"Landscape architects generally don’t know beans about the tourism market," said Clare A. Gunn, FASLA, author of *Vacationscape: Designing Tourist Regions*, sounding a fighting note to begin the LA Forum on ecotourism. “It just doesn’t get into the teaching curriculum and it’s not in practice.” □ “Landscape architects should become more familiar with natural principles,” added ecotourist resort developer Stanley Selengut (see page 55). “They’re closer to being naturalists than regular architects, yet they should be more qualified to integrate the architecture with the natural systems.” □ “But one of the things that encourages me about ecotourism, as opposed to old-style resort planning, is regional planning, an area where landscape architects have been very active,” said Peggy H. Carr, ASLA, assistant professor at the University of Florida and veteran of conservation projects in Central America. “Before, people went in and looked at a resort site as an isolated site; they didn’t view it as part of a system. In ecotourism, we are forced to look at a region and its systems.” □ The discussion focused not only on landscape architects’ role in this area of tourism, but on the feasibility of ecotourism itself. □ “Ecotourism has the potential to build up local economies and can act as an argument for the conservation of resources,” said John O. Wilson, environ-
mental officer for the U.S. Agency for International Development (U.S. AID). "But there are downsides. In part, that's why we funded a World Wildlife Fund study on the potentials and pitfalls of ecotourism development. There's still the question of economic benefit for the host countries. Often the U.S. producers and suppliers bring in services, and the money goes back to the U.S., not to the host country."

"Ecotourism is not a panacea," said John Reynolds, FASLA, the National Park Service's assistant director for design and construction. "Any single economic input is not a panacea."

The group grasped for a definition of the slippery term. Gunn started: "In regular tourism, you try to design facilities that will make your customer comfortable in familiar surroundings, by manipulating the environment, the temperature, whatever. In ecotourism, you look into indigenous plants, culture, music, dance, architecture, wildlife. You try to offer your guests a cross-cultural exchange."

"It's basically tourism focused on sites of natural beauty, in which people are willing to sacrifice some personal comforts," said Wilson. "Another aspect is its potential to promote conservation," said Carr.

In Selengut's view, ecotourism equals profits for the private sector, and those profits can create "a strong financial base for park management without a lot of government interven-tion." To make his point, Selengut reached into his vali and yanked out his tax records. They showed that last ye: he paid $217,000 to lease 14 acres for his Maho Bay touri cabins next to the national park on St. John, U.S. Virgin Island. Despite that high overhead, Maho's profits were 20 percent. "And that's after taxes in a recession."

Carr asked if Selengut's rent contributed to park protection. "Not at all," he answered. "There are three private owi:ers who collect the rent." "Then what's the connection between resource protection and tourism?" she followed. Selengut sa: his example was theoretical, but he could just as easily b: paying rent to a park system. "In Grenada, I hope to be de:veloping [facilities in] two parks, under the assumption that m: land rent will pay for the management of the parks. Then will also be job-training programs and business spin-offs like bakers and delivery services, so the local people who might have to poach for wood or meat will have alternatives."

Carr challenged that rosy vision based on her experience in Costa Rica: "Tourism—largely nature tourism—is the second biggest industry behind bananas. Yet there hasn't been the financial link of tourism to parks. The Costa Ricans still haven't figured out how to support their national park system [which covers 13 percent of the nation's land area—see Global Landscape, January 1992]."

"They've had parks for 15 to 20 years, but very little infrastucture development. That has helped attract the trekker type of visitor looking for the wilderness experience. But the parks have suffered. They don't have hardened trails, for example, so visitation results in erosion in some parks."

Wilson added that many third-world nations have extensive park systems on paper, but they are just that: "paper parks" with no facilities, staff or protection of natural areas. Landscape architects should make a difference, he said: "They can become involved through various conservation organizations and other non-government organizations. They can help wrestle with the questions of setting up and developing parks. Especially if they strengthen their foundations in ecology and environmental sciences, landscape architects can bring these necessary skills."

"But there's a tension within our profession," countered Reynolds. "Traditionally, landscape architects design for aesthetics rather than dealing with indigenous culture and environments. As I read Landscape Architecture, I'm struck by the hardness of many projects. I'm concerned that the AIA has taken the lead—with million-dollar EPA grants—to analyze materials and their effect on the environment. Even the engineers have formed a new organization on sustainability. Yet the ASLA and landscape architects in general are not involved."

Is ecotourism relevant to the U.S.? Yes, Reynolds said and national parks are the natural venue. "Starting with the Yosemite grant in 1984, we actually developed the model for resorts and recreation. We've taught Americans what to expect in national parks and in resort developments everywhere. Now we might have to re-teach them. Yes, the national park system can be an ecotourism experience."

The Park Service has a mandate to create "sustainable" development models, Reynolds said, ranging from energy-efficient employee housing to using recycled-plastic park benches to plans to banish cars from parts of Sequoia National Park. Such low-impact development would attract private devel-
operators, chimed in Selengut, because it can increase the bottom line. "At Maho Bay, things that don’t cost money—natural landscape, natural insect control—help turn out amazing profits. And that is part of ecotourism. Everything you do saves money. You don’t have heavy construction, air conditioning or enclosed spaces. You don’t cut indigenous vegetation. And we seem to be offering a vacation that’s much in demand."

