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GLOBAL wildlife tourism generated five times more revenue than illegal wildlife trade annually, a new study found.

The *Economic Impact Of Global Wildlife Tourism* report by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTTC) found that in 2018, wildlife tourism contributed US\$120bil (RM501bil) in direct gross domestic products (GDP) to the global economy.

This is 5.2 times more than the global wildlife trafficking industry, estimated at US\$23bil (RM92bil) annually.

The report also found that wildlife tourism directly created 9.1 million jobs worldwide in 2018 alone.

The WTTTC defines wildlife tourism as activities involving "viewing and experiencing animals in their natural habitat". This excludes zoos, circuses or theme parks involving animal performances, and consumptive wildlife tourism such as hunting and fishing.

The report found that the Asia-Pacific region is the largest wildlife tourism economy worth US\$53.3bil (RM223bil), followed by Africa at US\$29.3bil (RM122.39bil) and North America at US\$13.5bil (RM56.39bil).

When factoring in both direct and indirect impacts of wildlife tourism, the sector's total economic contribution rises to a whopping US\$343.6bil (RM1,435tril) – equivalent to Hong Kong's entire economy – and it globally employs over 20 million people, which is the population of Sri Lanka.

Wildlife tourism is increasingly recognised as an important part of the wider travel and tourism sector, the report says.

"Wildlife tourism is a rich segment of the industry, showing how our precious species can legitimately enrich tourism businesses without being harmed," WTTTC president Gloria Guevara says in a statement.

"In fact, the wildlife tourism market is so strong that it provides a strong incentive for communities to protect and display animals to the world rather than killing them for a one-off cash bonus," she adds.

With Malaysia being one of the world's most biodiverse countries, it is a great place for wildlife tourism, with places like the Ulu Muda Forest Reserve and Kenyir Lake offering great opportunities to view animals.

However, while wildlife tourism has the ability to support conservation work, unethical wildlife tourism operators are known to cause more harm to the wildlife.

Worth more alive than dead

Finally, people are paying more to see wildlife in their natural habitat than for wildlife as illegal pets and parts.



According to Fuze Ecotour Outdoor Adventures, a social conservation enterprise travel organisation, the best way to identify an ethical wildlife tourism provider is to look at their photos to see what they promote and read customers' reviews.

"If they promote some form of feeding, touching or riding the animals, or something that is unnatural for the animals, then it is unethical," says Fuze co-founder Daniel Qulter.

"Ethical wildlife tourism is viewing the animals from afar and respecting the animal's space, not up close, not feeding them, not touching them," he says.

The animals, he adds, should also look healthy and well taken care of.

Qulter says that Malaysia is a great place for wildlife tourism and recommends explorations of the Belum-Temenggor Forest Reserve in Perak, Ulu Muda Forest Reserve in Kedah, Kenyir Lake in Terengganu, Merapoh in Pahang, and the Kinabatangan River in Sabah.

However, he laments that tour guides on islands like Pulau Langkawi and those along the East Coast are feeding eagles, turtles and sharks due to tourists' demand for photos with the animals.

Tourists, he warns, are causing harm

when they pay local guides and villagers extra money to see more sharks or turtles.

"Villagers are starting to hand-feed the sharks and it's only a matter of time when the sharks get too comfortable and start biting people's hands," he says.

Tourists, complains Qulter, are also paying guides to catch a turtle for a photo opportunity.

He reminds tourists that they have the power to ensure that wildlife tourism is carried out ethically by tipping guides who practice ethical standards.

The WTTTC report was released on World Elephant Day on Aug 12.

Wildlife tourism – i.e. viewing and experiencing animals in their natural habitat – is paying off big time as more and more tourists want to see animals in nature.
– 123rf.com

