hard line these First Nation elders took is understandable. However, many Indigenous groups have not taken this approach and instead are happy to share their ritual, ceremonies and sites, provided due reverence and respect are paid. As an elder from the First Nations Scwepmic



### Case study: Guatemala

Sumac Champey is a sacred site to the local Mayan communities and a beautiful tourist attraction nestled deep in the Guatemalan jungle. In 2013 the National Institute of Tourism (Inguat) took over management of the site and then barred the local communities from using it. Crisanto Asig Pop, a 61-year-old member of the Q'eqchi' Indigenous authority said: 'This is the land of our ancestors; we are the true owners and caretakers of this land. If we wanted to use the site, we had to pay 30 Quetzales to enter.' The Indigenous communities protested for years to get their land back. At the end of 2015 they managed to reclaim their land, which they still allow tourists to visit while ensuring that the areas is well looked after. Support for their claim to this land came from all across Guatemala. This move, however, has not come without repression; key members of the community have been arrested for 'usurping the land' while the communities have also been threatened with eviction and arrests. The Guatemalan media told tourists not to visit the site as it would not be safe; the communities insist however that the site is still welcoming tourists. As Asig Pop states: 'They are calling us thieves, but we aren't the thieves. We as Indigenous peoples have the right to administer our lands.' (Abbott, 2016)

Semuc Champey is an example of the appropriation of sacred sites across the world, whether that be by government agencies as in this case, or global corporations. These places hold significance for the cultures in questions, and through them the rest of the world. Damage those connections and we damage everyone. Imagine how you would feel if you were charged for visiting the grave of a close relative, or the place at which you and your family had worshipped for years suddenly became inaccessible.

community stated: ‘we don’t need it to be kept secret, we just need it to remain sacred’, continuing to say that he was often flattered by the interest his knowledge receives, and that if it were not for other people sharing their knowledge with him, he would not feel like he had much of a culture. (Jennings, 2014). Acknowledging the inevitable different voices and opinions of Indigenous peoples when it comes to the matter of sharing is vital. Outsiders’ participation in ceremonies will inevitably vary from place to place. In practice, therefore, the development of sites at which Indigenous peoples may choose to showcase their culture, traditions and spiritual customs, has rescued certain ceremonies from oblivion, with rituals honed and developed. Groups of performers have gained work thanks to the growing interest in this kind of tourism; native pride has been enhanced.

Such tourism needs to be offered with caution and sensitivity. If tourists are honoured with an invitation to take part in a ceremony, and there is no evidence of coercion of the hosts, then perhaps they can



*First Nations Sweat Lodge in Xatsull Heritage Village, BC Canada*

accept with gratitude? But only provided the ground rules for their observation/ participation, dress codes, and expectations of behaviour are discussed. In Europe and the Middle East there are generally recognised codes for dress, such as when to wear or not to wear hats or shoes, etc, in various religious buildings. It is a courtesy to prepare beforehand so that you have some knowledge of the nature or the ceremony you are about to witness and its significance to believers.

### Section Summary

As long as we are intrigued by the mysterious and tantalised by the idea of a genuine religious experience – or just simply interested in seeing something strange and different, possibly enhanced by music and dance – sacred places will be on tourist itineraries. The key here is surely to travel with care and approach these experiences with more than the customary sensitivity demanded by good manners. As poet WB Yeats put it: ‘tread softly for you tread on my dreams’.

### SACRED & SPIRITUAL TOURISM: POINTS TO PONDER

**Sacred sites are more numerous and diverse than we might think**

**Sacred sites in the natural world are perhaps more difficult to protect**

**Show respect at all times, but do not be afraid to ask questions**

## Land Rights

### KEY QUESTIONS

How do we best sustain 'traditional' land rights in relation to 'legal' rights?

How can we ensure that the 'tourism business' does not wreak as much havoc as any other industry in exploiting the world's resources?

According to Minority Rights Group International, over 12 million Indigenous peoples have been removed from their land to make way for tourism projects. (MRG, 2016). Land rights are central to the concerns of many Indigenous peoples and, despite being recognised by international law, these rights are constantly being violated. Governments often talk the talk when it comes to sustainable policy, while in the same breath compromising land rights for the sake of their national economy.

Whilst there are examples of Indigenous peoples using tourism successfully to safeguard their territory, such cases are rare. Indigenous tourism is only really sustainable when land rights are respected – the link to their land being vital to the maintenance of the lifestyles, traditions and cultures which tourists wish to encounter. This chapter posits that only when Indigenous peoples regain control of their land will they be able to survive as distinct cultures. The case studies provided by Minority Rights Group International illustrate how the demands of tour companies are all too often given priority over the rights of Indigenous peoples.



