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Media And Ecotourism: Potential Unfulfilled?

By

Renton de Alwis
MEDIA AND ECOTOURISM: POTENTIAL UNFULFILLED?

By: Renton de Alwis, Vice President - Asia, Pacific Asia Travel Association

Members of the media, students of media, travellers, and friends

I guess I have covered all of us here... Salamat Sian... A very good afternoon to you.

Before I get into my topic, let me tell you a story. This is a story my mother told me when I was small and it is a story from my motherland Sri Lanka and its rich tradition of telling stories to stamp everlasting messages in the minds of the young. A technique, I guess, similar to modern day advertising.

Anyway, the story is about four friends who went on a long journey. Since these were the old days, they of course had to do it on foot. Each had in their sacks a quantity of rice grains for making their meals. In the evening of the first day, after a very tiring day, they lit a camp fire and got ready to make a rice meal for dinner. They kept a pot of water to boil and each of the friends was requested to put a handful of rice in the pot. Each of them went to their sack, put their hands in and thought "I don't need to put in any, as the others would and I will keep mine for the rest of the journey". So each pretended to put rice into the pot, but no one did. Well, you can imagine what happened, when they wanted to eat the cooked rice.

To me, this story demonstrates what happens in the area of ecotourism and in general in efforts at conserving the environment. It is everybody's business... yet only a few want to put their handful of rice in the pot.

AMIC asked me to speak on "Media and Ecotourism: The Promise Unfulfilled". That I guess gives me the licence to point a finger at most of you here. But my mother's story taught me that, that is wrong to do. It also taught me, of the power of information and that everybody is poorer, if we were ignorant of the others' action and intentions.

What I plan to do today is therefore, to share information on what we, in the travel industry do in the area of developing an environmentally sustainable tourism, of which an integral part is,
that which is called ecotourism. Then I will point some fingers to areas where all of us as travel
industry practitioners, media, governments and as travellers can do together to optimise fulfilling
the potential of making tourism a sustainable human activity.

Since my friend Robert Basuik from Sarawak's Borneo Adventures will speak later, of the hands
on experience of a tour operator involved in ecotourism operations, I will try and keep my
remarks as broad and as general as possible, so as to avoid any duplication of effort.

"Ecotourism" is almost a buzz term today. As against tourism or adventure tourism which we
knew in the past, ecotourism has emerged as a branded product segment. "Ecotourism", is today
equated with what is good about tourism, it is used to represent purity and responsibility. It has
emerged as a term that helped the travel industry ride the waves of the environment industry.
Pardon me for calling it an industry. Well there is a lot of money in it as well.

Recently, at the PATA Annual Conference in Auckland our closing speaker Jean Michael
Costeau, the renowned marine scientist, diver and travel industry personality questioned if
"ecotourism" was a fad and a label used by many, as a marketing gimmick to attract custom. He
was referring to those in the travel industry who called any tour, that involved visiting a natural
habitat an "eco tour", regardless of who participated, what the objectives were and how the tour
was operated. In essence, he said that every tour that involved a forest to trek through or a marsh
to watch birds or a coral reef to dive in, will not be an ecotour. An "ecotour" in his definition,
is a tour that has a definite objective of involving the study of nature, with built in conservation
practices.

When, as the leadership organization in the travel industry in the Asia Pacific region, the Pacific
Asia Travel Association (PATA) was developing concepts to address the issue of sustainability
of the travel industry in the future, we at various stages, went through the process of developing
brandable labels. They were "sustainable Tourism", "environmentally responsible tourism",
"endemic tourism" and most recently, "values based tourism". I remember at one of the fora,
when we discussed what term could best describe the objectives we had in mind, a seasoned and well known heritage conservationist Robbie Collins of PATA, asked "why do we need to call tourism different names, should it not be all plain "good" tourism". He was right, it is all plain "good" tourism that we are talking about. Tourism that is sustainable, takes in environmental values both natural and socio-cultural and enhances the quality of life of the people it touches, whether it is a community that receives visitors, the visitors themselves or those who facilitate the process ie. the travel industry.

But now, we get on to the communication business. No matter how good the concept we develop is, if it is to be practised, we then need, to market it. What matters is not, how good our intentions are... but if most others in the travel industry, and the travelling public or the visitors, understand what needs to be done, to keep tourism good. Here is where, we face, the communications challenge. Here is where, we have to brand, label and advertise. You are the communications experts and I should not be teaching my grandmother to suck eggs. So I stop here with those ideas, but leave the thought behind that there is indeed a need for branding of concepts, and that is no exception in the travel industry.

The problem with branding of "ecotourism", has been that it is used, too generically. It is used to describe activities that are not necessarily "eco", but are to do with "being good". But there is a great big need to practise what is "good" tourism in the travel industry today. Therefore I do not mind believing that the use of the term in any which way is ok, as long as what is practised under the label leads to the objectives of environmental sustainability (both natural and socio-cultural) and to enhance the quality of life of the people it touches.

