

# EDUCATIONAL TRAVEL

## *A promising sector diversifying Costa Rica's tourism*

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**D**espite its magnitude and worldwide recognition, Educational Travel (ET) has received little or no attention from tourism organizations, public or private, since its development, promotion and operation has generally been handled in studies, research and/or conservation efforts by universities, colleges, fraternities and foundations.

Although a retrospective analysis would show the great influence that this sector has had in the promotion, development and positioning of Costa Rica as one of the principal tourism destinations in the world, the concept has yet to received adequate attention here, evidenced by the fact that the subject is not treated in the 2002-2012 National Tourism Plan, nor does it form part of any specific promotion under the Costa Rican Tourism Board's (ICT) promotional activities for 2005.

### **What is Educational Travel?**

In general terms, ET is a special sector in tourism where trips have a large educational component, not strictly as a mere method of formal or conventional education, but within an ample and free spectrum of options offering a hands-on educational experience that can be had in natural open spaces and/or settings in rural and wildlife areas.

ET has not been a static term but rather it has evolved as a result of a series of socio-cultural phenomena since its origin, development and progress. The search for knowledge and learning have been two basic ingredients in the travels of thousands of people around the world for the longest of time. Its consolidation began during Grand Tour era based on the notion of traveling to learn and expand frontiers.

Such terms as Study Travel, Study Abroad Vacations and Learning Vacations became popular and gave birth to Educational Travel to represent the basis for the tourism sector's programs that combine experience-learning. Recently in Canada another term has evolved Experiential Travel, probably due to



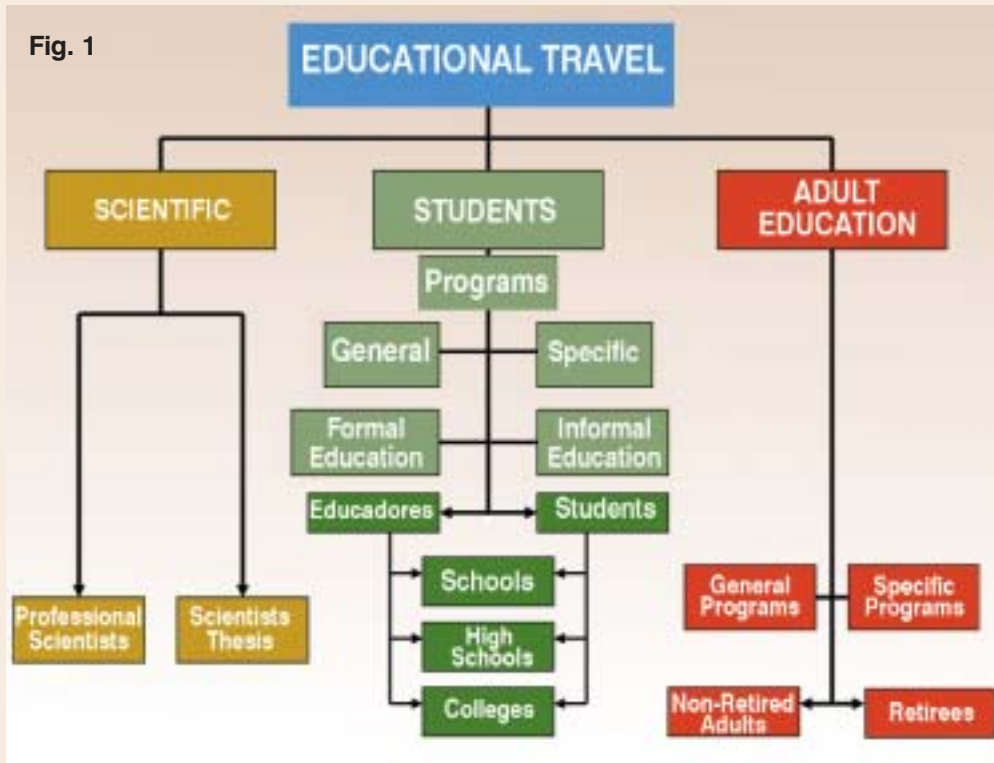
**Aprendiendo sobre aves en el INBioparque.**  
 (Foto Cortesía de INBio)

the close influence this term has with experiential education, which is more liberal and teaches in an informal – an excellent complement to traditional schooling since it expands the students' horizons and fosters their interest to learn.

As the chart (Fig 1) illustrates, ET covers three distinct levels: Scientific, Students, and Adult Education.

