



Mission Programs

Center for Sustainable Destinations

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News from the Center for Sustainable Destinations:

Eighth World Wilderness Congress Adopts Geotourism

The 8th World Wilderness Congress (WWC) announced on October 10, 2005 that it has officially endorsed the principles of National Geographic's Geotourism Charter, thus becoming the first major global assembly to do so. Geotourism is defined as tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place – its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents. In the past 12 months, three countries—Honduras, Norway, and Romania—have also signed the Geotourism Charter, a set of principles designed to protect and promote authentic sense of place.

The WWC passed the geotourism resolution on October 6, 2005 at the end of its meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, which focused on the theme of “Wilderness, Wildlands and People – A Partnership for the Planet.” Some 1,100 delegates from over 60 countries attended the Congress.

The WWC was founded in 1977, meets every four years, and is the world's oldest public international environmental forum. The geotourism resolution was proposed by James Dion of National Geographic's Center for Sustainable Destinations (CSD), supported by delegates from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the Norwegian Mountain Guides Association, and seconded by delegates from University of Tasmania and the Blue Mountains Wilderness Network (both Australia).

The resolution endorses geotourism as a strategy for gateway regions next to wild areas attractive to tourists. The idea that wilderness conservation and tourism can provide reciprocal benefits is a basic principle of traditional, nature-focused ecotourism: Gateway communities are likely to protect assets that attract tourist business. Geotourism expands that idea to address all aspects of a locale integral to its sense of place, including local historic sites and endemic cultural assets, as well as wilderness.

“Coming from a global, nature-based organization, the WWC endorsement sends a signal to environmental interests that the broader geotourism concept and principles can advance the conservation agenda,” says Jonathan Tourtellot, CSD director. “Protecting and enhancing historic sites, cultural assets, and aesthetics as well as natural habitats creates a conservation ethic. That means a more appealing destination for visitors and more support for nature conservation.”

In the words of the WWC resolution, “geotourism provides the holistic platform policymakers need for applying [sustainable] practices across the board, since an authentic sense of place is known to appeal to beneficial tourism market segments.” The resolution urges WWC participants to adapt geotourism principles to the specific needs of gateway regions and to join in alliances to help implement the geotourism approach worldwide.