

## Media and ecotourism : potential unfulfilled

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**Media And Ecotourism : Potential Unfulfilled**

**By**

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## MEDIA AND ECOTOURISM; POTENTIAL UNFULFILLED?

By Robert Nasiuk

## 1. WHO AM I TO BE ADDRESSING A CONGRESS ON COMMUNICATION

I am not a professional speaker, I am a practitioner of tourism (sustainable and responsible tourism); I am what they refer to as a ground operator. When I was first asked to present a paper on this topic I thought that this was just another "greening" of a congress byway including the topic of ecotourism. However, I have just returned from a travel fair in Switzerland where I was able to witness first hand the problems in trying to communicate the differences in tourism products from ground operator to retailer (and this is within the tour industry).

Borneo Adventure is an independent tour operation based in Kuching Sarawak operated by the people who own the company. (I am one of them). We are "hands-on" and we know our product very well. Before starting Borneo Adventure, neither my partner or I had any experience in the travel line; in fact, we did not even like to consider ourselves as tourists! (I was working as a biologist with the Sarawak state government and my partner who had finished a masters degree in Chinese literature was helping his family.) Whether this lack of industry knowledge was a liability or not remains to be seen, however, over the past 7 years we have established a reputation for innovative programmes and sound and sustainable practices.

Do not worry, in spite of the way this sounds it is not an advertisement of our services, it is actually an admission of our limitations. In order to survive in a very competitive business environment and to be able to offer the specialised products which make us different we have to be able to communicate. Communication is our lifeline for if we cannot communicate effectively we will not survive in an industry which requires the reply by yesterday for a FAX received tomorrow. Sound familiar? What I will discuss during this session are the various forms of media in current use in the travel industry (not just ecotourism) and the future trends as I see it from a small business perspective.

## 2. WHAT IS ECOTOURISM ANYWAY?

Ecotourism is a sub-set within what is known as the tourism industry and is that form of tourism which is culturally and environmentally sensitive. Ecotourism also involves local communities and provides direct economic benefit to the areas being visited. With the exception of infrastructure to protect the environment against degradation, nothing should be changed for the sake of the tourists.

The word ecotourism was first coined in 1983 by Hector Caballos-Lascurain who visualised the following:

*"...tourism that consists of travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas..."*

Current estimates by the World Tourist Organisation predict that by the end of this year the ecotourism industry will have experienced a 25 % growth from the beginning of the decade and will be generating in excess of two billion dollars revenue worldwide.

### 3. HOW DOES ECOTOURISM DIFFER FROM "REGULAR" TOURISM?

All tourism should be ecologically sound and this holds especially true of eco-tourism. Since 1983 ecotourism has become a recognised (although largely misunderstood) part of the tour industry and there has been much re-positioning of products. Some of this re-positioning has been justified and there are very good examples all over the world of products which fit the definition of ecotourism. Unfortunately there has also been much re-labelling of old products in an attempt to make them appear green to access this new market of "ecotourists". Whether ecotourism differs from regular tourism is very much dependent on the operator of the tours. How does one tell the difference or choose a good operator? Good question. This is where we, in tourism need you, in communication.

### 4. IS ECOTOURISM MORE DEPENDENT ON COMMUNICATION THAN OTHER "TYPES" OF TOURISM?

As you know or as we shall see, tourism is dependent on all types of media communication. Ecotourism, generally being a more specialised form of tourism requires an even higher level of information input from ground handler or operator through to the final end-user or client. The demands of the client tend to be greater and more specific and accordingly, the information they require is also greater and more detailed.

Successful ecotourism products tend to be operated by smaller "hands-on" operators who have a more intimate contact with their product (and their clients). Being smaller means they (the operator) are more in control of the product they are presenting and have greater control on the information they disseminate. The operator must know his product as well as his client. However, being small also limits the resources the operator has to invest in communicating their information to the market and this may limit the extent of the market they (the operator) can reach; or so it was

### 5. COMMUNICATION

Tourism is inspired by travellers' tales about the places they have visited, which when the experience is good, entices others to travel and visit these same areas. On the other hand, if the experience is bad, the message goes out to stay away from that particular destination. Thus, the success of a destination or a product within a destination is very much dependent what is communicated and by whom.

- a. The potential client needs to know about a particular destination in order to have a desire to travel there.
- b. The ground operator needs to be able to tell the wholesale



- buyer about his product and services.
- c. The whole-sale buyer needs to tell his retailer about his product line.
  - d. The retailer needs to tell the end-user about his range of products and hopefully entice him (the end-user) to buy.
  - e. The end-user has to know about the product and the geographical area being presented.

