ECOTOURISM PRINCIPLES FOR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

Introduction

No other profession but landscape architecture has as much to offer for resolving all issues of land development for tourism, of which ecotourism is only one part. Landscape architects regularly demonstrate how resources can be protected, even enhanced, at the same time development takes place. Instead of creating conflict, they are showing that environmentalism and development for tourism are compatible.

Ecotourism is a term used loosely to describe "adventure", "environmental", and "nature-based" travel. Generally it concerns these travel purposes:

--to observe, admire, enjoy, photograph;
--to improve mental and physical wellbeing;
--to understand the fundamentals of ecology; and
--to understand the need for conservation and sustainable development.

1. Landscape architects need a basic understanding of tourism. Popular notions are insufficient. Essential are understandings of how tourism functions; elements of supply (attractions, services, transportation, information, promotion) and demand; tri-sector decision makers (nonprofit organizations, government agencies, commercial enterprise); and relation to natural and cultural resources. Learning should include reading texts on tourism, tourism research journals, and participating in tourism conferences, such as the annual meeting of the Travel and Tourism Research Association as well as local TTRA Chapter meetings.

2. Landscape architects need understanding of travel market characteristics. Travelers have great diversity of interests and ability to see and do things. Travel market segmentation should be understood. Design clients are not the real clients. The true clients are those who will use sites and areas after design and development. Tourism market surveys need to be read and interpreted.

3. Landscape architects can perform a major catalytic role. Tourism design, planning, and management are extremely complicated. By means of discussions between clients and related parties, new approaches can be discovered. Often it is necessary to bring public agencies, environmentalists, and business people together to create the best solutions to land development.

4. Sites need to be integrated with the area and region. Ecotourism sites function mostly as attractions but these, in turn, are intimately related to transportation and access, the supporting businesses, and other related travel sites. For example, an island may be suited to day use for nature interpretation but the major services (hotels, restaurants, shops) that demand infrastructure (water, waste, power, police, fire protection) should be placed on mainland nearby. An ecotourism site is part of a larger geographical context.
5. Landscape architects can produce capacity-sensitive designs. Mass tourism presents problems with public use of fragile and rare cultural and natural resources. Proper design and management can provide enrichment for visitors without environmental damage. Most important technique today is visitor interpretive centers because they create minimum impact on resources. Ecocotourism is especially adapted to small-scale, low key development.

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