"I’m glad to hear that these things are happening," said Carr. "But I question if that’s where our energies should be placed. On the broad scale, we’re rapidly losing our land and natural resources. Design-related issues are important, and it’s great for education to bring in visitors and say, ‘Here’s how you can live with minimal impact on the land.’ But shouldn’t we try to preserve as much land as possible now and worry about the detailed design later?"

"We have to do both," said Reynolds, "ecosystem protection and conservation at the same time."

"It’s great to talk about the broader picture and establishing laws," said Selengut. "But in most countries where I’ve been invited to work, they’re desperate. They have no funding to protect land and there’s no interpretation to try to convince local people not to poach or to cut down trees. They are looking for something fast to fix the problem."

"There are some success stories," said Reynolds. "I met a

PEGGY CARR married into Florida’s first family of conservation, whose patriarch was the late Archie Carr, Jr., an author and champion for the protection of sea turtles. Involved in park and conservation planning in Costa Rica, she is now working on Paseo Pantera ("Path of the Panther"), a five-year, $3.2 million effort to connect Mexico and Colombia through a Central American greenway.

"I would add to Stanley’s suggestions that landscape architects should consider the larger scale, the regional context."

"We have to be sure to develop community support for proposals."

"There should be a link between private economic endeavor and conservation goals."

"Perhaps there should be a tourist tax that would help support the resource that people are coming to see."

“One of the dangers is that ecotourism will force people to stay as they are. We can’t think of culture as static, any more than nature is static. Coming from the developed world, we think it’s clever or cute. Their culture should evolve and change, just as ours does."

—Carr

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park superintendent for a marine national park in the Andaman Islands, a thousand miles off the coast of India. He was charged with protecting a quarter-mile zone off the coasts. But with only one employee and two boats, there was no way he could police hundreds of fishermen. So he told the fishermen that if they let the fish breed in the coastal zones, there would be more fish for everyone to catch. It took five years for the message to sink in, but today the fishermen police those zones themselves. The question is, how do you apply that to ecotourism?"

"It's a sense of theater, and that's part of the script," said Selengut. But Carr blanched when Selengut described Bali's Amandari resort (see pages 37-39), where local people were trained to perform traditional dances and music for the pleasure of tourists. "That scares me," she said. "We can't think of culture as static, any more than a natural system is static. Coming from the developed world, we think it's clever, cute or entertaining. But one of the dangers of ecotourism is that it will force people to stay as they are. Their culture should evolve and change, just as ours does."

"You're absolutely right," said Gunn. "How else do you hang on to the past, though, without making it a theatrical production? I mean, they're playing. What's wrong with that?"

"It's no different from a Wagnerian opera," said Selengut. "It happens on a stage and people are performing something from another era."

"That's a tough one," said Wilson. "Certainly, you want to assist the people to boost their livelihoods. On the other side, you do not want to degrade them, and it's easy to cross that line quickly."

"You're not putting them in the position of circus clowns,"

"Landscape architects design for aesthetics rather than dealing with indigenous cultures or environments. I'm concerned that the AIA has taken the lead to analyze building materials and their effect on the environment. Yet the ASLA and landscape architects are not involved."  
—Reynolds

said Selengut. "You're working with them to express who they really are. It's not dictatorial."

"Can I follow with another question?" said Carr. "My colleagues seem to have a healthy skepticism that ecotourism is the latest fad, and that in a few years people will move on to the next sexy attraction. Do you think that's true?"

"Much as I hate gimmicks and slogans," said Gunn, "I think ecotourism has done what conservation didn't do—brought a new excitement, a level of public interest that wasn't there before."

"I look at it as a tool for sustainable development," said Wilson. "Stanley's right—the economics make it appealing, but they're also very challenging. The short-term versus long-term costs and benefits need to be worked out."

"I don't worry whether it's a fad," said Reynolds. "I think ecotourism might lead towards eco-living at home, eco-lifestyles."

"No one ever questions if a botanical garden or a zoo is faddish," said Selengut. "My perception of ecotourism is that it's a counter-force to television, a counter-force to everything becoming oatmeal and mush. You're just trying to show people how things work. And the market may not be infinite, but it's certainly broad. Yet I doubt that anyone has built a really wonderful model for ecotourism."

"There are downsides to ecotourism. That's why we funded a World Wildlife Fund study on the potential and pitfalls of ecotourism development. There the question of economic benefit for the host countries. Often, U.S. producers and suppliers bring in services, and the money goes back to the U.S."

—Wilson
hat surprises me about ecotourism,” says Nicholas Hetzer, “is that it took so long to catch on.” Hetzer says he coined the term in a 1965 Link's Magazine article criticizing tourism's effects on developing nations, and proposing “ecological tourism” as an alternative. A cancer researcher at the University of California-Berkeley in the 1960s, Hetzer was concerned about the health effects of global environmental deterioration. “Large environmental, cultural and economic benefits can be derived from tourism,” he wrote. “It all depends on how it is done.”

