

**HD** A REAL ADVENTURE (AND SO CHEAP!).

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**LP**

'Sustainable tourism' gives little back to the Third World, argues Robert Gordon-Walker

We wait on a path in the Hinku Valley as another weather-battered group creaks towards us from Mera, one of Nepal's 20,000ft (about 6,000m) trekking mountains. Their strained, peeling faces contrast with their porters' clear complexions and bored expressions. One scabby Lancastrian in hi-tech gear gasps through wind-cracked lips, "It's amazing. But now I'm shattered; I'm emotionally and physically drained."

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Another mumbles that he will be back to "conquer it next time", while 20 over-burdened, under-clad porters rush past, anxious that nothing should interrupt their journey home to the comfort of a wood fire.

It is just as well they hurried away, as they might not have cared for the parting words of one of our number - who had now replaced his ice-axe with a prayer wheel - even though the words had been carefully translated from his dog-eared Nepali dictionary. "They have to learn," he said. "They can't keep chopping down trees."

His remarks epitomised one of the chief ambiguities in what has come to be known as "sustainable tourism" - tourism that, according to its proponents, should do minimal harm to the environment and tries to put something back.

The campaign for "sustainable tourism" is a branch that sprouted from the 1987 report of the UN-sponsored World Commission on Environment and Development. The report, Our Common Future, extends the most recent hand-hold for those who feel, with Ruskin, fear and loathing for the "plague wind" of industrialisation.

Organisations like Tourism Concern, founded in 1988, are in the vanguard of a movement that derides so-called "eco-tourism" - tourism to wilderness areas - as a marketing gimmick used by travel companies to attract Third World voyeurs who probably drive to their nearest bottle-bank. "Sustainable tourism", which aspires to put something back into underdeveloped countries, appears to be having little effect.

While World Tourist Organisation figures show a 17 per cent shift towards the Third World as the holiday-maker's preferred destination between 1980 and 1989, this increase has not had the predicted effect. If you ignore unquantifiable "trickle-down" benefits, the Third World's share of receipts from tourism has actually fallen by 4 per cent. This paradox is explained by a feature of such tourism that is depressingly evident to anyone who has endured the boast of the emaciated backpacker staying in the cheapest hovel in Zaire, or the affronted whine of the professional on sabbatical when "overcharged" for a taxi trip to the Giza pyramids that costs less than his Tube fare to work. You cannot help suspecting that the campaign for "sustainable tourism" is little more than a rationalised desire to keep the Third World a cheap place to visit.

It is an inescapable fact that the notion of "sustainable tourism" is riddled with internal conflicts. Its adherents tend to assume that the interests of the local communities coincide with their own desire to

preserve such regions, whereas the local communities might actually prefer their national government's development schemes. It also tends to forget that by trying to preserve the colourful backwardness that supports their image of primitive arcadia, it may also be maintaining hideous levels of poverty and deep social injustices. In other words, "sustainable tourism" may fail to make either an economic or a moral contribution to the regions it says it wants to help.

In a paper commissioned by the World Wide Fund for Nature called *Beyond the Green Horizon* (1992), Tourism Concern pleads for what we all yearn for when faced with wear and tear on our favourite landscape: the preservation of the status quo through restraint and positive conservation policies. It also insists that local people must determine whether their own backyard should receive visitors at all, and then reap the economic benefits if they do.

Both are laudable aims. But what happens when the economic return accrues at the cost of Conrad's "heart of darkness" or Tintin's Tibetan idyll? We need to know that such places are there even if we cannot visit them. One answer is to find a small tribe that has hunted in a large area for years, tell the world it is near to extinction and then send in the television cameras. The governor of Brazil's Amazonas state, Gilberto Mestrinho, had a different solution: attack ecologists and anthropologists as lackies of imperialist mineral producers, and then launch plans for an Eco-Disneyland in the jungle.

Perhaps these problems will be discussed next month when the "Second World Congress on Tourism for the Environment" meets at the Hilton on the Venezuelan island of Margarita. After digesting prolix papers in the tropical sunshine, assorted scientists and delegates from non-governmental organisations will reconvene on the mainland. The conference organisers, the Janaca Trust, hope the participants will find ways to "minimise negative environmental and cultural impacts while working to achieve authentic, intimate, meaningful and educational encounters [with] local natural and cultural phenomena".

They might also see a few sights, take some photographs and haggle for ethnic handicrafts. They can then go home more "experienced" than their inadequate but envious friends. In fact, of course, they will behave like tourists.

Perhaps the key to the discomfort felt by the campaign for "sustainable tourism" lies in the pretence that when we travel to the Third World we are not tourists at all. We feel we are seeking to discover something new in the wilderness, and so the slogan becomes the angry wail of the insincere self-flagellant, disappointed that he has explored along a beaten path.

"I'm keeping a journal; maybe I can make it into a book," says one traveller to me as we sit in a bar in a small village near Arusha, the centre of Tanzania's safari business. The happy disco chimes of "Jambo! Jambo!" from the radio pound the visitor's brain like a parody of a mantra, but the barman would prefer to say "goodbye" to this young traveller, who won't spend any money.

**Encounter Overland** truckers and lonely trekkers find that it is ennui, not danger, that confronts them in many exotic locations. In Peru, one of 12 countries the Foreign Office advises against visiting, travellers who are disappointed not to have captured a Sendero Luminoso flag raise their spirits with cheap pisco sour and swap stories about friends of friends who have been robbed. Quechua Indians can not only be admired for their spiritual purity and their "authentic" costumes, but also examined for their larcenous potential.

News reports of attacks on tourist buses in Egypt and bombs exploding in Bogota can glamorise a trip that could have been made to the local pub. But a journey to the Third World looks better on the CV, and if it is a long one, holds out the prospect of a job with a Third World "concerned" group when it is time to compromise in suburbia.

Resort complexes built by international corporations and enjoyed by fat-cat hedonists insensitive to the slums on the horizon of their photographs deserve censure if the only benefit to the region is poorly paid work for a handful of cleaners. Yet the mind of the "sustainable tourism" activist is ambivalent on this, too. The left side appreciates the low impact on the environment, while the right side deprecates the crassness.

The alternative to preservation does not have to be sex tours to Manila, but nor should it be the creation of parks for Western interest groups that designate indigenous communities as "guardians of nature and local customs". Let crystal-clutchers meditate on the Island of the Sun on Lake Titicaca, let fogeys in tweed scramble in the Karakorams against the grockel invasion of Gore-tex, and let businessmen with Kerouacs in their pockets explore the barrios next to the InterContinental; but at least accept that an Untouchable in India can enjoy a Coke on a hot day.

Self-indulgence is not the least of the faults of the self-righteous. In Banos, Ecuador, a 25-year-old Australian globe-trekker, wearing a "Pizarro Go Home!" T-shirt beneath his Otavalo jumper, consults his

"Lonely Planet" guide book. He eats muesli in a bed-and-breakfast run by a young ex-advertising couple from London, while New Age music hums from the CD player.

He turns to a man who has recommended a cheap local guide for a jungle trip. "It says he kills animals."

"He has to, there aren't any cafes out there."

"I don't care. I'm not impressed."

#### CORRECTION

The author of last Friday's article on sustainable tourism, 'A real adventure (and cheap!)', was Rupert Gordon-Walker, not Robert Gordon-Walker, as stated. We apologise for the error.

(The Independent 17/8/93)

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