This circle represents a lot of communication: Potential unfulfilled... you bet!

## 6. CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

### 1. Print media;

#### A. Brochures

Long the standard in travel communication, enter any travel agency and you are immediately confronted by a wall of colourful printed choices. The brochure has long been the main source of information transfer within the industry (from the ground supplier through the wholesale buyer to the retail sales offices) and from the industry to the end user. In ecotourism, brochures are still the main form of information exchange, although as we shall see there are many potential interpretation problems if this information passes through too many hands

#### B. Journals

##### Trade

Within the travel industry there are a number of journals and trade gazettes or publications which keep the travel industry informed about developments within the industry. New products, new destinations and new staff are often introduced through these publications. The writers are generally well informed about the happenings in the industry and try to keep abreast of current issues. Editors of these publications tend to cover the topics which relate to the trade and will often avoid topics which may be too controversial.

##### Consumer

While many magazines and newspapers have a travel section or column, there are surprisingly few magazines dedicated to travel. This is probably due to the incredible variety within travel which results in it being very difficult for a magazine editor to define a readership which he/she wished to address. Hence, much of the travel information which reaches the consumer is through magazines which have a specific interest area. It stands to reason that the travel opportunities they cover mirror the magazines' main interest areas. While there is nothing wrong with this method of defining and dividing readership, it is also the source of one of the communication problems within the industry. The messages

that are going out are going out to the people with the interest; "We are preaching to the converted". The publications espousing the strongest messages about ecotourism and its potential are the ones which people with those interests read. In order to make the movement (if we can call it that) significant, we have to reach the rest of the population.

One magazine that has challenged this credo and is dedicated to travel alone is the Conde Nast Traveller.

Further, there is a need to link what the trade reads to what the consumer reads. A better informed consumer will be able to make wiser choices and thus be able to directly influence the course of ecotourism.

### C. Journalists

While there are lines of communication between the various components of the tour industry, it is often the journalists who have the greatest influence on the end user. As much as we like to think the client relies on our information and trusts what we tell them, everyone is entitled to (and should seek) a second opinion. Journalists play a pivotal and key role with regards to the success of a destination as they are at the centre of most tour industry communication. Thus their ability to adequately cover the issues involved in ecotourism will have a direct effect on how well equipped the client is to make his or her choices.

## 3. Electronic Media;

### A. Video

With video players and recorders being so affordable, there are few houses which do not have a VCR (a point well noted by the people marketing tours). Videos have provided an additional media to pass on not only the visual information you would have received in a brochure but with audio and in a form which captivates. Any of you who have children will testify to the hypnotic power of a video.

In the travel industry, video has been used widely for both advertisements and documentaries and today it is often from one of these two forms that the potential client will receive the first information about a new destination. We have all seen video ads on the television and for the most part these are very good and provide effective methods of marketing a destination or product. They are also very expensive, thus limiting their use to National Tourist organisations, Airlines, or big chains which have the marketing budgets to pay for a production team. Documentaries require similar budgets and focus on a particular subject matter for their presentation. Documentaries have a longer life span and many consumers will buy or borrow video documentaries to learn more about a destination. As a means of promoting a destination videos are very good, limited only by the cost of keeping them up-to-date.



## B. Multi-media

With the advent of CD-ROM and the prodigious amount of information that can be stored on one disk, we have entered another phase in information exchange. Multi-media allows us the chance to be interactive with our topic and ask questions or direct the presentation as we go along. A few companies have started distributing CD's as part of their promotional packages (Mountain Travel\*Sobek was the first) and many companies now use multi-media in their presentations. This type of information exchange is still in its infancy and it remains to be seen how popular it will become. As with videos, the costs of producing and distributing large numbers of CD's limit their use to companies with large marketing and advertising budgets. In the ecotourism field many of the operators with the most to say just cannot afford this means of information exchange. However, the information format of the CD may find its outlet via the World Wide Web. In this form, the production of the information is much less and the distribution of the information is greater and much much cheaper. More on this later.

## 4. Trade Fairs

Each year world-wide, there are over 50 international trade fairs and exhibitions for the travel industry. In addition there are numerous trade related congresses, conferences and symposia which cover all aspects of the industry. I looked at the calender and the only month without a trade fair is August (I suppose the travel industry also has to have a holiday!)

