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TURISMO

**“The Geotourism Approach:  
an overview of implications and  
potential effects”**

*by Jonathan B. Tourtellot*

 CONSULTING

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## **“The Geotourism Approach: an overview of implications and potential effects”**

by Jonathan B. Tourtellot<sup>δ</sup>

*Conceived in 1997 after an international conference on ecotourism hosted on the Hawaiian island of Maui, the term geotourism was limited used until 2002 when it was first published in a study of American traveler practices and attitudes. The term, already used by geologists referring only to geological features, was necessarily adopted as terms like ecotourism and sustainable tourism weren't satisfactory: the first one refer to responsible travels in natural areas that conserve environment and sustain the local wellbeing, whereas the second one is perceived as in line with principles like waste reduction, limit footprints, use of low-voltage devices. These terms appears as limited, as they do not embrace ingredients that add in to the sense of place and the pleasure to travel, features always more important for tourists of the 20th century.*

*Thus, as defined via the National Geographic Society, the geotourism approach is “tourism that sustains or enhances geographical character”.*

*Geotourism must be sustainable tourism, but it goes beyond that, enhancing in fact the quality of the place and promoting wellbeing and benefits for local people in a responsible way.*

*Geotourism, moreover, follow the principle idea of ecotourism, the creation of a circle that permits to protect the destination and its environment thanks to tourism revenues for local people and stakeholders.*

*Definitely geotourism expands that principle to encompass further aspects of the locale, thus historical and cultural heritage, music, gastronomy, landscapes, handicraft and so forth. Geotourism has proven a viable way to protect a destination's natural and cultural heritage while securing higher revenues per visitor with less overcrowding.*

*The article details the rationale for introducing the concept and its relationship to ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and geological tourism; U.S. research that suggests the presence of substantial “geotraveler” market demand; ways to cope with challenging and unsustainable conditions in destinations, including geotourism's value in transcending political borders and institutional fragmentation; the strategic importance of establishing geotourism stewardship councils and launching catalytic projects; and a summation of the characteristics and value of the geotourism approach.*

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<sup>δ</sup> Jonathan B. Tourtellot. Sponsor and Portal Editor, Destinations Stewardship Center, [www.destinationcenter.org](http://www.destinationcenter.org)  
former Geotourism Editor, National Geographic Traveler

## **“L'approccio al geoturismo: una panoramica sulle implicazioni ed i potenziali effetti”**

di Jonathan B. Tourtellot<sup>δ</sup>

*Nato nel 1997 a seguito di una conferenza internazionale sull'ecoturismo tenutasi sull'isola hawaiana di Maui, il termine geoturismo fino al 2002 venne raramente utilizzato: fu solo agli inizi del XX secolo che per la prima volta apparì all'interno di uno studio dedicato alle pratiche e attitudini dei turisti americani. Il termine, già utilizzato da geologi nel riferirsi a caratteristiche, appunto, geologiche, venne adottato, si potrebbe dire, per necessità: i termini ecoturismo e turismo sostenibile non erano soddisfacenti. Con ecoturismo, infatti, ci si riferisce a pratiche di turismo responsabile in aree naturali che tendono a preservare l'ambiente ed a sostenere il benessere locale; d'altra parte l'uso della dicitura "turismo sostenibile" viene spesso legato a principi di riduzione dei rifiuti e degli impatti di diversa natura e utilizzo di apparecchi e tecnologie sostenibili. Questi termini apparivano già nel 2002 limitati, incapaci di cogliere caratteristiche legate alla pratica del turismo che si riferissero al piacere di viaggiare e dello scoprire un reale sense of place durante il viaggio: aspetti, questi, sempre più rilevanti per i turisti del ventesimo secolo. L'approccio del geoturismo è pertanto, come definito dalla National Geographic Society, quello di un turismo che sostiene e accresce il carattere geografico. Il geoturismo deve essere turismo sostenibile, ma va oltre questo, migliorando la qualità delle destinazioni e promuovendo benessere e benefici per le comunità locali in*

*modo responsabile. Esso, inoltre, segue l'idea di fondo dell'ecoturismo, la creazione cioè di un circolo che permetta di proteggere la destinazione e l'ambiente grazie alle ricadute che il turismo apporta alla popolazione ed agli operatori locali. Con il termine geoturismo, dunque, vengono estesi i principi fondanti l'ecoturismo ed il turismo sostenibile, poichè esso include tra quanto va preservato e migliorato ulteriori aspetti legati alla destinazione, come ad esempio la musica, l'enogastronomia, i panorami, l'artigianato, il patrimonio storico e culturale, etc. Il geoturismo si è dimostrato una strada percorribile per proteggere gli assetti culturali e naturali di una destinazione, assicurando allo stesso tempo ai visitatori della stessa un maggior beneficio durante la permanenza grazie ad un minor affollamento.*

*L'articolo che segue presenta i fondamenti del concetto di geoturismo, le sue relazioni con l'ecoturismo ed il turismo sostenibile. Arricchiscono il contributo utili indicazioni su come possono essere superate le condizioni non sostenibili di alcune destinazioni, anche grazie al valore del geoturismo e del suo poter superare confini politici e frammentazione a livello istituzionale. Chiudono l'articolo le considerazioni sulle opportunità legate alla costituzione di consigli di soprintendenza del geoturismo all'interno delle destinazioni ed una panoramica sulle caratteristiche e potenzialità di un approccio al geoturismo stesso.*

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<sup>δ</sup> Jonathan B. Tourtellot, Sponsor ed editore, Destination Stewardship Center; direttore Geotourism, National Geographic Traveler.