Ecotourism caught on explosively during the 1980s financial boom, when not only tour companies but conservation organizations, colleges and museums began offering thousands of trips that promised environmental advantages as well as vacation fun. Organizers reasoned that tourism revenue would encourage host countries to protect native ecosystems and cultures as attractions, and give local people an alternative to destroying forests and wildlife.

The 1990s recession brought some retrenchment, but ecotourism “is pretty well established,” according to Leslie Jarvis, director of environmental and educational programs at Mountain Travel/Sobek, an amalgamation of two of the older “adventure companies” (both started around 1970). “People realize this is not just a trend.”

Ecotourism’s popularity has caused some vagueness about the term, which may be applied loosely to any tourism in natural areas. Many professionals think, however, that ecotourism should provide eco-benefits. “I’ve been to 500 conferences where they’ve sat and argued about the definition,” Jarvis says. “My feeling is that ecotourism is responsible tourism, with the least negative impact. It can be a unique opportunity to educate people to live in harmony with the planet. Coming in contact with indigenous people, for example, can bring the kind of shift in perception from head to heart to get that motivates change.”

The Ecotourism Society, an Alexandria, Virginia, professional organization, defines ecotourism as: “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people.” “We’re more concerned with end results than definitions,” adds the society’s director, Megan Epler Wood. “We basically advocate tourism as a tool for conservation and sustainable development. In a sense, ecotourism has been around since national parks began. I don’t see a lot of difference between tourists visiting Yellowstone in 1892 and what’s currently called ecotourism. In both cases, a flood of interest in visiting places can have a positive influence on the places.”

Steve Griffith, publicity coordinator of the Sierra Club’s outings program, agrees: “Ecotourism’s become a buzzword but we’ve been doing it since John Muir led trips to the Sierra in 1901. International outings we’ve offered since the 1960s are in the same vein.”

Epler Wood sees landscape architects playing a role in ecotourism similar to the one they played in the design of North American parks. “Landscape architecture is not something we’ve got a policy on yet,” she says, “but there’s a strong movement in the field of creating guidelines for sustainable resort development. The U.S. National Park Service is working on a guide that will be the first document available. There’s a lot to be done with integrating the natural landscape into resorts, and tourists into the landscape. There’s all kinds of technology in temperate regions for dealing with problems—preventing erosion, providing low-impact access to wetlands—but very little has been done for tropical ecosystems like rainforest or savanna, and there’s been a lot more trouble as a result. So this is an area where innovative thinking and approaches are needed.”

One reason landscape architecture has lagged in developing countries is that governments have lacked funds to pay for these services. Epler Wood thinks this is changing. “There’s a growing interest in joint ventures between developed and developing countries,” she says. “Countries like Madagascar or Honduras with few resorts now will be developing them with help from international agencies. Most of the growth will be in the private sector. Governments will decide what the sites will be and then tour companies and concessionaires will come in and bid on them. It’s already happening a lot.”

Ironically, some critics accuse ecotourism of what it seeks to prevent. Leftists see it as neocolonialism that reduces local people to menial dependence. Scientists and environmentalists fear negative effects on wildlife and traditional cultures. Some acknowledge ecotourism’s compatibility with parks, but question benefits. “It might produce a lot more for the country to take the energy required to run that ecotourism operation and put it in a school program,” says Daniel Janzen, an American biologist active in Costa Rica’s pioneering national park system. Alvaro Ugalde, the director of Costa Rica’s park service, has cooperated with tour operators in making that Central American nation one of the region’s most popular destinations. Yet he has expressed uneasiness about their potential power to influence management policies (see “Costa Rican Parks: Forever Wild?” Global Landscape, January 1992).

Ecotourism professionals acknowledge problems, but see them as arising from misuse of the concept. “Since ecotourism has become fashionable,” Jarvis says, “a lot of people are using the bandwagon to get clients, but not doing things to benefit host countries. We recommend travelers inform themselves on programs offered them.” Epler Wood sees three main challenges: “First, there’s a lack of standardized guidelines so that operators using the term will also use the principles behind it. Second, there’s inadequate management of visitors in many natural areas worldwide, so that visitors get out of control and degrade the resource. Third, not enough benefits from visitation are being recycled back to host countries. There’s still too much ‘leakage’ of funds back to developed countries, and we won’t be able to call it sustainable development until that’s minimized.”

Now executive director of Forum International, a California educational corporation that offers more than 1,200 travel programs, Hetzer seems cautiously optimistic. “Why did ecotourism finally become popular? People are looking at it as a way to make some money, not just the industry but also the nonprofits, which are making more and more important money. And that’s justified up to a point. But you have to protect the goose that lays the golden egg.”

Veteran conservation writer David Rains Wallace recently published two books: a novel, The Vermillion Parrot (Sierra Club Books), and The Quetzal and the Macaw: The Story of Costa Rica’s National Parks (Sierra Club Books).