

Tourists can do their bit

Mass tourism is a modern phenomenon brought about by developments in transport technology and improved standards of living. From only 10 million tourists worldwide in 1950, it is estimated that by 2010 the figure will have reached one billion. Today millions of people travel the world to experience natural and man-made wonders. This interest in natural and cultural heritage is important for the economy, since tourism generates income from direct spending and supports jobs in a variety of industries. But not everything in the garden is rosy. If uncontrolled, tourism can cause irreversible physical and social damage, not only to tourist destinations but to the local communities living there.

Many tourists are keen to travel to places known for their natural beauty, for example, yet some of the most beautiful holiday destinations have fragile environments and local communities that are coming under increasing pressure from the growth of tourism. This can range from a fish-and-chip wrapping thrown away in the street to a caravan site near a bird sanctuary. Fortunately, the impact which our travel has on the natural environment is now being recognised. The travel industry has begun to offer trips which allow tourists to make a positive contribution to conservation and to the economies of local communities while minimising the negative effects that tourism can have. This is known as "responsible tourism" or "eco-tourism". For example, local people may become genuinely involved in tourism projects and tour operators can be encouraged to put revenue back into local development.

The European Union too funds programmes in the field of rural development which encourage young people to devote some of their holidays to activities that directly benefit rural areas. By doing so, they have the chance not only to improve their knowledge and skills but also to meet new people and discover new places, while at the same time they can really make a difference to preserving the countryside!