## **“The Geotourism Approach: an overview of implications and potential effects”**

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### **1. The Geotourism Approach - Rationale and Development**

Poorly managed tourism can overwhelm a place. But tourism done well can bring economic benefits and also create an incentive to protect natural and cultural assets. That incentive is propelled by curiosity strong enough for people to cross an ocean just to experience something and learn about it. Geography is, of course, about place. Nature and human culture help define a place, distinguishing one place from another.

The approach now known as geotourism had its roots in an international conference on ecotourism, hosted by the Kapalua Nature Society on the Hawaiian island of Maui in 1997. Hawaii’s neighboring island of Oahu was perceived as a mass tourism destination. Maui seemed to be evolving in the same direction, a trend that displeased most participants at the conference. Ecotourism held appeal as an alternative, but many attendees felt that it was not entirely satisfactory. Derived from “ecology”, ecotourism has been defined by The International Ecotourism Society as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of the local people”. Sentiment among

conferees was that ecotourism was fine as far as it went, but that it left out other aspects of the endemic Hawaiian experience - its historical heritage, its still-thriving native Hawaiian culture, its scenery, cuisine, artisanry, performing arts and literary traditions. All were authentic characteristics of the place not encompassed by the ecotourism concept.

The term “sustainable tourism” was not entirely satisfactory either, deriving largely from the environmental focus of the United Nations Agenda 21 action plan. Rightly or wrongly, “sustainable tourism” was often perceived as addressing such matters as linen re-use in hotels, low-voltage light bulbs, waste reduction, and corporate carbon footprints - all commendable goals, but not necessarily related to sense of place. The Maui conference adjourned and attendees dispersed without proposing a new term or concept, but it did prompt more consideration of the issue. In subsequent weeks such terms as “place-based tourism”, “community-based tourism”, and “holistic tourism” were considered and discarded. What was needed was a term that embraced the totality of ingredients that add up to sense of place, i.e., geographical character. That

concept suggested the compact term “geotourism”. It later transpired that some geologists had already started using the same term in a different and more narrow sense focused exclusively on geological features, but this specialized usage at that time was not yet widespread.

Use of “geotourism” as focused on character of place was limited to assorted emails and memos until 2002, when it was first published on the cover of a landmark study of American traveler practices and attitudes about various aspects of sustainability and responsible tourism, including nature, culture, and historic places. National Geographic Traveler magazine sponsored the study, which was conducted and published by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA; later renamed United States Travel Association). The geotourism definition is on the study’s cover, later slightly condensed:

*Geotourism (noun) - Tourism that sustain or enhances the geographical character of a place - its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and well-being of its residents.*

The term and its definition is in the commons and available for all to use. It has become increasingly widespread (Bellows and Tourtellot, 2006), including its adoption in 2013 by the tourism ministers of the Organization of American States

as the preferred approach for Latin America and the Caribbean.

### *1.1 Types of tourism and destination impacts*

To understand better the context of the geotourism approach, it is beneficial to consider the relationship between different styles of tourism and their impacts on destinations. Tourism can help to protect and enhance these places, or if executed poorly, it can ruin them. Types of tourism vary in their dependence on character of place. Consider these three overlapping styles of tourism (Fig. 1).

**Fig. 1 – Overlapping styles of tourism**

**OVERLAPPING TOURISM STYLES  
DIFFER IN THEIR RELATION TO PLACE**



Source: Elaborated by the author.

The first can be called “Touring Style”. This is the origin of the word “tourism” - to tour, to look around and experience a place. All the various characteristics of a place pertain to this style, both physical and cultural. Tourism of this

type tends to be the most dispersed, spreading economic benefits throughout the destination for local businesses and residents and having fewer negative impacts on the locale. Based on the qualities that add up to character of place, touring style is the motivational heart of the geotourism approach. It requires protecting the natural, cultural, historic, and scenic features that attract visitors.

"Recreational Style" (or R&R, for "rest and recreation") depends only on the physical nature of the place. It requires mountains and ski slopes, lakes and rivers, golf courses, beaches and the right climate, but it does not depend much on the human character of the place - on local culture or heritage. This particular type of tourism has literally changed the face of the earth, visible in satellite pictures, as resorts and rental villas spread along seacoasts and into scenic mountain areas. Such resort sprawl has become a major sustainability issue. Recreational Style requires protecting only the physical characteristics that attract visitors. The cultural side is optional or even detractive for tourists who want conditions similar to those at home, except better weather.

The third can be termed "Entertainment Style". It centers entirely on manufactured attractions - (theme parks, shopping malls, convention

centers, casinos, and combined complexes of the same). These facilities need have no relation whatsoever to the surrounding region; they are entirely self-contained. Entertainment Style is often heavy-duty, industrial scale, providing major centers of employment, and with major environmental and cultural impacts, even complete obliteration. The advantage of Entertainment Style is that it requires no attractive surroundings. It can even be conducted in a desert. One of the best-known examples is indeed in a desert: Las Vegas, Nevada, U.S.A. Entertainment Style requires no protection of local character - unless destination leaders want tourism to venture beyond the manufactured facilities. The disadvantage of Entertainment Style is that its tendency toward mass tourism and associated sprawl consumes other geotourism assets - environment, scenery, traditional communities. For that reason Entertainment Style can be best sited in locations with no other valuable characteristics, where it can do the best and the least harm - nondescript, depressed urban areas, for example.

