

## Center for Sustainable Destinations (CSD)

**The tourism phenomenon.** The Center for Sustainable Destinations (formerly the Sustainable Tourism Initiative) seeks to use the economic leverage of responsible tourism to help protect and revitalize Earth's great places. Tourism in recent decades has exploded to become one of the largest, most all-pervasive industries on Earth. International arrivals, for instance, have grown 30-fold since the 1950s and are forecast to reach one billion by 2010. The world's domestic trips are roughly estimated as numbering at least five times that figure. Rising population, increasing disposable income, and improving travel technology have powered this phenomenal growth. By its very nature, the tourism explosion affects Earth's most significant, appealing places first and fastest. It packs an economic clout that sways policymakers' decisions.

When done well, tourism promises a triple benefit:

- profit-motivated preservation and conservation,
- public education, and
- poverty alleviation.

But when done poorly, as it often is, tourism destroys environmental and cultural distinctiveness, promotes great disparities in wealth, and educates no one. Its ability to overbuild, overcommercialize, and disrupt local environments and societies is so well recognized that it is probably the only industry to use the term “unspoiled” as a selling point.

This rampant spoilage of great places is an ongoing preservation crisis. Mitigating it is a fourth benefit of CSD activities. The sustainable-tourism field is so new that expertise is in its infancy; it needs to grow swiftly to catch up with development pressures.

The CSD's primary instrument for doing this is **geotourism**, 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.*

True ecotourism has already shown that this principle can work for natural environments. Geotourism applies the same principle across the entire spectrum of what differentiates one destination from another—to the natural, manmade, and social environments that together create “sense of place.” Natural habitats, architecture, landscapes, cuisine, artisanry, social customs, performing arts—all form the totality of experiential tourism. Geotourism can educate both visitors and residents. It can provide communities with both revenue and pride.

**The role of the National Geographic Society (NGS).** In the face of the vigorous growth of tourism, the need for knowledge about practicing it in a sustainable, constructive way is paramount. Yet the field is so new that information about it is fragmented, unsystematic, little researched, and generally undeveloped. Most advanced-degree academic programs in the field are only a few years old; scientific research is similarly in relative infancy. By one account, only 22 PhDs in tourism were granted in the U.S. in 2000, almost all business-oriented programs geared for the likes of major hotel chains.

Many organizations exist that, like the three blind men touching the elephant, work on different

aspects of sustainable tourism: conservation, historic preservation, cultural integrity, scenic quality, community development, and so on. All are components of geographical character, the purview of NGS.

NGS, with its encompassing mission of promoting geographical knowledge, seeks to begin providing information services among all three involved audiences: tourists, residents, and tourism professionals whether private, public, or NGO.

In addition to its multidisciplinary scope, NGS brings two other strengths to sustainable tourism and destination stewardship: its reputation and its worldwide media, essential for raising awareness among those three audiences. As awareness rises, the appetite for pertinent information should increase.

### NGS contributions to date:

- **Geotourism MapGuides** — Intended in part to be a catalyst for creation and strengthening of local destination-stewardship groups, these National Geographic maps convey interpretive information that best sustains the natural and cultural attributes of a place. They require involvement of the local community. Almost any destination can be a MapGuide candidate by obtaining support from advertising, grants, loans, and donations. The first, **Appalachia**, appeared in the April 2005 issue of NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELER; subsequent MapGuides are now under way.
- **Destination Scorecards**— Published in NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELER, these landmark surveys of destination stewardship have sparked extensive press coverage worldwide. The most recent survey, evaluating North American national park regions, appeared in the July/August 2005 issue of TRAVELER.
- **Experts database**—Approaching 600 entries, this in-house directory of experts in fields pertaining to tourism practices and impacts provides the panels for destination stewardship Delphi surveys and a reservoir of consultant aid for technical assistance projects.
- **The Geotourism Study**, commissioned by TRAVELER and conducted by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), established that geotourists—travelers predisposed to sustainable destination policies—represent roughly half of all U.S. traveler household incomes.
- **The World Legacy Awards** — A joint project of TRAVELER and Conservation International, these sustainable-tourism awards ([www.wlaward.org](http://www.wlaward.org)) have been presented twice by Queen Noor of Jordan. In 2004, they were awarded in four categories: Nature Travel, Heritage Tourism, Resorts and Hotels, and Destination Stewardship.
- **The online Sustainable Destinations Resource Center** provides a globally accessible reference directory ([www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable/](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable/)).
- **Articles** appear in TRAVELER magazine and NG News online, including the regularly appearing “Travelwatch” column, with reports on destination stewardship and an ongoing “Best Practice” profile.
- **Presentations** by CSD director Jonathan B. Tourtellot occur at major tourism conferences around the world.

**Field Projects** seek to achieve CSD goals at specific destinations around the world, supported by international development funds and government grants; also sponsorships and donor support. Currently in development:

- **World’s first national geotourism strategy: Honduras**—On October 22, 2004, President Ricardo Maduro of Honduras signed the “Geotourism Charter” ([www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable/pdfs/geoprinciples.pdf](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable/pdfs/geoprinciples.pdf)), making Honduras the first country to adopt geotourism as its national tourism strategy. Among planned activities: a north coast Geotourism MapGuide cobranded with a new Honduran stewardship council; creation of a center for research, volunteer and educational tourism; geotourism photo workshops; and assorted technical assistance projects.
- **Machu Picchu/Vilcanota Valley Heritage Preservation, Peru** —will likely include a participatory MapGuide for both communities and tourists, technical assistance with visitor and cultural-training centers, and a tour-guide training program in the Inca’s “Sacred Valley” of the Vilcanota River and the sanctuary of Machu Picchu.
- **Mundo Maya Sustainable Tourism Program** —The CSD consulted on this five-nation program for community tourism projects at Maya archaeological sites. Additional projects expected.