

FODOR'S COSTA RICA 2012: ECOTOURISM

Perhaps more than anyone else, two men who wrote a field guide about tropical birds were responsible for the ecotourism movement in Costa Rica. According to Carlos Manuel Rodríguez, the country's former minister for environment and energy, "When *A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica* by F. Gary Stiles and Alexander Skutch was published in the late 1980s, the government noticed that it was bringing bird-watchers here," he told a reporter for *The Guardian*, a London newspaper. "From then on, a national tourism plan was developed." The country's leaders, seeing so many of its primary growth forests being felled at an alarming rate by loggers and farmers, established its national park system in 1970. But it wasn't until nearly two decades later, when *A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica* was published, that they realized that the land they had set aside could help transform the tiny country's economy.

Of the 2 million people who travel each year to Costa Rica, many are bird-watchers who come in search of the keel-billed toucan, the scarlet-rumped tanager, or any of the 850 other species of birds. Other travelers are in search of animals, such as two types of sloth, three types of anteater, and four species of monkey, all of them surprisingly easy to spot in the country's national parks and private reserves. But other people come to Costa Rica to go white-water rafting on the rivers, soar through the treetops attached to zip lines, or take a spin in a motorboat. And many people combine a little bit of everything into their itineraries. Which raises a couple of questions: Is the person coming to see the wildlife practicing ecotourism? Is the adventure traveler? And exactly what is the definition of ecotourism, anyway?

Defining Ecotourism

The word *ecotourism* is believed to have been coined by Mexican environmentalist Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin in 1983. According to him, ecotourism "involves traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals." His original definition seemed a bit too general, so in 1993 he amended it with a line that stressed that "ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel." Ceballos-Lascuráin said he is pleased that ecotourism has gained such acceptance around the world. But he is also concerned that the term has been "variously abused and misused in many places." The trouble, he said, is a misunderstanding about what is meant by the term *ecotourism*.

In Costa Rica, for example, it has been used to describe everything from hiking through the rain forest to rumbling over the hillsides in all-terrain vehicles, and from paddling in a kayak to dancing to disco music on a diesel-powered yacht. "I am sad to see," Ceballos-Lascuráin told a reporter for EcoClub, "that 'ecotourism' is seen mainly as adventure tourism and carrying out extreme sports in a more or less natural environment, with little concern for conservation or sustainable development issues." That is not to say that adventure sports can't be part of a green vacation. It all depends what impact they have on the environment and the local community.

Going Green

Over the past decade, the concept of ecotourism has made a strong impression on the average traveler. Many people now realize that mass tourism can be damaging to environmentally sensitive places like Costa Rica but that much can be done to alleviate the negative effects. At the same time, *ecotourism* has become a marketing term used to attract customers who have the

best intentions. But is there really such a thing as an eco-friendly car-rental company or a green airline? In addition to giving travelers the chance to observe and learn about wildlife, ecotourism should accomplish three things: refrain from damaging the environment, strengthen conservation efforts, and improve the lives of local people. The last part might seem a bit beside the point, but environmentalists point out that much of the deforestation in Costa Rica and other countries is by poor people trying to eke out a living through sustenance farming. Providing them with other ways to make a living is the best way to prevent this. What can you do? Make sure the hotel you choose is eco-friendly. A great place to start is the Costa Rican Tourism Board (www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr). It has a rating system for hotels and lodges called the Certification for Sustainable Tourism. The New York-based Rainforest Alliance (www.rainforest-alliance.org) has a convenient searchable database of sustainable lodges. The International Ecotourism Society (www.ecotourism.org) has a database of tour companies, hotels, and other travel services that are committed to sustainable practices.

Other Things You Can Do

What else can help? Make sure your tour company follows sustainable policies, including contributing to conservation efforts, hiring and training locals for most jobs, educating visitors about the local ecology and culture, and taking steps to mitigate negative impacts on the environment. Here are a few other things you can do: Use locally owned lodges, car-rental agencies, or tour companies. Eat in local restaurants, shop in local markets, and attend local events. Enrich your experience and support the community by hiring local guides. Stray from the beaten path—by visiting areas where few tourists go, you can avoid adding to the stress on hot spots and enjoy a more authentic Costa Rican experience. Support conservation by paying entrance fees to parks and protected sites and contributing to local environmental groups. Don't be overly aggressive if you bargain for souvenirs, and don't shortchange local people on payments or tips for services. The point here is that you can't assume that companies have environmentally friendly practices, even if they have pictures of animals on their Web site or terms like *eco-lodge* in their name. Do business only with companies that promote sustainable tourism, and you'll be helping to preserve this country's natural wonders for future generations.