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Buzzword of the Year: Eco-tourism

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

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Loango National Park in Gabon, which set aside about 10 percent of its land for national parks.

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growth.

Omar Bongo, the president of Gabon, a developing country in west central Africa, has set aside about 10 percent of the country's landmass for 13 national parks. Green Visions, a tourism and environment protection company, based in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, is pioneering an eco-tourism development plan in Central Europe with "green adventures" that promote environmental principles and support local businesses. Even Greece, better known for its pumping night life and archaeological monuments, devotes a section of its national tourism Web site to "Greek nature" and eco-tourism.

Eco-tourism - travel that preserves the environment and promotes the welfare of local people - continues to gain momentum. Impressed by the success of countries like Costa Rica and Ecuador, which have lured flocks of travelers for mountain treks and jungle safaris, a growing number of regions across the globe are turning to eco-tourism as a strategy for economic

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Over the last four years, at least 48 countries, from Puerto Rico to Portugal, have created or started to define a national strategy for eco-tourism development, according to a 2004 eco-tourism report by Mintel International Group, a market-research company based in Britain.

Though eco-tourism has long conjured images of biodiversity hot spots in countries like Belize, parts of the United States are starting to embrace the trend too. For example, the Wisconsin Department of Tourism will begin testing a new certification program in March called Travel Green Wisconsin. Designed to encourage hotels and tour operators to reduce their environmental impact, the program is aimed at protecting the natural areas that play a significant role in defining the state as a tourist destination. If successful, the program will be rolled out statewide next year.

"As a country we tend to think of eco-tourism as always over there," said John Ivanko, owner of Inn Serendipity, a bed-and-breakfast near Monroe, Wis., that has a solar-powered water-heating system and bathroom floor tiles made from recycled auto windshields. "It doesn't necessarily have to be that way, especially when you have places like the Grand Canyon. We're just not thinking of it as much as a country."

For businesses, eco-friendly initiatives not only offer marketing advantages but can help with the bottom line. Hotels can cut costs by doing everything from installing energy-saving light bulbs to asking travelers to reuse their towels. And some 58.5 million U.S. travelers, or 38 percent, would pay more to use travel companies that strive to protect and preserve the environment, according to a study by the Travel Industry Association of America sponsored by National Geographic Traveler. Of those travelers, 61 percent said they would pay 5 to 10 percent more to use such companies.

However, selecting among the growing number of eco-friendly choices can be daunting, especially given the ever-broadening category, which now encompasses everything from basic campsites to high-end mountain lodges, lama trekking to motorcycle tours through the jungle. Enter the Sustainable Tourism Certification Network of the Americas - a partnership of certification programs, environmental groups, government organizations and others, led by the Rainforest Alliance and the International Ecotourism Society - which aims to promote sustainability and higher environmental and social standards for tourism. In September, the network designed a series of baseline criteria for certification to help generate credibility among members and promote local conservation. This year, the document will be put up

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for public consultation before being fully ratified.

"Certification is a way for us to avoid green washing," the practice of promoting something as eco-tourism while behaving in an environmentally irresponsible way, said Ronald Sanabria, director of sustainable tourism at the Rainforest Alliance. "Certification for us is a tool to avoid that and to ensure third-party assessments of requirements and really prove the company."

Within a few weeks, the Rainforest Alliance plans to introduce an online eco-index, www.eco-index.org/tourism, that will offer travelers a searchable database of hotels and tour operators that have been certified by a program member of the network.

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