*Style drift.* From the perspective of the destination, these three styles display a dynamic and sometimes destructive relationship. Once tourists begin to "discover" a destination, the short-term temptation is, for local civic

leadership, to allow ever-growing commercialization. When tourism development is unmanaged and unguided, however, that *laissez-faire* policy begins to change the character of the place. In the most striking cases, the destination loses many of the qualities that attracted people in the first place, especially when mass tourism takes over.

**Fig. 2 – Destination style drift**

**DESTINATION STYLE DRIFT..  
If development unchecked, unguided**



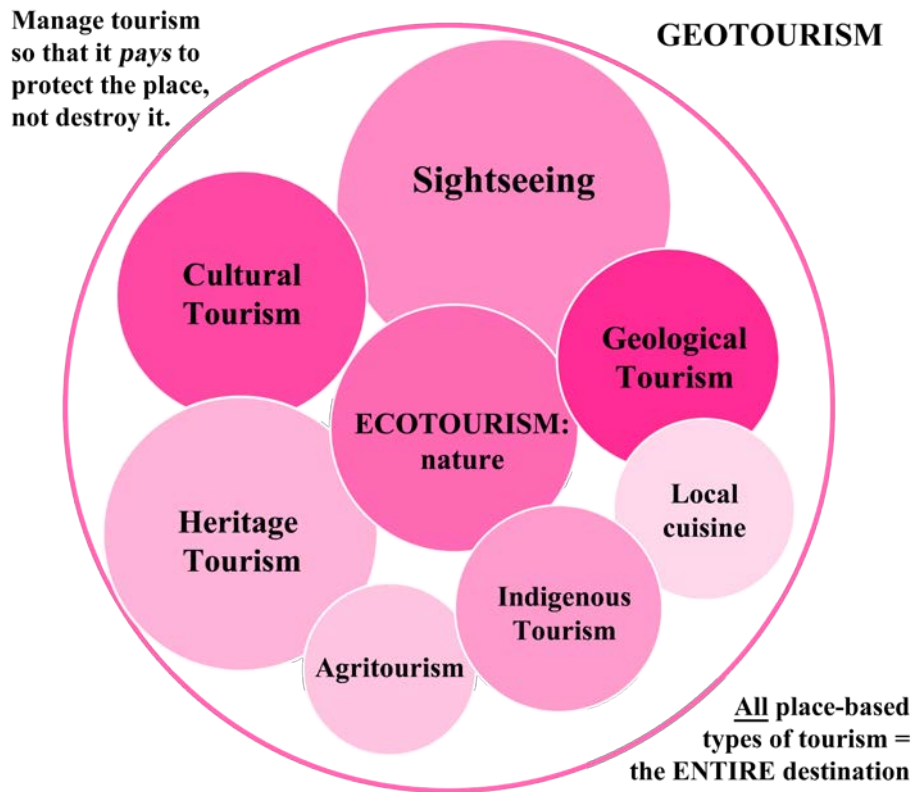
Source: Elaborated by the author.

The holistic nature of the geotourism approach resists that tendency by raising the perceived value of authentic local assets while is still allowing for economic development. In one way, the geotourism concept returns tourism to its roots—tourism focused on assets of the place - but with the added component of full integration with management policies of that place.

*1.2 Distinguishing Sustainable Tourism, Ecotourism and Geological Tourism*

Geotourism is about enjoying and protecting everything that goes into making a place distinctive, unique. Without questions, geotourism must be sustainable tourism - meaning it must do no harm - but geotourism goes beyond that to build on sense of place, to enhance the unique qualities of a locale in a responsible way. The geotourism concept is rooted in the principle idea underlying true ecotourism - to create a “virtuous circle” whereby tourism revenues to local people create an incentive to protect flora and fauna that will in turn continue to attract tourists. As noted, however, ecotourism focuses on nature; it’s a niche. Geotourism simply expands that principle to encompass all distinctive aspects of the locale (Fig. 3). It means directing attention in a holistic way on all of the natural and human attributes that make a place worth visiting. That includes not only flora and fauna, but also historic structures and archaeological sites, scenic landscapes, vernacular architecture, and all of the things that contribute to culture, like local music, gastronomy - as well as the agricultural traditions that support it - local crafts, dances, traditional arts, and so forth.

**Fig. 3 - From ecotourism to geotourism**



Source: Elaborated by the author.

That word ‘enhances’ is another important distinction in geotourism, which allows for evolution and creativity, provided that the improvement remains faithful to the character of the place. You can do it in two ways.

One is constructive tourism, by creating something suited to the locale that makes it a little better than it was before. Examples may range from a new three-euro drink or dish based on local ingredients to a new three-hundred-



million-euro aquarium showcasing local marine ecosystems and creatures.

A second way to enhance is restorative tourism, by saving or recreating historic assets that might otherwise disappear. Examples include living history museums with costumed interpreters, restaurants recreating meals from historic periods, or tours aboard disappearing types of transportation, such as dhows and schooners.

