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Green is queen

Ecotourism has a complex future to juggle

By DANIEL BATEMAN

GETTING off the beaten track has never been more popular.

Speaking at Ecotourism Australia's International conference in Townsville yesterday, UNESCO's Natarajan Ishwaran said ecotourism had evolved in leaps and bounds during the past 30 years.

The Sri Lankan-based director of UNESCO's ecological and earth sciences division said the challenge for the future was making sure the industry developed responsibly.

"I started wildlife work in Sri Lanka in 1975," Mr Ishwaran said.

"We used to take occasional tour-

ists who didn't want to go with the big group into the wild areas.

"You (didn't) call it ecotourism at that time, but those types of options existed even at that time.

"So I think similarly things do exist now, and we need to see how best we can develop those options and get the types of results we think we should have — energy efficiency, minimising emissions, increasing employment opportunities.

"We cannot go back (to) whatever paradise we think existed, I don't think it's possible."

More than 300 delegates from countries such as Estonia, Fiji, Japan, Sweden and Kenya are attending the five-day conference.

They will be discussing issues facing the industry such as juggling human activities with conservation and climate change adaptation.

Ecotourism Australia chairwoman Clare McFarlane said being enthusiastic about ecotourism was the first step to developing it.

"Second step is identifying exactly what those tourism opportunities are and of course providing support, infrastructure and information and putting together ecotourism experiences," Ms McFarlane said.

She said ecotourism had evolved to become more than 'just two people going birdwatching.'

"Now ecotourism is about fantastic delivery of information to as

many people as we can, but in a very managed and structured way," Ms McFarlane said.

Certification of tourist operations to divide irresponsible operators from real ecotourism businesses was another way, she said.

"What we're trying to do is work on the top end and take the good operators and get them certified.

"There are benefits in terms of branding. We're pushing the top end rather than canning the bottom end.

"Success breeds success, so an eco-certification is the indicator of the mechanism where we recognise this."