

# What Foreign Ecotourists Expect: Research Report for Ecotourism and Environmental Management Symposium (10/23/03)

## The Local and the Global Tourist

Although it is not possible to categorize precisely, there are a number of generalizations that can be made that distinguish Taiwanese tourism and international tourist expectations. The primary difference is the macro economy of tourism. Tourism makes up more than 10% of the global economy, but only 2% of Taiwan's economy. This means that tourism is a great unexplored potential economic resource for Taiwan. Worldwide ecotourism is one of the fastest growing segments of tourism. Cultural tourism is another. With their rich ecological agricultural, historic and religious events, the west coastal areas of Yunlin, Chiayi and Tainan counties could readily develop tourism that would appeal to domestic and international visitors.

The domestic tourists in coastal Tainan County typically come on bus tours in large groups. They move quickly from one highlight to another, spending most of their time in the bus or eating. They usually are on a weekend excursion. They want to see as many attractions as possible in as short a time as possible. They want comfortable accommodations at a low price. Ecotourism is a small part of their tourist experience, often looking at the Black-faced Spoonbill for only a matter of minutes. More time is spent socializing or shopping for inexpensive gifts.

The international ecotourist, in great contrast, would prefer to come in small groups and stay in one area for several days or a week, learning about the place in some depth. They want to see the highlights, especially exotic ones that are different from their own culture. They often expect to spend a lot for rustic, even primitive accommodations and rather large, locally made gifts. They will spend as much as ten to twenty times what domestic tourists spend. Ecotourists from abroad will look at wildlife and ecosystems for hours.

Here I want to outline the primary expectations of international ecotourists and the implications for Yunlin, Chiayi and Tainan counties.

### 1. BIRDS, nature and local culture

Ecotourists travel long distances to see endangered species, especially large, exotic mammals and birds. Birders often have life lists of birds they have seen and are likely to want to add *Platalea minor* to their lists. This would attract them here only in the winter months. However, there are over 200 other species of birds, enough endemic to attract ecotourists at other times. Birders may spend entire days looking for birds. They want to spend their time in nature. They will often be interested in minute nature, like crab species or mangrove soil types, and local culture. They are likely to come primarily for a big attraction, like the spoonbill, but they will want to see other nature and local celebrations and rituals. They will want to experience these

things in an "earth friendly" way -- they will prefer to walk, bike or boat to have an intense ecological experience in nature.

The implications for land use and community planning are rather obvious. First, the habitat for the Black-faced Spoonbill and other species must be preserved or ecotourists will not come. To prevent the extinction of spoonbills and ecotourism, 250 square kilometers of appropriate habitat must be provided in this region. Second, the Blueway, bike and walking trails must be developed as primary transportation infrastructure. Third, the single most important action is to permanently protect the habitat resource. This has not been done. Fourth, provide a management authority for the resource that includes local people.

## 2. Unspoiled Landscape

Ecotourists from abroad usually come to experience a dramatically beautiful landscape. The coastline, lagoons, wetlands, creeks, salt ponds and fishponds of Yunlin, Chiayi and Tainan counties provide exactly the environment sought. It appears natural. It is dramatically flat with greens and blues worthy of master paintings. The expanse of its flatness provides a world class natural setting. Ecotourists do not want their natural experience spoiled by development of any kind. They do not want urbanization, even tourist facilities, to blemish the natural landscape.

The implications include the following: First, large natural areas need to be preserved for wildlife habitat and to provide the setting tourists demand. Second, urban development must be clustered in and around existing cities, towns and villages. Third, tourist facilities near the natural areas should be hidden by native vegetation at the edges. Fourth, buildings should be low to the ground, none higher than local temples, to maintain the dramatic flatness. Fifth, tall buildings should only go in existing cities. None should go near the natural areas or in the open viewsheds. These principles have seldom been followed in Taiwan. In Shitiping, development ruins the view of the otherwise extraordinary views to the coast and sea. In Ilan, apartment towers ruin the view of wetlands. These must be prevented to benefit from international ecotourism. Development and design guidelines should be created to guarantee that the unspoiled landscape is maintained.

