

## The view from above: canopy walks around the world

*L. Schweitzer Meins*

*A research tool becomes a popular form of ecotourism: suspended walkways in forests around the world bring people into the canopy for research and adventure.*

In 1917, United States naturalist William Beebe elegantly described the treetops as “another continent of life remain[ing] to be discovered”. Forest canopies are thought to contain as many as 40 percent of plant species, to intercept up to about 25 percent of precipitation and to provide pollination valued at around US\$12 billion per year (Global Canopy Programme, 2002). They have also become a new frontier for tourism. Forest walkways, originally constructed for research, are increasingly visited by people seeking a novel experience and a spectacular view.

While evidence of scientific interest in the forest canopy can be traced back hundreds of years, the first recorded expedition into the treetops was made in 1929, by an Oxford University expedition in Guyana (then British Guiana) (Mitchell, 2002). Early canopy researchers applied mountain-climbing techniques to scale large old-growth trees in temperate and tropical forests. In the ensuing 80 years, methods for conducting aerial forest research evolved to include pulley systems, hot-air balloons, airships, towers and large industrial cranes. Today, forest walkways provide a safe way for scientists to ascend to the crowns and set up long-term study sites, while also limiting damage to trees and the organisms that inhabit them. These walkways range in construction from rope and wood

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**The Capilano Bridge in North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, soars 70 m above the Capilano River and is one of several bridges connecting parts of the canopy walk**



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bridges to steel-trussed suspension walkways and platforms, and are generally reached by stairs or ladders. State-of-the-art construction uses adjustable cables and braces that allow trees to grow normally. The research sector has in some cases invested hefty sums into the building of these walkways in order to enable scientists to explore the still relatively unknown world of forest canopies.

Other investment has come from private entrepreneurs, governments and development institutions responding to a fast-growing ecotourism market. The Iwokrama Canopy Walkway in Guyana, for example, was funded by the Canadian International Development Agency and cost US\$180 000 (Iwokrama Canopy Walkway, 2010). Other projects have cost many millions of dollars.

Most commercial canopy walks are managed through cooperative partnerships between various combinations of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national and international development organizations, government (national and local) and private business. The cost of admission can range from as little as US\$3 to more than \$60, depending on the location, length of the walk and type of experience; in some developing country contexts, local people are charged less.

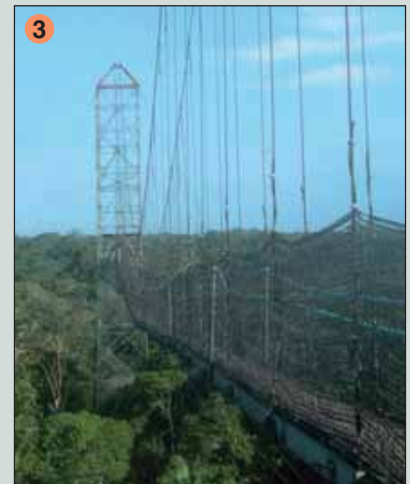
People travel from around the world to immerse themselves in the green world high above the ground. Canopy walks give people the opportunity to view trees and forests from a different perspective, helping them to connect with and learn about the role of forests in maintaining air quality, regulating precipitation and mitigating climate change. They have thus proved to be a useful tool in teaching the importance of environmental conservation.

**The Sky Walk in the Monteverde Cloud Forest in Costa Rica is constructed of six suspension bridges connected by trails**



D. VAN DER MADE

**One of three towers supporting the 275 m long Canopy Walk at the Sacha Lodge in the Ecuadorian Amazon, containing stairs that provide access to the walkway**



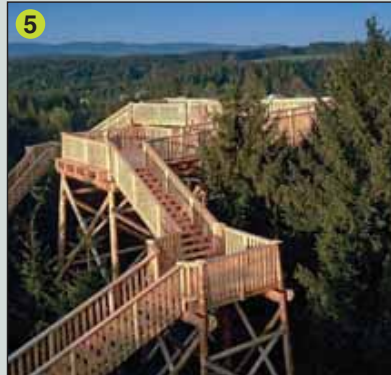
J. BAILE

While a canopy walk may not be for those who have vertigo, most operators stress that their walks are safe, though visitors are generally informed that they ascend at their own risk. Some countries where ecotourism has acquired major economic importance, such



S. CADMAN

**4** The Xstrata Treetop Walkway at Kew, United Kingdom, offers views of the London skyline – a fine example of a canopy walkway in an urban setting



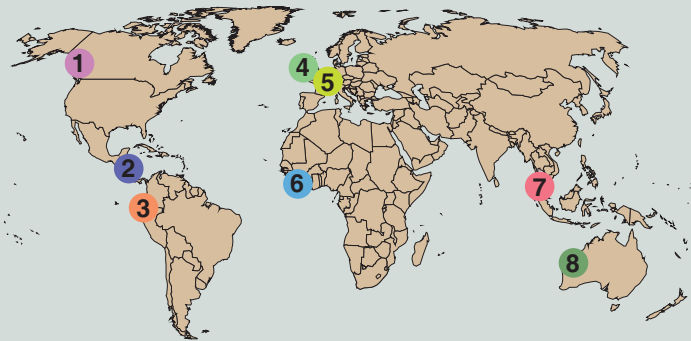
BAUMKRONENWEG

**5** Family-oriented events such as concerts and sport events are organized around the all-wood Baumkronenweg (treetop way) in Innviertel, Austria



R. WEBSDALE

**8** The Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk in Western Australia soars 40 m in the air, allowing visitors a great view of the endemic tingle trees (eucalypts)



Suspended between trees to allow visitors a spectacular view, this 40 m high rope walkway is found in the Kakum National Park near the Cape Coast in Ghana



FAO/FO-4792/11 LEHENE

This aluminium alloy canopy walkway in Pasog, Malaysia was constructed in 1992 as a collaborative project between the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia and Japan's National Institute of Environmental Sciences



FAO/FO-5894/K. SHONO

as Costa Rica, have passed laws requiring operators to institute safety measures such as nets beneath walkways or vigilance by rangers.

Canopy walks are found around the globe, in a variety of forest types and climatic zones and in both rural and urban settings. If all types are considered, they probably number

in the hundreds (see CCA, 2005). The Tree Top Walk in the Sedim River Recreation Park in Kulim, Kedah, Malaysia, stretching 950 m, is promoted as the world's longest. Yet each one offers a different perspective and different learning opportunities for scientists and tourists alike. Some examples are pictured here.



### Bibliography

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