

**John Paul II**

# **“Ecotourism, the Key to Sustainable Development”**

**Message of the Holy Father John Paul II  
for the 23<sup>rd</sup> World Day of Tourism**

**F**avour tourism that respects people, environment

1. The observance of the World Day of Tourism that will take place on 27 September with the theme: *“Ecotourism, the Key to Sustainable Development”*, again gives me the welcome chance to reflect on the phenomenon of human mobility that has developed so rapidly in recent decades and now involves millions of persons. Tourism enables people to use part of their free time to contemplate the goodness and beauty of God in his creation and, through contact with others, helps to intensify mutual dialogue and acquaintance. Thus free time and tourism can compensate for the lack of human contact that is often felt in daily life.

Travel educates through direct contact with people and with nature

Sacred Scripture considers the experience of travel a special opportunity to acquire knowledge and wisdom, since it puts the person in touch with different peoples, cultures, customs and lands. Indeed it says: *“A man who has travelled knows many things, a man with much experience will speak with understanding. He who is never put to the proof knows few things, but he that has travelled acquires much cleverness. I have seen many things in my travels, and I understand more than I can express”* (Sir 34,9-11).

In *Genesis*, in the renewing vision of the *Prophets*, in the wise contemplation of *Job* and of the author of the *Book of Wisdom* as well as in the faith experiences witnessed in the *Psalms*, the beauty of creation is a sign that reveals God’s greatness and goodness. In his parables, Jesus invites people to contemplate the nature that surrounds them to learn that confidence in the heavenly Father must be total (cf. Lk 12,22-28) and faith must be constant (cf. Lk 17,6).

Creation is entrusted to man so that, by cultivating and safeguarding it (cf. Gn 2,15), he may provide for his needs and obtain his “daily bread”, the gift that the heavenly Father himself destines for all his children. We should look at creation with eyes that are clear sighted and full of wonder. Unfortunately, it sometimes happens that the respect due to creation is lessened, but when human beings become the tyrants

rather than the custodians of nature, sooner or later the latter will rebel against human disregard (cf. John Paul II, *Homily at Mass for the Jubilee of the Agricultural World*, 12 November 2000, n. 4; ORE, 15 November 2000, p. 1).

Selfish interests and greed can create ecological disasters

**2.** Among the countless tourists who “go around the world” every year, there are many who set out with the explicit goal of the discovery of nature to explore it even in its most secluded corners. An intelligent brand of tourism tends to appreciate the beauty of nature and directs people to approach it with respect and to enjoy it without altering its balance.

Nevertheless, how can we deny that today humanity is experiencing an ecological emergency? A certain kind of savage tourism has contributed to and still contributes to this unwanted destruction by way of tourist installations built without any planning that respects their impact on the environment. As I noted in my *Message for World Day of Peace 1990*, “we must go to the source of the problem and face in its entirety that profound moral crisis of which the destruction of the environment is only one troubling aspect” (n. 5; ORE, 18-26 December 1989, p. 1). Indeed, the destruction of the environment highlights the consequences of decisions made by private interests that do not weigh the real conditions of human dignity. One finds prevalent an unbridled desire to accumulate personal wealth that prevents people from hearing the alarming cry of poverty of entire peoples. In other words, the selfish quest for their own good fortune induces people to disregard the legitimate expectations of present and future generations. The truth is that when people cut themselves off from God’s plan for creation, they block out concern for their brothers and sisters, and respect for nature.

Reasons for hope: interior ecology

**3.** However, there are reasons for hope. Many persons, aware of this problem, for some time have been studying ways to find a remedy. They are first of all concerned to recover the spiritual dimension of the relationship with creation, by rediscovering the mandate God originally entrusted to humanity (cf. Gn 2,15). Indeed, “interior ecology” encourages “exterior ecology” with immediate positive consequences, not only in the struggle against the poverty and hunger of others but also, for their personal health and well-being. This approach should be encouraged in order to make the culture of life more influential and to defeat the culture of death.

We should favour forms of tourism that show greater respect for the environment, greater moderation in their use of natural resources and greater solidarity with local cultures. This type of tourism implies a strong ethical motivation based on the norm that the environment is everyone’s home and that the good of nature is destined for everyone who enjoys it now and for the generations to come.

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Ecotourism: pro's and con's

4. A new sensitivity, commonly known as “ecotourism”, is also emerging. It is good in its assumptions. Nonetheless, we must be careful to ensure that it is not distorted and does not become a vehicle of abuse and discrimination. In fact, if the protection of the environment were to be made an end in itself, there is the risk that new, modern forms of colonialism will arise that would injure the traditional rights of communities resident in a specific territory. It would be an obstacle to the survival and development of local cultures and take financial resources from the authority of the local government who are the first to be responsible for the ecosystems and rich biodiversity present in their respective territories.

No intervention in an area of the ecosystem can neglect weighing the consequences in other areas and in general the effects it will have on the well-being of future generations. Ecotourism takes people to places, environments or regions whose natural balance needs constant care if it is not to be jeopardized. Studies and rigorous controls must be encouraged; they should aim at harmonizing respect for nature with the human person's right to benefit from it for his personal development.

Tourism fosters the consciousness of need for measures of protection and change of life-style

5. “*We wait for new heavens and a new earth*” (2 Pt 3,13). With regard to the inconsiderate exploitation of creation that is a result of human insensitivity, our current society will not find an adequate solution unless it seriously reviews its life-style and manages to base it on „firm points of reference and inspiration: a clear knowledge of creation as a work of God's provident wisdom and the awareness of human dignity and responsibility in the plan of creation „ (*Address to the Convention on the Environment and Health*, 24 March 1997, n. 6; *ORE*, 9 April 1997, p. 2).

Tourism can be an effective means of forming this consciousness. A less aggressive approach to the natural environment will help people discover and appreciate better the goods entrusted to the responsibility of all and of each. A close knowledge of the fragility of many aspects of nature will create a greater consciousness of the urgent need for adequate measures of protection, to put an end to the inconsiderate exploitation of natural resources. Attention and respect for nature can foster sentiments of solidarity with men and women, whose *human environment* is constantly assaulted by exploitation, poverty, hunger, the lack of education and health care. It is up to everyone, but especially those who work in the tourist sector, so to act that these objectives become reality. May believers draw from their faith an effective incentive that will guide them in their relationship with the environment and in their duty to preserve it in its integrity for the benefit of human beings today and tomorrow. I now especially address Christians to ask them to make tourism another opportunity for the contemplation and encounter with God, Creator and Father of

all. May they thus be strengthened in their service to justice and peace, faithful to the One who promised new heavens and a new earth (cf. Apoc 21,1).

I hope that the observance of the coming World Day of Tourism will help people rediscover the values inherent in this human experience of contact with creation and will spur each one to respect the natural *habitat* and local cultures. I entrust all who are concerned with this specific area of human life to Mary, Mother of Christ, and invoke upon them the Blessing of Almighty God.

*From the Vatican, 24 June 2002*

*Johannes Paulus II*

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