## 3. Unique Character

Visitors from abroad will come to experience Chinese history, culture and architecture. They want to see what is distinctive. They will not come to see suburban sprawl and buildings that look like everywhere else. Ecotourists and sophisticated international visitors will want to experience Chinese courtyard houses, temples, quaint villages and narrow roads. These are just the things that are being destroyed in order to modernize. Many of these visitors will want comfortable but not necessarily "modern" accommodations. Some will want luxury with a Chinese flavor, others will want to stay in a Chinese courtyard house or fisherman's hut for the unique experience that provides.

The implications include the following: First, preserve the unique character of architecture, villages and the landscape. Second, protect this character by strict land use plans, zoning and other mechanisms. Third, do not "modernize" too much. Keep roads narrow. Preserve and make

available "old style" buildings for tourist accommodations. Since so much of Chinese architecture and culture was destroyed in the mainland, many tourists can be attracted here to see the only remaining traditional Chinese temples and houses.

#### 4. Knowledgeable Hosts

International ecotourists expect knowledgeable local hosts in restaurants, hotels, bed and breakfasts, museums, and on tours. They expect professional, friendly service. Most will need English-speaking intermediaries. Ecotourists really appreciate hosts and tour guides who can provide "inside" local information and details of the ecology, history and culture. They are demanding in this regard, but they will also pay a premium for knowledgeable service.

The implication is that local people need to be trained to be professional and knowledgeable about the local ecology and culture. Typically colleges in the area take the lead in this training. This also suggests that local people with local knowledge can get good jobs doing things they enjoy.

#### 5. "Insider" Events

Sophisticated foreign travelers want to experience things other tourists don't get to see. They want to actually participate in local culture. They want to be part of religious festivals; they want to learn first-hand what local people do. They want to experience real work. This always seems strange to local people, but foreign ecotourists and sophisticated visitors will pay to help you do your work. For example, they will pay to help you harvest oysters, clams or fish. The tours of Chigu Lagoon allow visitors to see this up close. Ecotourists will pay more to learn how the work is done. Sometimes the tourists may seem to be more trouble than they are worth, but it is not unusual for an American ecotourist to pay \$500/day for a guide for two or three people. They generally prefer very small groups and hands-on learning. They definitely want to feel like they have gotten behind the scenes and experienced the true local culture that others might have missed. This requires deciding how to mix "mass" tourism with ecotourism and they often do not mix well. For example, most temple gardens in Kyoto, Japan cost less than three U.S. dollars for entry. One decided to limit the numbers of people, provide an intensive "insider" experience, including meditation and scripture writing; they charge thirty U.S. dollars entry, ten times the average admission.

Many of the experiences sophisticated visitors want are shared with domestic Taiwanese tourists, most notably local and distinctive foods. Ecotourists, however, are likely to be willing to pay a local guide to take them fishing and help prepare the food. In Mexico, American tourists pay local people to teach them how to prepare and cook regional foods.

Sophisticated tourists want to see local arts, crafts and work tools. They especially enjoy seeing them being made. It is not unusual for some of these visitors to spend a thousand U.S. dollars on a locally made [work of] art.

The implications are varied. First, local inventories should be made of local festivals, authentic places, local work and potential arts and crafts to determine which ecotourists would want to

experience. Then local training should prepare local people for the jobs. Local companies should be formed to provide and manage these services so they are professional and special. Second, local districts with historic architecture and village character should be preserved and repaired to create settings for clusters of the more permanent and place-dependent activities. Third, organize the festivals and special events so that the entire coastal region benefits economically from these visitors. Fourth, manage the natural areas so special "insider" places do not get too many tourists. Fifth, develop local arts, crafts and tools ranging in price from several dollars to several thousand dollars. Provide places for artisans to work and some to be seen working. Sixth, develop a marketing strategy to target the international tourists you want to attract and emphasize the unique "insider" experiences you provide. Seventh, establish the national scenic area immediately to achieve all these intentions.

This west coast area of Taiwan has made extraordinary advances in tourism in the last decade. Soon there will need to be serious discussion about providing the resource protection, accommodations, experiences and marketing necessary to attract international ecological and cultural tourists.