Despite the dips and swings caused by political turmoil, economic downturns, and natural disasters, tourism's growth rate is not about to slow down.Synonymous with "green" tourism, ecotourism promotes cultural sensitivity and respect for traditions and customs in order to avoid the kind of exploitation that has turned tribal ceremonies into side- shows and relics into souvenirs. Last but not least, ecotourism plays a political role in its support of human rights and democracy. 8 When it adheres to its principles, ecotourism can be a win-win situation for all involved Ecuador's 15,000-acre Maquipucuna Reserve hosts an ecolodge, employs local staff and tour guides, and supports a project to protect local bears. Home to the rare and unique lemur, the island of Madagascar invests its tourist revenues in safeguarding its world-famous biodiversity and reducing poverty, while keeping tourist numbers small and manageable. The province of Palawan in the Philippines, where ecotourists can visit three bird sanctuaries, twelve national parks, six mangrove forest reserves, and twenty-four watershed forest reserves, has been designated a fish and wildlife sanctuary and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Visitors to Chitwan National Park, another UNESCO Natural Heritage Site in Nepal, can explore jungles on the backs of elephants that are raised in a scientific breeding center and cared for in a sanctuary. 9 A shining model of what can be achieved without sacrificing quality, comfort, and conve- nience for its guests is the Si Como No resort near Manuel Antonio National Park in Costa Rica. Belonging to Greentique Hotels, Si Como No runs on solar power, conserves water, and practices recycling and environmental gray-water management. The staff is trained in environmental awareness, and time and money are invested in programs that benefit the environment and the community. 10 There is another side, however, to the ecotourism success story. Because tourism is the least- regulated industry with no universal standards or formal accreditation programs, any company can slap a "green" label onto its operation and cash in on the trend.While progress continues to be made on many fronts and by many players, it is the individual traveler who will keep ecotourism on track.The red flags are already appearing: quaint fishing villages turned into sprawling tourist play- grounds, shorelines ribboned with high-rise hotels, agricultural fields plowed under and con- verted into golf courses, coastal waters polluted with sewage, beaches littered with garbage, and noisy streets plagued by traffic congestion.To make way for airports, roads, and tourist com- plexes, forests have been cleared, fragile ecosystems .destroyed, wildlife dispersed or decimated, and indigenous peoples displaced and dispossessed

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