### Case study: Land and water rights – the Bushmen of the Kalahari, Botswana

There are often stark contrasts in how Indigenous peoples and companies working and living in the same area are treated, both in the name of promoting tourism. Take the Bushmen of the Kalahari Reserve, for example, who applied to the government to reopen a borehole that was once used to access water close to their homes; the high court of Botswana ruled against their request. Meanwhile, a first luxury lodge, complete with a swimming pool, opened on the reserve. The Kalahari Plains Camp, owned by South African operators Wilderness Safaris, was given permission to drill its own borehole to supply the establishment. This illustrates the essential inequity of the Botswana Government's policies allowing the tourism (and diamond mining) industry access to this scarce resource within the reserve, while denying its own people the same fundamental human right. Thanks to a UN resolution, recognising access to clean drinking water as an essential human right, the Bushmen eventually did gain access to their borehole. Not before, however, the campaigning organisation 'Survival International' called for a tourism boycott of the region, such was their concern for how the Bushmen were treated. Wilderness Safari has been asked to move their lodge off the Bushmen's lands, as their 'free, prior and informed consent' was not sought before its construction. The company claim that they followed a legal, transparent tendering process for the acquisition of the land and claimed that as the commercial rights belong with government, they did not need the consent of the Bushmen.

This illustrates the importance of distinguishing between 'commercial', 'traditional' and 'customary' rights in this field. While 'commercial' rights are typically enshrined in legislation and enforced by law, 'traditional' rights are often poorly respected or completely ignored by governments and big business, particularly where poor, socially marginalised peoples are concerned, and where traditional claims clash with commercial.

The situation is complex and extends far beyond the involvement of Wilderness Safaris. It reflects a lack of understanding all round, or refusal to accept the rights of Indigenous peoples by Wilderness Safaris and the Government of Botswana. Indeed, the Botswana Centre for Human Rights notes their government's refusal to recognise the Bushmen as a distinct 'Indigenous' ethnic group. It also reflects a lack of awareness of the business responsibility to respect human rights and an understanding of what this implies. This situation is being replicated across the world.



*Loliondo, Maasai community waiting for a meeting to begin in Sukenya Village*

### Land rights – Case study: The Maasai & Enashiva Nature reserve.

Another example of the clash between sustaining a lifestyle at the same time as promoting tourism can be found in the case of the Loliondo, Maasai. The lifestyle of the Loliondo, Maasai, a semi-nomadic pastoralist community residing in the Mondorosi, Soitsambu and Sukenya villages of northern Tanzania, is infused with a sense of spiritual and cultural attachment to their ancestral land. The Maasai depend on fertile land and central water sources to graze their cattle and other livestock to maintain their livelihood, and on unique plants to treat wounds and illnesses through traditional means. However, the growth of wildlife conservation areas and luxury tourism has resulted in mass displacement of the Maasai, and loss of key cultural practices and identity.

The Maasai have for the last 10 years been engaged in a land dispute, after the Tanzanian government in 2006, illegally sold 12,617 acres of traditional pastoral land to Tanzania Conservation Limited (TCL, a Tanzanian subsidiary of US based tourism corporation Thomson Safaris (TS). TCL / Thomson Safaris operates wildlife safaris on the area known as Sukenya Farm /Enashiva Nature Reserve. The Maasai claim that they were offered no compensation, nor were they consulted over the land transfer. The community was abruptly prohibited from grazing and watering their livestock on the entire acreage despite their uninhibited access to the land for 19 years. The Maasai have also always lobbied vigorously against this change in land use from agriculture to tourism. The dispute rumbles on, but TS have not been stopped from conducting tourism activities on the land.

The Maasai have not received any money from TS, despite their culture being exploited and commercialised to entice tourists to the region. TS claims to be conducting 'sustainable tourism' and has even won awards on these grounds. Some funds have gone to support a local school and other infrastructure, but locals claim that these funds are bribes to divide the villages and gain support for their operation. The Maasai are also victims of violence, arrests and beatings from police forces, and remain excluded from important sacred sites. The Maasai are continually marginalised in the name of conservation and tourism, and have not been protected by the State. Without their land, their culture is under threat and their community may not survive.

Across the world there are repeated incidents of the grabbing of ancestral lands. The industry is largely self-regulated and transient, leaving Indigenous peoples with few options but resistance once their land rights are bypassed. A key issue here lies in different definitions of ownership. Many Indigenous peoples claim their land – which they have a sacred duty to maintain – by ancestral right. Much of their economy stems from their use of this land, leaving them with little else to trade or barter with big business. Village elders may protest, but are easily fobbed off, duped and overridden by large corporations or government officials. Rarely have contracts worked to their advantage, as the case studies in this section reveal.

