Ecotourism can help protect biodiversity in a sustainable manner, but may potentially lead to damage if a site receives large numbers of visitors. New research in Latvia has provided insight into managing the impact of visitors on Natura 2000 sites, and suggests that admission fees and environmental tourist guides could help boost the value of ecotourism.

Ecotourism in Natura 2000 sites can help protect biodiversity in a sustainable manner, but may potentially lead to damage if a site receives large numbers of visitors. New research in Latvia has provided insight into managing the impact of visitors on Natura 2000 sites, and suggests that admission fees and environmental tourist guides could help boost the value of ecotourism.

Ecotourism can be defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and protects the wellbeing of local people. As such, it is considered to provide excellent opportunities to protect biodiversity and support local communities. Latvia has a rich biodiversity and an established tradition of nature conservation, with 334 protected Natura 2000 sites where tourism plays a central role.

The study suggests that current and future ecotourism activities could promote sustainable conservation by encouraging public interest in nature, promoting local development and generating income from visitors to help maintain conservation projects.

However, it is important to consider the impact of an increase of tourists to these areas. The study interviewed a range of stakeholders across Latvia, including national and local government, academic institutions, the private sector, NGOs and local residents. Their responses indicated that the main cause of unsustainable ecotourism is considered to be too many tourists. Excessive numbers of visitors can disturb the living space of wild animals and damage plants, habitats and water quality, as well as negatively affect local communities.

It is necessary to plan ecotourism carefully to consider its potential impacts on nature, the study observes. This could involve collaborating with scientific researchers to estimate the effects of ecotourism and including local residents in planning. The use of green technologies, such as environmentally-friendly sewage water treatment systems, heat pumps and solar panels, could also reduce negative impacts, while attaching extra educational value to the sites.

The economic potential of ecotourism remains largely unrealised in Latvia. Many protected sites do not charge admission fees, which could provide financial benefits and limit visitors to a manageable number. It is suggested that the benefits of ecotourism could be maximised by employing more local environmental tourist guides to improve the ‘tourism experience’ and communicate information about given sites, particularly if the guides were well trained and had access to environmental data. In addition, guides may also help to make admission fees and accommodation taxes more acceptable.