Good geotourism must benefit local people, so as to create a virtuous cycle wherein local people are benefiting from tourism, and that benefit in turn - if clearly communicated - provides them with an incentive to protect what tourists are coming for - whether nature, traditional crafts, scenery, historic buildings, local food or music.

So geotourism is wider than ecotourism and pure geological tourism. It goes beyond sustainable tourism because it speaks to the possibility of enhancing unique aspects of a place.

## **2. The U.S. Geotourism Study**

### *2.1 Market demand*

How important, then, is the geotourism market? And how much do consumers really care about sustainability? In the United States, National Geographic Traveler magazine funded the Travel Industry Association of America to find out.

## **RELATION TO GEOLOGICAL GEOTOURISM**

Geotourism based on geographical character embraces all distinctive aspects of a locale. Confusingly, the word is also used to describe a niche topic, geological tourism. The former usage is a broad approach, the latter a specialized subject (Dowling, 2010). At the initiative of European geopark managers, the 2011 International Congress of Geotourism in Arouca, Portugal reconciled the two usages by issuing the Arouca Declaration, in effect incorporating and supporting geological tourism as an important part of the geotourism approach as follows:

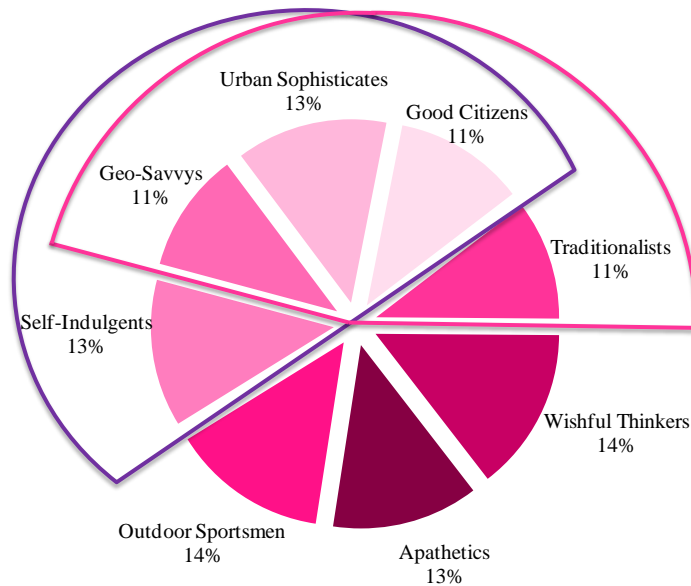
*1. We...believe that geotourism should be defined as tourism which sustains and enhances the identity of a territory, taking into consideration its geology, environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well-being of its residents. Geological tourism is one of the multiple components of geotourism.*

National Geographic experience has shown that among the best ways to interest a lay audience in geology is to show its relationship to nature, history, and culture. In a tourism context, then, the two meanings really work as one.

TIA's resulting study entitled *Geotourism: the New Trend in Travel* was the first detailed look at American travel practices combined with their attitudes about various aspects of sustainability, from environmental protection to historic preservation (this landmark study, conducted 2002-2004 and still the first of its kind, needs updated research. Parallel studies should be performed for other tourism source markets.).

The survey found that over half of the American traveling public thinks that it's harder to find unspoiled places than it used to be. Almost three-quarters say they don't want their visits to harm the environment of their destinations. Cluster analysis yielded eight segments, based on travel habits, demographics, and attitudes (Fig. 4).

**Fig. 4** – Segment size: percent of 154 million who traveled in past 3 years



Source: *The Geotourism Study: Phase I Executive Summary*. National Geographic Traveler and Travel Industry Association of America.

From the destination point of view, the top four segments (purple semicircle) are the most important economically: the Geo-Savvy, Urban Sophisticate, Good Citizen, and Self-Indulgent segments. The first three of these

four, plus the less affluent Traditionalists, favor sustainability. These are the geotourists (Tab. 1, top four rows). They enjoy experiencing character of place, and they favor protecting it.

