

## **GEOTOURISM INNOVATORS HONORED AT WASHINGTON SUMMIT**

International participants plan sustainable tourism that helps local communities

Winners and finalists in a competition of tourism-related projects that promote natural and cultural heritage while improving the well-being of local residents are being honored at the Geotourism Challenge Summit at the National Geographic Society headquarters in Washington, D.C., Oct. 14-15, 2008.

The projects in the Geotourism Challenge were selected out of a total of 321 entries from 83 countries for their innovative approaches in promoting geotourism, which is defined as “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place- it’s environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well-being of its residents.” The global competition was carried out by Ashoka’s Changemakers and the National Geographic Society’s Center for Sustainable Destinations (CSD).

The three winners—the Yachana Foundation (Ecuador), 3 Sisters Adventure Trekking (Nepal), and Rios Tropicales (Costa Rica)—are being introduced at a session on the future geotourism challenge. Speakers include Jonathan B. Tourtellot, CSD director, and Charlie Brown, executive director of Ashoka’s Changemakers.

The awards presentation is being hosted by John Fahey, president of National Geographic, and Bill Drayton, founder of Ashoka. Each of the three winning projects will receive a \$5,000 award.

Representatives of each project are making presentations and participating in a series of panel discussions and workshops during the two-day event. (For information on the projects, go to <http://www.changemakers.net/es/node/8306>.)

Ashoka is a global association of more than 1,800 social entrepreneurs—people with innovative and practical ideas for addressing social needs around the world. Ashoka’s Changemakers, which conducted the geotourism competition, holds competitions to identify outstanding innovators who provide solutions to pressing issues. The Geotourism Challenge is the 17<sup>th</sup> Ashoka competition and the first sponsored by National Geographic. Ashoka is based in Arlington, Virginia.

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## **Geotourism network set for launch**

Summit participants are also discussing a series of new geotourism initiatives. Beginning in 2009, the Global Geotourism Network is planned to provide an Internet-based platform for tourism professionals and travelers to share information and tools to develop projects and set new standards for destination stewardship. The network is a project of the Montreal-based Centre of Excellence for Destinations (CED) in collaboration with the CSD.

Summit participants are also being briefed on the new Geotourism Development Foundation by its president, John McKenzie, a principal operations officer at the International Finance Corporation. Joining him will be Len Cordiner, CEO of World Hotel Link Travel. Tova Solo of The World Bank, and Santiago Soler of the Inter-American Development Bank will also present funding initiatives.

These new initiatives build on eight years of progress by the CSD in promoting geotourism principles to governments, organizations, and the general public. Achievements include six Geotourism MapGuide projects carried out in collaboration with local people and organizations, the signing of the Geotourism Charter by eight countries and other jurisdictions, and a memorandum of understanding with U.S. federal agencies to formally adopt the principles of geotourism. The CSD also helped to found the Montreal-based CED to serve as a global gateway for expertise in sustainable tourism. The CSD's destination stewardship surveys appear annually in National Geographic Traveler Magazine, as the "Places Rated" cover story.

Geotourism is increasingly accepted by business and consumers as a necessary and profitable alternative to mass tourism, which often results in environmental destruction and degradation of local cultures.

## **Next geotourism challenge set for January**

Other summit topics include how to educate and motivate local residents to protect destinations, how these messages can be transmitted across cultures, how to finance protection measures, and how to measure success in applying geotourism principles. Sessions are being moderated by representatives from Ashoka, CSD, and the World Hotel Link Travel.

Speaking at the closing session are Pamela P. Flaherty, president and chief executive officer of Citi Foundation, and Sven Lindbland, president and founder of Lindblad Expeditions.

A second geotourism competition sponsored by National Geographic and Ashoka will be launched in January 2009.

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