

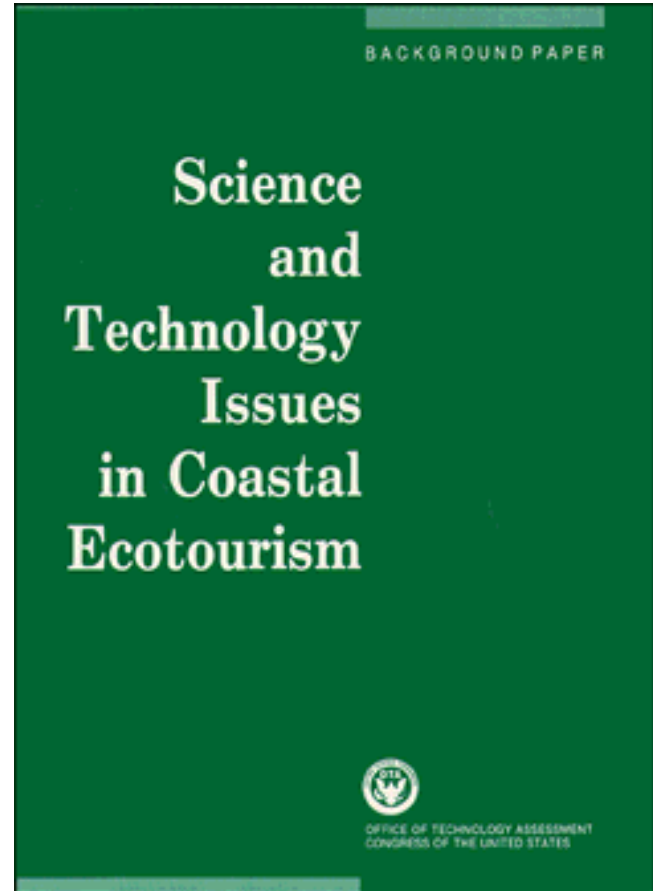
*Science and Technology Issues in Coastal
Ecotourism*

October 1992

OTA-BP-F-86

NTIS order #PB93-116218

GPO stock #052-003-01312-6



Recommended Citation:

U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, *Science and Technology Issues in Coastal Ecotourism-Background Paper, OTA-BP-F-86* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, October 1992).

For sale by the U.S. Government Printing Office
Superintendent of Documents, Mail Stop: SSOP, Washington, DC 20402-9328
ISBN 0-16 -038152-5


Foreword

Nature-based tourism, increasingly called “ecotourism”—one of the fastest growing sectors of tourism worldwide, is fast gaining the attention of developed and developing countries as a potential means to conserve natural resources and support sustainable economic progress. Particularly in areas with stagnant or recessionary economies, ecotourism is being looked to as a promising means to protect wildlife and ecosystems, to maintain rural aesthetic character, to provide economic alternatives to resource extraction activities, and to gain income for local communities.

Ecotourism was identified by the Office of Technology Assessment as a potential resource management option in three reports: *Technologies to Sustain Tropical Forest Resources* (1984), *Technologies to Maintain Biological Diversity* (1987), and *Integrated Renewable Resource Management for U.S. Insular Areas* (1987). Because of the apparent surge of interest in this form of economic development, primarily within developing countries, OTA conducted a small exploratory investigation into experiences with ecotourism and its relationship with renewable resource management technologies.

Development of ecotourism in coastal areas, where resident populations accumulate and tourists congregate, also is receiving heightened attention by all levels of government in the United States. As expressed by the Chairman of the House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, “an informed and farsighted ecotourism strategy could be pivotal in maintaining fragile coastal and island habitats which are under intense development pressure, while at the same time supporting a sustainable economic development effort.”

The House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries subsequently requested the Office of Technology Assessment to summarize information it had gathered relevant to ecotourism development and coastal resource management and, where possible, to identify issues of special concern to U.S. Atlantic and Caribbean coastal and island areas that might be addressed by the Committee. This paper presents information on the ecotourism trends; identifies issues related to resource conservation, ecotourism development and management, and planning; and presents questions for possible further consideration.


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