**Tab. 1 – TIA Geotourism Study segments characterized**

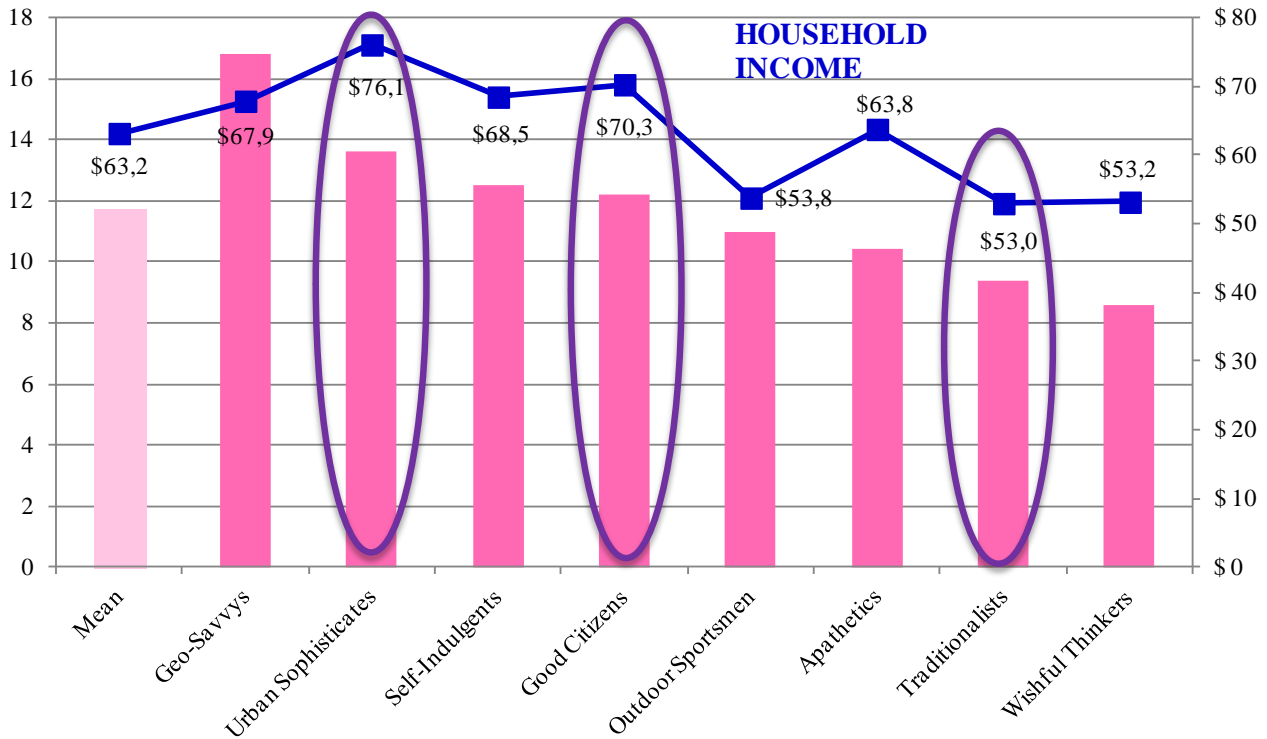
<b>Cluster</b>	<b># of Adults</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i>Geo-Savvys</i>	16 million	Affluent, outdoor-oriented, strong environmentalist.
<i>Urban Sophisticates</i>	21 million	Wealthiest group, culture-seekers, pro-environment.
<i>Good Citizens</i>	18 million	Mid-affluent, well-educated, civic-minded at home but not activist when travelling.
<i>Traditionalists</i>	16 million	Conservative, older, limited income; travel less often but show responsible attitudes.
<i>Outdoor Sportsmen</i>	21 million	Most rural group, prefer domestic hunting and fishing.
<i>Wishful Thinkers</i>	22 million	Largest, youngest, least wealthy, least travelled group, wants more time and money to travel.
<i>Apathetics</i>	20 million	Inert when travelling, little interest in surroundings.
<i>Self-Indulgents</i>	20 million	Affluent, focused on luxury, no interest in protecting nature or culture.

Source: *The Geotourism Study: Phase I Executive Summary. National Geographic Traveler and Travel Industry Association of America.*

Of the four top segments in both household income and frequency of travel, three match the geotourist profile (Fig. 5). Pink bars show the number of trips that people in each segment had taken over the previous three years; blue points indicate average household incomes. Violet ellipses identify the geotravelers' markets. The four geotourist

segments control more than half the household income of all US travelers and almost three-quarters of those who travel internationally. For a destination that is trying to adopt sustainable policies, it's important to know that there is a healthy, affluent market that thinks the same way.

**Fig. 5** – Number of trips in past 3 years and average household incomes



Source: *The Geotourism Study: Phase I Executive Summary*. National Geographic Traveler and Travel Industry Association of America.

### 2.2 Geotourist Attitudes

To assess attitudes, researchers sought responses to a wide variety of statements (Tab. 2). Every

percentage shown for the four geotourist groups is above the average for the total eight clusters combined.

**Tab. 2** – Selected sample responses for the four “geotouristic” clusters

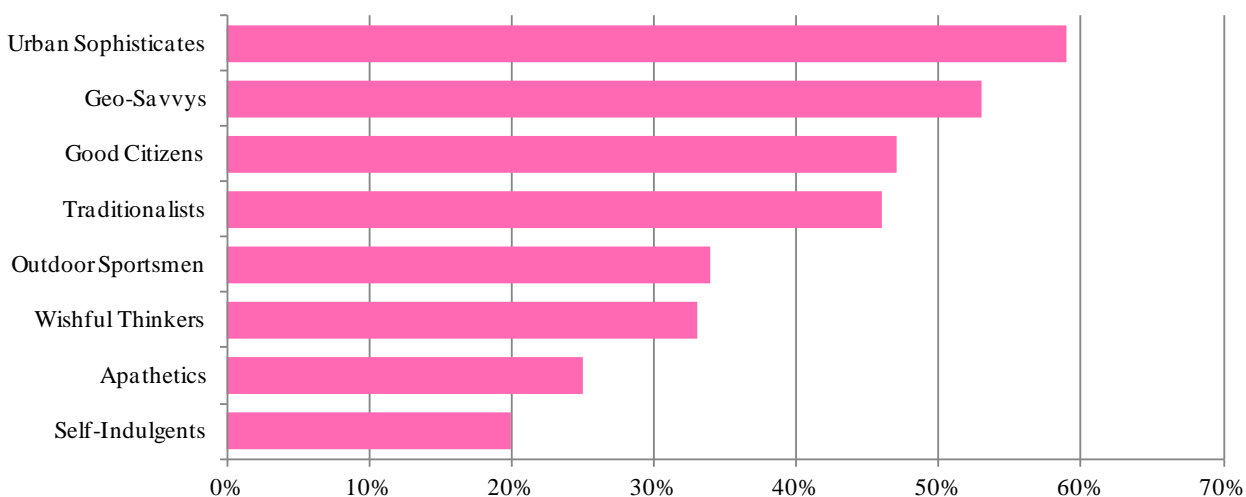
Statements	Percentage agreeing with the statements			
	Geo-Savvys	Urban Sophisticates	Good Citizens	Traditionals
My travel experience is better when my destination preserves its natural, historic, and cultural sites and attractions.	81	77	63	68
It is important to me that my visit to a destination not damage its environment.	84	83	75	79
It is important that future generations know and pass on our nation's history.	93	90	93	93
My travel experience is better when I have learned as much as possible about my destination's customs, geography, and culture.	72	74	61	63
I support controlling access to our National Parks and public lands so that the environment can be preserved and protected.	68	76	70	72
I support controlling access to historic buildings and monuments so that they can be preserved and protected.	54	67	54	63
It is important to learn about other cultures.	85	84	74	68
I think sprawling development is a major problem.	76	78	66	63

