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AEWA CONSERVATION GUIDELINES NO. 7

**DRAFT REVISED GUIDELINES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECO-TOURISM
AT WETLANDS**

Compiled by David Stroud

Key messages

- Eco-tourism has the potential to assist wetland and waterbird conservation through provision of social and economic benefits at multiple scales. It is encouraged by the Agreement.
- Poorly managed tourism however also can have adverse impacts, through waterbird disturbance effects, negative impacts on habitats from infrastructure development, and social impacts.
- However, considerable guidance exists that allows such risks to be managed and minimised.
- Governments (whether national or at other scales) have an important role in regulating eco-tourism, through the establishment and enforcement of standards and the creation of supportive policy frameworks.
- Within protected areas, eco-tourism (as relevant) should be addressed as an important element of site management planning using guidance in AEWA's **Conservation Guidelines on management planning**.
- AEWA has guidance that assists wetland managers to understand, manage and reduce disturbance effects ([here](#)).
- Ramsar's guidance on avoiding, mitigating, and compensating for loss and degradation of wetlands ([here](#)) should always be used where tourism has potential habitat effects. This is applicable to all wetlands as well as other habitats.
- AEWA's collation of 29 case studies of successful waterbird eco-tourism enterprises ([here](#)) shares good practice.

AEWA Policy Context

Eco-tourism: the AEWA context

The [Agreement's Action Plan](#) encourages the “development of sensitive and appropriate eco-tourism at wetlands” important for migratory waterbirds, noting the need to “evaluate the costs benefits and other consequences” of eco-tourism at these sites.

[AEWA's Strategic Plan for 2019-2027](#) seeks to ensure that “waterbird related eco-tourism is promoted in at least half of Contracting Parties ... focussing on migratory waterbirds that exemplify benefits to local communities as well as for the conservation status of AEWA populations and their habitats.”

To support that objective, [case studies](#) exemplifying good practice have been compiled by AEWA. These Conservation Guidelines summarise key messages arising from these examples as well as other relevant international good practice.

Background

Eco-tourism can be understood as relating to “nature tourism that contributes to nature conservation”. It is also referred to in some contexts as “conservation tourism”.

The rapid development of ecotourism based on spectacular concentrations of migratory waterbirds and/or species that are rare, peculiar and desirable to see, or on the wetland areas that support them, can not only increase support amongst public for waterbird conservation, but can also provide a valuable source of income for local communities.

However, without careful management, ecotourism can harm wildlife, habitats and local communities through environmental, cultural, and other impacts, both directly at a site, and/or more widely, for example through encouragement of unsustainable land and water use, and disturbance to waterbirds and other species.

There is now much experience and guidance to demonstrate how ecotourism - as a nature-focused element of tourism that is environmentally sustainable - can be conducted in responsible ways which are positive not only for conservation but also for local communities, including reduction of dependencies on non-sustainable land-uses.

Community benefits

Communities can benefit from (wetland) eco-tourism through:

- Creating employment opportunities;
- Supplying goods and services;
- Direct (informal) sales to tourists;
- Support of micro-enterprises;
- Local redistribution of visitor taxes;
- Voluntary giving by tourists; and/or
- Investment in infrastructure (for example better roads).

Yet some of these benefits can also be environmental risks if poorly managed. Guidance (below) exists that helps to avoid this.

Nature-based tourism

Nature-based tourism, including wildlife watching, supports mental and physical well-being, raises awareness, and facilitates connections to nature, in addition to bringing local benefits such as direct income generation to local communities (well established). Although non-extractive practices using wild species are common across all human societies, the nature of the practice differs among cultures and locations (well established).

Wildlife watching generates substantial revenue, contributing US\$ 120 billion in 2018 to global gross domestic product (five times the estimated value of the illegal wild species trade) and sustaining 21.8 million jobs (well established). Prior to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, globally, protected areas received 8 billion visitors and generated US\$ 600 billion per year, with species-rich countries experiencing the highest increases in rates of tourism visitation (established but incomplete).

Wildlife watching is crucial for local livelihoods, provides employment and promotes development of tourism-related infrastructure, particularly in some remote locations (well established).

