

International Bicycle Fund

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A non-governmental, nonprofit organization promoting bicycle transport, economic development, international understanding and safety education.

Tip For Environmentally Friendly Travel

Increasingly tourists are visiting areas where the ecosystem is fragile and resources are scarce. Using conventional western behavior they are destroying the very qualities they cherish. To stop this trend the traveler must reexamine their behavior and become more sensitive to their impact on the local environment, both natural and cultural. Each action is not the action of one "tourist," but a part of the collective impact of "tourism".

The ultimate goal is to leave a very selective record of one's visit: no traces at camp sites, or on the savannas and forests; zero pollution of air and water; properly disposed of waste; considered imprint on the culture; and fair compensation for resources used. It is not as hard as you might think, much of it is common sense. There are literally hundreds of ways, large and small, to be an environmentally conscientious traveler. While not exhaustive, here are some tips to help you be a more responsible guest:

Physical Environment

In most areas of the world the air, land and water (ground and surface) are being degraded; life forms (not just the glamour mammals, but plants, birds, small mammals, reptiles and aquatic life) are threatened. Practices that can help include:

1. Travel only established trails and roads.
2. Use water for washing and bathing consistent with conservation minded local standards and dispose of it properly.
3. Let life that is wild stay that way: don't feed it, keep your distance, don't make noise or make actions that will stress it.
4. In natural environments take nothing but pictures.
5. Don't buy souvenirs made of ivory, tortoise shells, coral, reptile skins, cat pelts, rare woods or other endangered animals or plants.
6. Long sleeve shirts in the evening and mosquito nets over beds are more environmentally friendly controls than chemical pesticides.
7. Eat low on the food chain.
8. Support local environmental and conservation efforts.

Energy Conservation

In many areas the energy picture is particularly bleak. Energy is either imported, using foreign exchange which might otherwise be used for purchasing items such as educational materials, medicine or other development needs, or it comes from the local biomass and consumption is leading to air pollution, massive deforestation, soil erosion, water pollution and climate change. To be responsible think about your energy actions and minimize your energy impact:

1. Turn off lights, fans, air conditioners and appliances when not in use.
2. Whether lighting is electric, kerosene or candle, adjust your schedule to being active during hours of sunlight and sleeping after sundown.
3. Heat and use hot water for bathing in accordance with local conservation practices.
4. Choose hotels that are designed for passive temperature controls (avoid air conditioners).
5. Use human powered transport (walk, bike or canoe) or use high occupancy vehicles (bus, trains, collective taxis, etc.).

Solid Waste

Improper waste disposal is an eyesore and a health hazard, please don't contribute:

1. Reduce consumption of materials and packaging that will become waste. Traditionally people brought their own reusable bags to market -- keep tradition.
2. Reuse materials where possible. A cloth washcloth is not as wasteful as packaged towelettes.
3. Recycle materials where possible. In less industrialized countries, glass bottles are more recyclable than aluminum cans.
4. Don't throw away magazines or newspapers, they are welcomed gifts at rural schools and by isolated development workers.
5. Dispose of human waste properly. Don't pollute surface or ground water.
6. Minimize your use of disposable batteries and other items that will become toxic waste.

Cultural Environment

Part of the environment is the culture. Cultural diversity is as important to this planet's survival as bio-diversity, yet it is probably more endangered and less protected. There are two challenges in preserving cultures: First, part of a culture is superficial and easy to mimic, but the core is much more hidden and not always shared with strangers. Second, determining the positive elements of the cultural environment is very subjective and based on the values one brings to the experience. There may be aspects of a culture that one finds offensive (i.e. polygamy, public nudity, rigidly defined gender roles, etc.) Should one take a totally hands-off approach? When is it responsible to interfere with a foreign culture? While this debate continues, you can adjust your cultural impact by observing a couple of general principles:

1. Meet or exceed (on the side of conservativeness) cultural standards for greetings, dress, body language and protocol.
2. Learn the cultural and social taboos and the local customs and tradition.
3. Behave to reinforce positive elements of the culture: make purchases that reinforce the traditional culture and crafts, not the tourism culture; eat local dishes, prepared with locally produced foods; choose accommodations which maintain cultural identity by using forms of indigenous architecture;
4. Don't give gratuitous gifts and handouts of candy and trinkets, that create "give me" expectations and attitudes of dependency or inferiority. But, justly compensate those who have done something for you.

Diversity is one of the elements that draws the traveler. If we each help it to flourish, it will be there for the next traveler and the next generation.