Source: *The Geotourism Study: Phase I Executive Summary*. National Geographic Traveler and Travel Industry Association of America.

Several survey questions asked whether respondents would patronize tourist businesses known to help protect natural and cultural

heritage - even if at greater expense. The combined results appear in figure 6.

**Fig. 6** – *Select travel company you know preserves/protects history/culture/nature even if costs more*



Source: *The Geotourism Study: Phase I Executive Summary*. National Geographic Traveler and Travel Industry Association of America.

In internally conducted research, National Geographic Traveler magazine's poll of its readers yielded comments typical of the geotourism market, such as:

- ~ "See that the money spent on tourism goes to support community visited."
- ~ "Not visiting the world as though it was a theme park."
- ~ "Use local, hire local."
- ~ "Perhaps more advertising about the culture of the places being traveled to."<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2 Geotourist spending

While the TIA study included household income data, it did not probe travel spending patterns. In 2010, a University of Montana study did an analysis based on a single-day poll of tourist spending responses in the State of Montana, U.S.A. Researchers correlated responses with the tourists' sustainability attitudes, using the same questions as in the TIA study (Fig. 7). Results indicate that among visitors on the sample day, those with more geotouristic attitudes did indeed spend more.

<sup>1</sup>Source: *National Geographic Traveler* Reader Panel, 2007.

**Fig. 7 – Daily tourist spending in Montana, statewide, 2010**

Source: Boyle, ITRR, University of Montana.

### 3. Addressing the Challenges to Geotourism

Trends that first developed in the late 20th century pose increasing challenges to sense of place, and even the pleasure of travel itself. The geotourism approach can counter these trends, provided destination leadership is in relative agreement on the need to do so.

**GLOBALIZATION OF STYLE.** “I step out into the corridor of Santiago’s [Chile] Four Points Sheraton and am instantly confronted by the challenge geotourism faces. You could wander around this hotel for hours and never get a clue

you’re in South America. It’s all standard-issue globalized ambience, from the abstract shapes of the chandeliers in the lobby to a breakfast buffet identical to one you would get in Wellington or Winnipeg.” (Walljasper, 2007). Even a nondescript chain hotel can adopt a geotourism approach by choosing decor, music, and restaurant menu items that reflect local culture, history, and traditions, plus environmentally responsible operating policies. Restaurant programs such as Slow Food, Farm-to-Fork, and other practices that

highlight local cuisine and supply chains also promote the geotourism approach.

**UNSUSTAINABLE GROWTH IN MASS TOURISM.** World Heritage destinations and around the globe are experiencing ever-increasing rates of short-term visitation - mere hours, in many cases - that overcrowd popular attractions while delivering minimal economic benefit per tourist. In such cases, high quantity drives out high quality. Franchise businesses cater to nondiscerning tourists while forcing out more authentic enterprises and changing sense of place into a generic, mass-tourism shopping mall. Large cruise ships exacerbate the trend by disgorging thousands of day trippers whose per capita contribution to the local economy is a fraction of that spent by overnight visitors. Characterized as "hit and run tourism" (Ruoss, 2013), this trend has spurred such responses as an anti-tourist campaign in Barcelona and proposed tourist quotas in Cinque Terre.

To counter this trend, local leadership can create various incentives that discourage day tripper tourism in favor of stay over visitation, such as admission discounts for any multiple-overnight visitor. For cruise ship traffic, encouragement of day excursions that emphasize local character can motivate

manageable numbers of cruise passengers to return as multi-day visitors (Tourtellot, 2013).

**SHORT-TERM PROFIT VERSUS LONG-TERM MARKET DIFFERENTIATION.** The expedient value of short-term revenues is attractive to both public and private leadership, but risks encouraging unsustainable levels of high-volume, low-margin mass tourism. That in term accelerates the drift in tourism style noted above, rendering the destination less appealing to higher-spending tourists who seek a more authentic travel experience.

The geotourism approach calls for building local pride in the character and qualities of the destination, a desire to safeguard those qualities, and broadly distributed economic benefits from carefully paced tourism volume.