IPBES Thematic Assessment of the Sustainable Use of Wild Species: Summary for Policymakers

Guidance

Principles of good practice

United Nations (UN) Environment Programme and UN World Tourism Organisation have jointly identified a set of priority issues for the development of more sustainable tourism that minimise the negative impacts on society and the environment and maximises tourism's positive contribution to local economies, the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and the quality of life of hosts and visitors. These are:

1. Economic viability
2. Local prosperity
3. Employment quality
4. Social equity
5. Visitor fulfilment
6. Local control
7. Community well-being
8. Cultural richness
9. Physical integrity
10. Biological diversity
11. Resource efficiency
12. Environmental purity

The Convention on Migratory Species has [recommended](#) that in promoting tourism or recreational activities involving wildlife interaction, the following basic philosophies are taken into account:

- a) tourism activities should not inhibit the natural behaviour and activity of migratory species nor adversely affect their associated habitat;
- b) the activities should not have significant negative impact on the long-term survival of species populations;
- c) tourism activities should create sustainable social and economic benefits within local communities;
- d) revenues generated from the activity should be able to provide resources for the conservation of the species or group of species subject to tourism, including the protection of their habitat, and sustaining of best practices; and
- e) tourism involving wildlife should take into account the safety of observers and wildlife as well as risk to human health;

Management of risks

Management planning. Within relevant protected areas, risks associated with ecotourism should be addressed within a site management plan. Management planning is the process through which trade-offs between risks and benefits, and proposed solutions should be determined. Stakeholder involvement – especially local communities and tourism operators – should play an important role in the development and implementation of site management plans. Much guidance exists on management planning, summarised here¹.

¹ Revised Conservation Guidelines on Management Planning

Disturbance. Visitors to wetlands can cause disturbance to waterbirds and other species through their presence resulting in impacts that can be serious and long-term. AEWA has guidance that assists wetland managers to understand, manage and reduce disturbance effects ([here](#)).

Habitat loss. Sometimes development of infrastructure with wetlands including protected areas may encourage infrastructure development such as the creation of new access routes. Where these have the potential to have damaging impacts, Ramsar's guidance on avoiding, mitigating, and compensating for loss and degradation of wetlands ([here](#)) should always be used. This is applicable to all wetlands as well as other habitats.

When

It is easier to reduce ecotourism risks through planning *before* new enterprises commence. This avoids the more difficult task of redirecting activity that is already established. To this end, at a national scale, clear policies are important to establish an appropriate regulatory framework, whilst at the site-scale management planning (above) should address local risks.

Who

Governments (whether national or at other scales) have an important role in regulating eco-tourism, through the establishment and enforcement of standards and the creation of supportive policy frameworks.

Commercial tourism operators are an important target audience and need to work closely with staff of relevant conservation organisations to mutual benefit.

International non-government organisations operating in an area often have capacity to support eco-tourism if they are brought into a project early on.

Community groups/representatives are important to bring benefits to local communities and ensure there is long-lasting support for eco-tourism. The process of developing a new initiative can help stimulate the creation and self-organization of such groups where they do not initially exist.

Where to find more information

Information source	What it contains
Ecotourism and waterbird conservation . AEWA Resolution 8.16. 2022	Formal AEWA position on waterbird eco-tourism
Eco-tourism: Case studies and options for AEWA strategic engagement . AEWA Doc 8.41. 2022	29 case studies relating to wetlands and waterbirds
Wildlife watching and tourism . 2006. CMS	Migratory Species Convention (CMS) guidance
Sustainable boat-based marine wildlife watching . 2017. CMS	Guidance relevant to seabirds
Eagles <i>et al.</i> 2002. Sustainable tourism in protected areas: Guidelines for planning and management . World Commission on Protected Areas Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines No.8. IUCN	Comprehensive guidance in relation to protected areas

Thematic assessment of the sustainable use of wild species (summary for policymakers). 2022. IPBES	Useful summary of nature-based tourism statistics
Avoiding, mitigating, and compensating for loss and degradation of wetlands in national laws and policies . 2012. Ramsar Convention	Guidance on managing the planning and consenting of potential habitat impacts
Managing waterbird disturbance . 2022. AEWA	Guidance for wetland managers
Case studies of 29 successful waterbird eco-tourism enterprises . 2022. AEWA	Valuable examples of a wide range of good practice initiatives
Conservation Guidelines on management planning . 2024. AEWA	Guide to guidance on management planning
Destination wetlands: supporting sustainable tourism . 2012. Ramsar & World Tourism Organisation	Guide and case studies for wetland tourism