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## **Ecotourism boom can help save endangered forests, UN and partners say**



Millions of people depend on forests

28 September 2011 –

The increasing demand for ecotourism can play a vital role in saving endangered forests, a United Nations-backed partnership said today, while also warning of the potential damaging effects if its expansion is not effectively managed.

According to the findings of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF), which consists of 14 international organizations and secretariats, including the UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)), the benefits of ecotourism flowing to local businesses are dramatically higher than those from mass tourism, providing an incentive to local communities to take care of their environment.

“Ecotourism has a far greater potential for contributing to income and livelihoods in poor rural communities than what is realized,” [said](#) FAO’s Edgar Kaeslin, a forestry officer in wildlife and protected area management.

The CPF found that standard all-inclusive package tours typically deliver just 20 per cent of revenue to local companies, while the rest is captured by airlines, hotels and large tour companies. Local ecotourism operations, however, can return as much as 95 per cent of earnings into the local economy.

The CPF also noted that ecotourism can motivate local communities to maintain and protect forests and wildlife as they see their income directly linked to the preservation of their environment.

However, it warned that ecotourism could damage forests if it grows too quickly and its expansion is mismanaged.

According to a news release by FAO, ecotourism is one of the fastest segments of tourism worldwide, growing at a pace of more than 20 per cent annually – two or three times faster than the tourism industry overall, and failure to limit tourists can permanently damage fragile ecosystems.

This rapid growth can have negative effects, as there is the risk that powerful players in the travel industry may seek to dominate and squeeze out smaller local operators, resulting in the disruption of local economies and ecosystems.

The CPF stressed that to avoid this, training for local people is essential to ensure they can compete successfully for desirable ecotourism jobs.

“It is crucial that local people are fully involved in the activities and receive sufficient benefits,” Mr. Kaeslin said.

Several sustainable ecotourism programmes such as the Great Apes Survival Partnership (GRASP) have already had successful results. By involving the local communities in Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the gorilla population is rising in numbers.

“There is no question that is a direct result of the careful commitment to responsible tourism in East Africa that respects the gorillas and their habitat,” said GRASP coordinator Doug Cress.

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