**MEASURES OF SUCCESS.** When government and industry measure tourism success in terms of quantity and not quality, they can accelerate the trend toward overcrowding destinations. Thus it is important that tourism success be measured, not by counting arrivals, but counting the economic, social, and environmental benefits to the location. Without policies to conserve what tourists are coming to see, the place may eventually have no endemic attractiveness at all.



Consider for instance a hypothetical destination where 10,000 tourists spend \$10 a day and another where 100 tourists spend \$1,000 a day. Both places would gross \$100,000, but the impact on the destination - and on the quality of the travel experience - between these two extremes would be dramatically different.

For a real-world example, consider this research comparing annual cruise and stay-over tourism spending in Belize:

**Tab. 3** - *Arrivals and economic benefits in Belize*

	<b>CRUISE</b>	<b>STAY-OVER</b>
<i>Arrivals</i>	<i>800,300</i>	<i>236,600</i>
<i>Economic benefit</i>	<i>31M. \$</i>	<i>144 M. \$</i>

Source: Center on Ecotourism and Sustainable Development, 2005.

In this case, it required more than three times as many cruise passengers to generate only about one fifth the income provided by stay-over visitors, a factor of 15.

**LOCAL FRAGMENTATION.** Common in most places, fragmentation caused by specialty interests and concerns, mutual competitiveness, personalities, and simple noncommunication can make holistic destination management difficult. It has become clear that Geotourism Stewardship

Councils (see Section 4) and well-publicized geotourism projects can help to unify across such barriers, even political borders. One example is the North American “Crown of the Continent” region surrounding the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park in the Rocky Mountains. That Canadian-U.S. council embraces portions of Alberta, British Columbia, Montana, and all of three participating Indian reservations.

**SOCIAL ATTITUDES.** In some locales, residents may not hold some of their customs and traditions in high regard - common foods for instance - that may in fact be of considerable interest for a curious visitor. Everyday sights and experiences that a local person might regard as boring or even embarrassing may actually constitute geotourism assets for a tourist from afar. An obvious solution is to solicit and disseminate visitor opinions, and so develop local pride in the locally ordinary.

#### **4. Stewardship Councils and the Geotourism Charter**

Geotourism tools, developed with support from the National Geographic Society 2001-2010 (Becker, 2013), have continued to evolve with additional experience. Two key tools are the Geotourism Stewardship Council and the Geotourism Charter.

A Geotourism (or Destination) Stewardship Council is a nongovernmental or public/private entity. A Council may be national, regional, or local. It may go by any name, or coalesce around an existing group, but has the characteristics described below. The Council's task is to oversee and advise on the four activities of a geotourism strategy:

- ~ identifying;
- ~ sustaining;
- ~ developing;
- ~ marketing the geotourism assets of a place.

Council advice and activity should align with good conservation and preservation practices and with responsible economic development. The Council should encourage appropriate tourism in appropriate places, and discourage inappropriate tourism in unsuitable places. The Council should invite citizen participation.

##### *4.1 Council Composition*

A stewardship council should be holistic in its membership. It should be part private sector, part government, part civil society. Since it must survive changes in government, it should not be controlled by government. Since its job includes general stewardship of the place, not quick profits, it should not be controlled by business. Since it should help enable responsible economic benefit, it should not be controlled by nonprofit organizations. Rather, all these parties should be work together.

Thus Stewardship Council participants should represent:

- ~ destination management and marketing organizations;
- ~ natural conservation, including habitats and geological sites;
- ~ historic and archaeological preservation
- ~ agritourism, Slow Food, farm/fishing/restaurant programs;
- ~ citizen organizations;
- ~ beautification programs (signage, architecture, streetscape and landscape);
- ~ traditional performing arts - music, dance, theatre, storytelling, re-enactments, etc.;
- ~ art and artisanry;
- ~ indigenous and minority groups;
- ~ urban renewal;
- ~ government (tourism, planning, environment, culture, economic development);

- ~ private businesses compatible with geotourism;
- ~ other stakeholder groups emblematic of the locale.

The Council should subscribe to the 13 principles embodied in the Geotourism Charter, a two-page document designed for destinations that wish to adopt the geotourism approach:

1. Integrity of place
2. International codes
3. Market selectivity
4. Market diversity
5. Tourist enthusiasm
6. Community involvement
7. Community benefit
8. Protection and enhancement of destination appeal
9. Land use
10. Conservation of resources
11. Planning
12. Interactive interpretation
13. Evaluation.

A variation on the Charter, the Geotourism Code, presents nine principles suitable for tourism businesses. Both documents and related information are freely available at [www.geotourism.org](http://www.geotourism.org).

Council activities are intended not only to promote geotourism assets to tourists but also to

be a catalyst for local communities - to help them discovering their own distinctive assets and the tourism value of protecting them.

#### *4.2 Council procedures*

Each destination must tailor an approach appropriate to local circumstances, so there is a no formally prescribed method for choosing Council members and sustainably funding Council activities. Until the Council becomes self-supporting, a member organization can serve as its fiscal agent. The Council best functions through a collaborative website, initially hosted by one of its members or by a neutral third party. The Council can:

- ~ Coordinate geotourism strategy; promote the virtuous circle.
- ~ Oversee content for geotourism maps, publications, and websites.
- ~ Serve as ongoing gatekeeper and clearinghouse for community-generated geotourism information, issued via the Internet and handheld devices.
- ~ Solicit meaningful visitor opinion on the quality and character of the destination.
- ~ Oversee the Geotourism Code for participating local tourism companies.
- ~ Review proposals and provide recommendations to government on tourism developments.