### Case Studies

As noted already, the case studies have been shared with us by Minority Rights Group International (MRG), which has initiated a campaign to raise awareness around Indigenous peoples and tourism. MRG share with Tourism Concern a desire to see an industry that is sensitive to human and environmental rights.

They call for greater respect for – and recognition of – Indigenous collective land rights. They also champion Indigenous peoples' ability to participate in development – crucially through free, prior and informed consent. Global standards on these important issues need to be established, mandated and met – with Indigenous peoples as key contributors – so all those affected in tourism can benefit.

### Case study: The Endorois and Lake Bogoria Game Reserve

The Endorois are an Indigenous community of around 60,000 semi-nomadic pastoralist peoples in Kenya and their story illustrates what happens when people are evicted from their homelands. Their home surrounds traditional sites around Lake Bogoria and the Mochongoi forest in the Rift Valley, where they reared cattle and livestock until the 1970s, when they were summarily evicted from their ancestral lands to pave the way for lucrative tourism projects such as the Lake Bogoria Game Reserve – one of Kenya's top tourist attractions owing to its hot springs and wild animals, including the famous congregation of around 1.5 million flamingos.

After their evictions, the Endorois suffered from extreme poverty. Kenyan authorities destroyed their possessions, including houses, religious constructions, and beehives. The Endorois have claimed that the Kenyan Wildlife Service, which oversaw the creation of the Game Reserve, has never fulfilled its promise to compensate the Endorois families with fertile land, employment, and a share of the tourism revenue.

They have been marginalised during the development process; they do not benefit from income generated by visitors, who are probably unaware of the Endorois' exclusion and dispossession of land. They have been forced to live on semi-arid land unsuitable for their pastoralist lifestyle, and the community has been further divided and displaced.

The Endorois, with the help of international human rights organisations, have fought hard to reclaim their land and their rights, including taking their case to the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (an international human rights body). A ruling in their favour was issued by the African Commission in 2010 but they are yet to experience a full and meaningful implementation of the ruling and have also not been fully engaged partners or stakeholders in tourism planning.



*Two men washing their feet in the outflow from a swimming pool at the Lake Bogoria Hotel, which lies on Endorois land.*

### Section Summary

One feature of this discussion is how situations may be improved when Indigenous peoples feel able to take their fight to an international level and bypass their own governments. This is helped in turn by the existence of international and regional human rights bodies which can act as courts of appeal. Publicity is vital in raising world awareness of the issues.

Cooperation is also vital to any further progress in

this field. Organisations like Tourism Concern need to share information with international bodies like Minority Rights Group International and with

organisations that promote the rights of Indigenous peoples within countries. This has to involve Indigenous communities fully if it is to be successful.

#### LAND RIGHTS: POINTS TO PONDER

**Land rights are central to most current disputes involving Indigenous peoples and tourism**

**International agencies have a vital role to play in bringing pressure to bear on governments**

**All groups with concerns in this area need to work together for the common good**

## Developments and Conclusions

There are some grounds for optimism to be found in the emergence of regulatory bodies at all levels: local, regional, national and international.

### Regulatory Bodies

Accrediting bodies are springing up in an effort to support ethical development and help tourists make better choices. Many of the agencies require full or partial Indigenous ownership – one way of ensuring profits go to the right quarters and that cultural content has been well considered. Here are two examples of such regulatory bodies:

#### **Aboriginal Tourism Association of British Columbia (AtBC)**

– was founded in 1996 as a ‘non-profit, stakeholder-based organisation committed to promoting a sustainable, culturally rich Aboriginal tourism industry in British Columbia, Canada. In order for sites to gain accreditation they must be at least 51% Indigenous owned or controlled, and sites are required to satisfy their requirements in three main areas: market or export readiness; operating standards; and cultural content. They provide training, resources, and networking, as well as co-operative marketing programmes. They work closely with a range of professionals to promote good practice for visitors and employees alike.

**Experience Sápmi** – this Sámi owned initiative promotes responsible and sustainable Sámi tourism ventures. Their vision is to ensure that their money goes to the Sámi communities, and to develop a more respectful

tourism and prevent further objectification. They note that, for tourism to work for them, it must be accepted and established culturally and socially in Sámi society, and the hosts must be able to communicate Sámi values and way of life. Companies that have been awarded badges have demonstrated a holistic approach to the Sápmi living environment, are knowledgeable about the region and its residents, and can offer professional arrangements to people visiting Sápmi.

