



**FORO INTERNACIONAL INDIGENA DE TURISMO**  
*INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON INDIGENOUS TOURISM*

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**Working Document of**  
*The International Forum on Indigenous*  
*Tourism*  
**Oaxaca, Mexico**  
**March 18-20, 2002**

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## **Declaration of *The International Forum on Indigenous Tourism*, Oaxaca, Mexico, March 18-20, 2002.**

We, the delegates at the International Forum on Indigenous Tourism, have gathered in Oaxaca to share perspectives and deliberate on the consequences of tourism in our communities. We come from thirteen primarily Western Hemisphere countries, representing Indigenous communities that are participating in activities related to tourism development, nature conservation, reforestation, environmental education, cultural heritage, and agriculture. We do this mindfully independent from the U.N.'s ongoing "International Year of Ecotourism" (IYE) because we have grave concerns over the processes leading up to the IYE and its outcomes so far, and how they will impact Indigenous Peoples in the future.

We have been told that the IYE declaration is testimony to the importance of ecotourism to conserve lands, protect cultures, and encourage economic development. Yet the realities we are experiencing of ecological degradation and cultural erosion associated with tourism development under the influence of globalization suggest that the IYE does not go far enough in its review of ecotourism. For centuries, Indigenous Peoples have suffered from displacement and dispossession, and we see the incursion of the profit-driven global tourism industry as well as the rhetoric of "sustainable development" in the IYE as the latest threats to our lands and our communities.

Throughout the process leading up to the IYE, a clear division has developed between the actors promoting the year and worldwide movements of Indigenous Peoples rejecting it. Many have rejected the IYE because of its lack of transparency. We are especially concerned that the IYE has not sought the informed participation of Indigenous representatives in its planning. It is sadly reminiscent of recent problems over the process in which U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity developed guidelines for sustainable tourism and biodiversity, which were rushed without significant Indigenous input. Divergent perspectives, values, and interests must be taken into account in global initiatives like the IYE, and we affirm the internationally-recognized right and responsibility of Indigenous Peoples to be present in them.<sup>1</sup>

We register our profound disagreement with the IYE's and ecotourism's most basic assumptions that define Indigenous communities as targets to be developed and our lands as commercial resources to be sold on global markets. Under this universalistic economic framework, tourism brings market competition, appropriates our lands and peoples as consumer products, and renders our traditional knowledge vulnerable to bioprospecting and biopiracy. The IYE must not be used to legitimate the invasion and displacement of Indigenous territories and communities. Our lifeways and cultures are distinct, and we demand that the IYE and ecotourism's promoters acknowledge our fundamental rights to self-determination, prior informed consent, and the diverse ways that we choose to process and participate in such initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> These rights are confirmed by the Convention on Biological Diversity, International Labor Organization Agreement 169, the Draft Declaration of Indigenous Peoples' Rights to the OAS, and the U.N. Draft Declaration of Indigenous Peoples' Rights, among others.

To be sure, some ecotourism projects might be deemed successful because they have not disrupted local cultures and ecosystems. It is because these projects have been designed and implemented by Indigenous Peoples ourselves. These forms of tourism encompass the inherently holistic ways in which our communities are organized. They are based on and enhance our self-determination. They are protective of our biological and cultural diversity, sacred sites and rituals, and collective property and traditional resource rights. They affirm the fundamental ethical and spiritual dimensions of our relationships with the land and with each other.

Such forms of tourism cannot be based on concept-driven tourism development such as ecotourism, sustainable tourism, nature tourism, cultural tourism, ethnotourism, etc. Instead they are based on a long-term analysis of the pros and cons of tourism development, recognizing and following collective decision-making processes, and integrated into our long-term realities and visions of sustainable use and access to collective goods. An essential component of this is the right to decline tourism development at any point in the development process. So when we talk about "Indigenous Tourism," it is not just another marketing gimmick, but a broad category of distinctive ways in which Indigenous Peoples choose to implement tourism on our own terms.

The participants in this meeting have affirmed and determined to undertake the following:

1. Indigenous Peoples are not mere "stakeholders," but internationally-recognized holders of collective and human rights, including the rights of self-determination, informed consent, and effective participation.
2. Given that we have seen few positive results from the U.N.'s Decade of Indigenous Peoples, we do not put much stock in the effectiveness of this declaration to the U.N. We believe the real listeners of this message will be Indigenous Peoples and others who have respect for our ways of being. This declaration is also aimed at governments, conservation and ecotourism NGOs, academics, the tourism industry, and others who seek to "develop" us and our lands for tourism.
3. Indigenous Peoples are not objects of tourism development. We are active subjects with the rights and responsibilities to our territories and the processes of tourism planning, implementation, and evaluation that happen in them. This means we are responsible for defending Indigenous lands and communities from development that is imposed by governments, development agencies, private corporations, NGOs, and specialists.
4. Tourism is beneficial for Indigenous communities only when it is based on and enhances our self-determination. Outside "experts and assistance" are useful to us only if they work within frameworks conceptualized and defined by our communities. Therefore, tourism projects must be undertaken only under the guidance and surveillance

of an Indigenous Technical Team, and only after a full critical analysis of the long-term pros and cons of tourism development.

5. Indigenous Peoples must be the natural resource and wildlife managers of our own environments. Communities that fall within protected areas often experience oppression by governing agencies and lack of access to our own resources.

6. Indigenous Peoples must establish and strengthen strategies of coordination and information sharing both regionally and internationally, in order to assert participation in initiatives like the IYE. This meeting signals the birth of the Indigenous Tourism Network, that employs the sharing of information among Indigenous communities through newsletters, gatherings, regional workshops, emails, websites, video production, and other forms of communication that are independent of the self-promotional focus of the tourism industry.

7. We urge an honest and transparent commitment on the part of the United Nations and other international organizations to actively open doors for the direct participation of Indigenous Peoples. This includes dedicating funds and developing mechanisms for Indigenous Peoples' representatives to participate in the planning and execution of international initiatives like the IYE, and respect for the diverse ways that Indigenous communities make decisions about important initiatives that directly impact us.

8. We demand that national governments implement and respect laws and regulations regarding the environment and Indigenous communities.

9. We urge the development and implementation of guidelines and regulations for ecotourism development and visitation based on principles of respect for local cultures and the integrity of ecosystems.

10. We consider illegitimate any drafting process that does not include the active and full participation of Indigenous Peoples.