The trade fairs provide a forum for the ground suppliers to meet with the wholesale tour buyers either to present their products or to give up-dates on any new developments. The pace at these fairs is generally fast and the buyers are much sought after by the sellers. True to its un-regulated self, the travel trade fair is generally without much structure and often resembles an early morning fish market.

## 7. COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS WITHIN THE INDUSTRY

In view of the number of communication channels and the amount of information being exchanged, is it possible that there could be a problem? Yes. Throughout the communication from supplier to end user there are often "interpretation" problems along the way. The more specialised the product becomes the greater the chances for differences to occur in what is sold to the client and what the supplier actually delivers. The supplier may be delivering what he sold, but the buyer may be expecting something entirely different. This break-down in communication is not necessarily due to bad information but more to how the information is distilled and then re-used.

Much of this stems from the fact that the ecotourism field (if it can be called that) is a new field for which there are few examples and the guidelines are only being made up as we go along. When the industry is concentrating on the latest new hotel or the movement of certain staff, the

developments of ecologically sound tourism often get shunted to the back page or edited out completely. This then is the problem. In spite of the huge amounts of communication, there is a lack of communication on issues such as the environment. It is seen as good to be concerned about the environment and even better to be seen to be doing something about it (great PR), however, as soon as it starts to cost more money conventional wisdom takes over. It is this blind spot in the industry that prevents everyone from asking the questions, "Is my presence having an impact on the environment? & Am I willing to pay a bit extra to ensure that my presence does not have an impact?"

## 8. THE ROLE OF JOURNALISTS IN PROMOTING AWARENESS OF ECO-TOURISM

The role of journalists in what is still a very new segment of the industry should be to educate all sides. The end users or clients need to know what to expect on an ecotour and how to choose. The suppliers need to know what the clients expect and how far you should go to cater for their needs. The policy makers need to know what is sustainable and what is appropriate development.

Journalists play a key role in promoting awareness about ecotourism. They have the power to make caring for the environment sexy and chic, where people are willing to pay extra to ensure they are not the first, and the last. Journalists have the power to bridge the gaps within the industry as well as outside the industry. Only by enlightening all levels will people have the ability to ask the questions which will qualify an operator or project as being responsible and sustainable.

Everyone needs to hear about responsible and sustainable tourism to ensure that the message is consistent from the client to the ground operation.

## 9. THE FUTURE

Today, information is only a key stroke and a telephone call away. The significance of the internet to man has been compared in importance to the invention of the printing press. As the printing press allowed for the production of books and the distribution of knowledge, so the internet unlocks information banks the world over.

The travel industry is just starting to use the internet and the technology of obtaining information from and interacting with your destination of choice is close at hand. With the increasing use of the Internet and the World Wide Web, people from all over the world can request and receive information in video, audio or print form from any other part of the world with internet service. This information service also puts the potential client in touch with other people who have experienced the same or similar tours. This access to an international referral system could potentially be one of the most important forms of advertising to occur. The network becomes a method of qualifying the product or service for the potential client.

The Web could prove to be a boon to the smaller operators who lack the



resources to establish a global distribution system. On the Web they will have access to the information servers which enable them to put their information into "electronic malls" reaching thousands of potential users. Through the Web they will be able to establish links to other information sites and reach even more clients than would be possible using traditional means.

The benefit to the end user (and the tour wholesalers are not going to like this) is that in addition to being able to find out information direct from the source the client will also be able to transact business directly with the end supplier rather than having to pay for the several layers which today separate supplier from end user.

While there is a general disdain for any form of business conducted on the internet, there is nothing wrong with providing an information service about your products. If someone then wishes to contact you directly, they are free to do so and can conduct business accordingly.

## 10. SUMMARY

Ecotourism is an operating principle or philosophy which has arisen from the environmental consciousness of the 1970's and 80's. As the environmental consciousness was developed over time, so must the ecotourism philosophy be developed using the various channels of communication at our disposal. Development of this consciousness will take time and much communication so the people of the communications industry do not have to worry about lack of work as there is much potential to be fulfilled. Much of this work will be research as to what underlies the philosophy of ecotourism so they can inform their readers.

Developing this philosophy will not be without problems and until more people are aware of the underlying ecotourism principles there will continue to be communication problems.

We are in an age where we are overwhelmed by communication from all directions. We have access to so much information that we often go for what is the most sensational and attention grabbing. Our challenge in the tour industry with the help of the communications industry is to make ecotourism a sensational and attention grabbing philosophy to which everyone subscribes as not only an operating principle but a way of life. Potential to be fulfilled, you bet!