**The World Indigenous Tourism Alliance (WINTA)** is an Indigenous-led global network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and organisations who seek to give practical expression to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, through tourism.

WINTA collaborates with Indigenous communities, tourism industry entities, states, and NGOs which have an interest in addressing the aspirations of Indigenous peoples seeking empowerment through tourism and producing mutually beneficial outcomes. In doing so, WINTA undertakes tourism policy research, organises tourism conferences and workshops, and provides strategic destination consulting services.

When tourism is planned in cooperation with and showing respect for Indigenous people, with accrediting bodies like these who can help with the management and business models, then communities can make an informed choice as to which tourism activities they wish to accept. Such bodies are helping to improve standards for all concerned.

On the theme of regulation, more initiatives on the part of the UN and other international agencies should be encouraged. The UN Declaration on Indigenous peoples (Article 27) was a step in the right direction, but notice that it only came in as recently as 2007, having been held up for many years by bodies including the UK government. Given so many instances of poor practice by individuals, corporations and national governments, much still needs to be done. Tourists need to mobilise themselves to become part of a pressure group for ethical, sustainable tourism. Tour companies will respond and improve practices when they see a market advantage for doing so.

*‘Tourism goes right to the heart of who we are as peoples. Our culture and our way of life are on the line’.* (Smoke, 1999)

This is a key message to take away: we have read about some of the devastating effects tourism can have on Indigenous peoples and also the abundance of benefits that it can bring when done well. We need to accept that all cases are different, political climates vary along with geography and history. There is a lot at stake and everyone must play a part in getting it right. As Greenwood (1976) asserts, ‘to prohibit all change is nonsensical; to ratify all change is immoral.’

There will never be easy ways to reach sensible compromises that will satisfy all interests. Yet we must try, and at least there are now ground rules as to how we should behave – first and foremost by ensuring that we give a strong voice to the very people we are trying to ‘help’.



## Recommendations

Tourism Concern believe that Indigenous peoples should be given meaningful engagement in the processes of planning and developing tourism which affects them, including allowing them to say no. Evaluation of potential tourism development should recognise the rights of Indigenous peoples and the responsibilities that they have to their territories. It should seek to ensure that the benefits of any such tourism are shared fairly.

Tourism Concern have played a vital role in seeking consensus around Indigenous tourism for several years. We wish to continue to cooperate with others who share our aims – Indigenous peoples, tour companies, NGOs, government departments and tourists – in order to develop clear guidelines for tour operators, governments and for tourists themselves which help to ensure fair and ethical treatment of Indigenous peoples by the tourism industry. We are working to develop codes of conduct for both tour operators and tourists that encompass four key principles:

- Recognising the distinct and separate rights of Indigenous peoples within their own territories.
- Ensuring that Indigenous peoples have a clear voice in all projects involving their territories.
- Protecting the cultural practices and customs of Indigenous peoples, particularly with regard to the value placed by them on particular sites and sacred places.
- Committing to a policy of continuous improvement.

### Recommendations for governments

- Comply with international law
- See minority groups within countries as an asset not an obstacle to development
- Regulate the power of multinational companies operating within their jurisdiction
- Promote the diversity of their populations and cultures

### Recommendations for companies

- Take note of sacred knowledge systems
- Engage in collective decision-making, respecting the rights of all concerned
- Comply with international law
- Support the maintenance of traditional resource rights for families, communities and people
- Listen to and respect customary law and protocol
- Ensure that Indigenous peoples have uninterrupted access and use of their own territory
- Make sure they are getting due benefit from developments

### Recommendations for tourists

- Look carefully at the credentials and practices of tour companies
- Assess the extent to which Indigenous peoples are involved
- Beware of empty marketing catchwords – do they live up to what is claimed?
- What attempts have been made to be sustainable?
- Be aware and cautious of your position – your presence makes you complicit
- Do your research first: what is the political, social and economic position of the people you are visiting, and are you doing so with their permission?
- If you are invited to partake in a spiritual ceremony of some kind, tread carefully. Ask questions and move with respect and care

Tourism Concern is an independent UK registered charity that campaigns for better tourism. We are funded by individual Members who want tourism be ethical, fair and a positive experience for both travellers and the people and places they visit. This report was made possible through the generous support of our Members and supporters who donated to this campaign. We are very grateful to everyone who has helped make this report possible.

If tourism is going to benefit Indigenous People there needs to be a strong Code of Conduct for Tour Operators and clear guidelines for Tourists. Tourism Concern is uniquely placed to work on this and has previously done similar work in other areas of tourism with recognised success. However, we cannot do this without your support so please consider making a donation to support our work to develop a practical Code of Conduct at [www.tourismconcern.org.uk/donate](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/donate)

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