For quite some time ET didn't received much attention due to the image of being primarily composed of backpackers with little spending ability and therefore of little or no interest to

Fig. 1



business. As a rule, ET program coordination and management was previously left to educational institutions and/or non-tourism related NGOs due to its strong educational character, academic in nature.

Today this image of “low cost travelers” no longer applies as ET is currently composed of a variety of travelers: children, youth and even senior citizens. This has not only enabled a wider interpretation for the concept of the demand for this type of tourism, but has expanded the field of organizations dealing partially or fully in meeting the needs of this type of visitor including private companies serving as outbound and/or inbound tour operators. These operators work in close coordination with educational entities (usually colleges and universities) and NGOs as they organize such programs and require the usual tourist services for development and operation, as well as specific services designed for the needs of this sector itself – theme-related, for example.

Although now better known, there are no statistics or traveler’s profiles available. As a result there is no documentation dealing with the sector at the international level. The same is true with most countries whether they have outbound and inbound tourism, as in the case of Costa Rica.

Some authors point out that one of every four tourists in the world are young, and that age levels have diversified, therefore volume is presumed important. In Great Britain for example almost 18% of the US\$70 billion spent in tourism corresponds to ET — for an impressive sum of US\$12 billion.

The growth experienced by this sector has driven the organizers of a related event held in Washington DC every February to change its name from Non-Profit in Travel Conference to the Educational Travel Conference (ETC). Considered the major event of this type in the world, it brings together the principal Suppliers and Buyers of this kind of services worldwide, although with special emphasis in USA and Canada. Another development is that the British Educational Travel Association organized for the first time a “Youth Pavilion” within the World Travel Market in London in 2003.

In a similar manner, in Montreal, Canada the International Experiential and Learning Travel Symposium and Trade Show is being organized. This is the first event of its type in that country, offering a dynamic and

real opportunity to raise the level of Experiential Tourism where program planners and service providers can negotiate face to face. As in the case of ETC this event will host a high level academic meeting while the Travel Show will be for commercial purposes.

### Importance of the transformation of Costa Rica as a destination

A brief retrospective analysis demonstrates the leading role of ET, in particular through its sub-sectors Scientific Tourism and Student Travel are contributing to the country’s popularity as a destination, in particular for programs where nature has and continues to be the basic motivation.

Since the beginning and because of its dedication to research, conservation and biological education, entities such as the Organization for Tropical Studies, the Scientific Tropical Center and the Caribbean Conservation Corporation started to promote this country for students and scientists of natural sciences, which snowballed to a large extent the position Costa Rica enjoys as a destination.

### Importance of the current tourism demand for Costa Rica

There are no hard statistics to support the extent of this market, and there are no studies along these lines to assist in defining the profile of the various sub-sectors that exist under the umbrella of ET. This doesn’t imply that organizations and/or companies with programs in this field do not



**Adult Continuing Educational Travel include specific and/or general programs designed to meet the demands of people, generally older folks, that are not necessarily students in the conventional way, and because of the age status and work situation can be divided into Retirees and Non-Retirees. (Photo: Courtesy of InBio)**

have relevant information, since they may have at the very least group records — although some valuable complementary information may be lacking which would help in understanding sector's diversity.

However, NGOs through research, education and/or conservation do have better records of some related sub-sectors, since they have been “quietly” involved with groups in educational tourism. Such is the case of the Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS) and the Scientific Tropical Center (STC) since they have been involved in Scientific ourism. and Student Ttravel long before Costa Rica began its effective positioning as a destination. Therefore these organizations are key players in this field, as evidenced by data related to visits to their own protected areas and/or scientific stations such as La Selva Biological Reserve and Scientifi Station and the Monteverde Biological Reserve, respectively.

If we consider that OTS had a total of 45,408 visitors (La Selva, Las Cruces and Palo Verde) during the past seven years and that STC had 67,518 in 2002, while in 2004 La Tirimbina had 12,368 visitors, and for the first six months of that same year EARTH had 2,544, we can get an idea of the magnitude of ET in this country. These are only some of the entities involved in its development.

The demand for sun and beach vacation spots will not disappear completely but a growing number of potential travelers may become supporters of Educational Travel. There are many who have the time and money as well as the desire to increase their knowledge and experience in accordance with of their interests and hobbies.

Because of its nature, Educational Travel is in itself sustainable. It is successful because it recognizes the unique value of

destinations, it emphasizes that value and offers a cultural understanding, all for the benefit of the destination and its visitors.

Contributed by JLC & Assoc., a consulting company in Responsible Tourism and Educational Travel. Tel. 506-296-9949.

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