- ~ Advise on threats to geotourism assets and on opportunities for enhancement.
- ~ Work with the government tourism bureau to promote and protect those assets.
- ~ Evaluate progress and make adjustments.
- ~ Administer certification programs, conservation funds, and a destination management system.

The Council should monitor sustainability and ensure that tourist capacity is appropriately managed, while encouraging maximum benefit to the community per visitor.

## **5. Taking Action**

### *5.1 Steps to Geotourism*

Based on geotourism program experiences in destinations ranging from the Sierra Nevada of the U.S.A. to the Douro Valley of Portugal, the steps below offer a way for a destination to adopt the geotourism approach:

1. Convene a steering group.
2. Adopt a mission statement - i.e., what do we want?
3. Identify allies; build and name a stewardship council.
4. Consider inviting stakeholders to sign the Geotourism Charter.
5. Establish an online presence and community forum - website, social media, etc.

6. Decide on a first collaborative, catalytic project, with a deadline (see below.).
7. Raise funds, preferably from multiple sources.
8. Execute the first project, inviting public participation.
9. Evaluate and plan next steps and projects; develop a business plan to institutionalize the council as a self-supporting entity.

Several lessons have been learned from these projects:

**VALUE OF AN EXTERNAL CONVENER.** An outside person or organization can help bring disparate local groups to the table, transcending local issues and serving as a catalyst to get the discussion started.

**FUNDING.** Projects with multiple sources of funding rather than a sole funder are more likely to reach completion. Local funders will be motivated to see a successful outcome.

**ONLINE PRESENCE.** Most destinations need a Stewardship Council website, preferably with some kind of forum functionality, to help build community awareness and participation and to solicit visitors' feedbacks. It should be associated with but independent of existing tourism promotion sites.

## 5.2 *Sample projects*

Catalytic activities have included:

- ~ Creation of citizen-participation marketing tools such as a map or web site with extensive local participation and oversight by a university, the National Geographic Society, or another neutral, high-profile institution. Successful examples are the Geotourism MapGuides produced in partnership with National Geographic, online and in print.
- ~ Festivals to build local pride and awareness, while enhancing tourism spending.
- ~ A local geotourism magazine to function as the social-responsibility counterpart to standard tourism materials.
- ~ Photo or video contests highlighting the heritage and character of the locale.
- ~ A crowd-selected and crowd-funded project with attendant publicity, the online “crowd” including both residents and interested tourists.
- ~ Enhancement program to add geotouristic features for existing tourism businesses and attractions. A “Recreation Style” beach resort for instance, could introduce local dishes on the menu, local-style music for entertainments, and local arts and crafts in

the facilities, thus differentiating themselves from generic resorts. Similarly, a manufactured “Entertainment Style” attraction can introduce local elements. By example, the Tennessee (U.S.) theme park “Dollywood”, owned by country singer Dolly Parton, adds to conventional rides and entertainment a stage devoted to the traditional music of the surrounding Appalachian region.

One sign of a successful project is that it is just as rewarding for local residents as it is for tourists.

## 6. Conclusion

Research on geotourism and its impacts is in its infancy. More studies are needed, investigating not only economic effects but also relative effectiveness in protecting and enhancing destination distinctiveness.

In summary, geotourism adds to sustainability principles by building on a destination's geographical character, its "sense of place," to emphasize the distinctiveness of its locale and benefit visitor and resident alike. Thus the geotourism approach is not a niche, but rather a holistic approach to comprehensive tourism management throughout the destination.

Done well, geotourism will be:

- ~ culturally and environmentally sustainable;
- ~ economically viable long-term;
- ~ true to the character and people of the place;
- ~ enriching for the community in terms of economic benefit and quality of life.

As summed up via the National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations, GEOTOURISM IS SYNERGISTIC. All the elements of geographical character work together to create a tourist experience that is richer than the sum of its parts, appealing to visitors with diverse interests.

IT INVOLVES THE COMMUNITY. Local businesses and civic groups join to provide a distinctive, authentic visitor experience.

IT BENEFITS RESIDENTS ECONOMICALLY. Travel businesses hire local workers, and use local services, products, and supplies. When community members benefit, they are more likely to take responsibility for destination stewardship.

IT INFORMS BOTH VISITORS AND HOSTS. Residents discover their own heritage by learning that things they take for granted may be interesting to outsiders. As local people develop pride and skill in showing off their locale, tourists have more rewarding visits and more stories to tell.

IT ENRICHES TRAVEL EXPERIENCES. Enthusiastic visitors post pictures and stories on social media, encouraging friends and relatives to visit and experience the same things.

IT SUPPORTS INTEGRITY OF PLACE. Catering to perceptive travelers incentivizes businesses to emphasize the character of the locale, yielding positive traveler reviews and continuing manageable, high-quality tourism flow.

For local decision-makers, the geotourism definition can provide a standard against which to assess and debate any tourism plan or development: "Will this project sustain or enhance the character of our locale?" By design, the definition leaves plenty of room for community discussion about types of tourism and their impacts. The important first step is for such discussions to take place.

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Giudecca 624 | 30133 Venezia

tel. +390413093260 | fax. +390418520077

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