This indeed is a challenge. It is a challenge because we are here dealing with the world's largest industry. An industry that depends entirely on the quality of the environment to support its product and an industry that involves intense interaction with the environment both natural and human generated.
Travel and tourism today generates an economic value of three trillion US dollars. That's a three with 18 zeros. It is today bigger than the oil industry and the automobile industry. It is also the largest in terms of employment. The travel industry employs over 130 million people and has grown globally at an average growth rate of 3-4 percent per year for the past ten years. Last year alone there were over 500 million international visitors travelling all around the world.

Here in Asia growth has been even more staggering. While in the past, Asia was a only a destination area for the more affluent visitors from the West and North America, today Asians themselves are travelling both within Asia and to the West and North America. Asia where, more than two thirds of the world's population live is expected to have an affluent middle class of over 500 million by year 2005. This is twice the current population of the USA. Today, there are nearly 60 million visits generated from within Asia. By the turn of the century, this is forecasted to exceed 100 million. Over 70 percent of these visits are also expected to be visits undertaken to destinations within Asia.

Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand are catching up with the NIE tiger economies and are developing very fast as destinations, while giants such as China and India are waking up to generating more and more outbound visits with rapid economic and social development. New destinations are emerging in the Mekong sub-region of Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam.

Like I said earlier there are over 70 million already travelling in the region and there will be many millions joining the already travelling millions. All this mean good business and much pressure. Pressure on the natural habitats as they are what visitors want to escape to. Pressure on heritage sites as these are what visitors enjoy seeing. Pressure on human communities as they interact with visitors who come from varied cultures and hold different core values and pressure on recreation facilities and a need to develop more and more of them such as theme parks, golf courses, etc.
Is there any way of eliminating this pressure or is there a way of easing it? I am sure no one here will disagree with me when I say that there is no way of eliminating it. Of course if everybody stayed at home and watched TV, there will be very little damage to the environment. Some may even think that virtual reality travel, where I can wear a VR mask and experience the sites and sounds and even tastes of Bali or of Hawaii, as the answer. Recently Arthur C. Clarke, the futurist/writer of 2001 Space Odyssey fame was asked the question if virtual reality travel will affect the real thing, he said that it will encourage more people to go places and will only act as a better sales tool. In another instance, he said that virtual reality will eat television alive. Travel is not an activity that the homo sapiens can do without. It is today not a luxury, but a basic human right. The only factor that prevented many millions of human beings from travelling long distances exploring new frontiers was purchasing power. Today, this barrier is fast disappearing in Asia. What is left for us therefore is to do what ever is possible to ease the pressures. In my opinion, here is where, the message and the messenger must meet with a common goal and a common objective.

I have heard every too often of the media pinning blame on governments, communities, developers, investors and tour operators on the damage they do to the environment. On how eco unfriendly they are. On how they should be thinking of the good of the many and not of their own.

I would at this point, once again like to take your minds back to my story of the four friends. Well, each of them thought it was the others' business to put the rice in, and no one did.

Let me for a moment request you to re-think things a little. Let me suggest, that we change the tone and form of the message.

I said earlier that the vast and fast growth of tourism in Asia is good for business and that it also brings enormous pressure on the natural and socio economic environment. Does it then, not make good business sense, to sustain this growth and ensure that it continues into the future?
When we know that some thing is good business, don’t our eyes and ears open wide? Does it not meet the conditions of a basic premise we have in communications, of addressing the question, "What’s in it for me?"

The Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) has taken this message to the travel industry with strong conviction. Through the "PATA Promise" our members made in Bali in 1991 and the subsequent adoption of the "Code for Environmentally Responsible Tourism", the implementation of the "Green Leaf Programme" and the most recent development of the "Values Based Tourism" concept, PATA has taken the message to the Travel Industry that "Being eco friendly makes good business sense".

At this point, without much more of the spoken word let me take you to a video presentation to illustrate what I just said. This video is of 11.45 minutes duration and was made two years ago. It is titled "PATA and the environment: Delivering on the Promise". Since a picture speaks a thousand words and I am in the midst of those who appreciate that truism most, let us now have the video...

But, I will be back. It is not easy to be rid of me.

(ROLL VIDEO)

Well, thank you for your attention. The video illustrated the efforts of the travel industry in being eco friendly, not merely because when done, it helps the environment. It was done also because it was good for business. It enabled cost savings, it resulted in increased efficiency and it helped make more profit.

There are many other unsung "good" tourism and ecotourism projects that are operated by members of the travel industry. Mr Costeau’s Eco Resort in Fiji and the UNDP supported "Quality Tourism Project" in Nepal are two other examples. While there are best practise case
studies to draw on, it is a pity that what we see and hear in the media are mostly the of the bad practises. They say that bad news always makes good news. But if we are to throw that handful of rice in the pot, then there is a need to seek out the best of the best practises and show how those who operate them benefit financially and profit entire communities by these efforts.

The fact is that, the rapid growth of travel will not go away. If not handled right, this growth can mean destruction of the very resources that have made possible this growth. The goose that laid the golden egg will be killed prematuraly. The message is very clear... and it is that the practice of sustainable tourism and ecotourism make good business sense and it brings profit to both the travel industry and to human kind.

To fulfill the potential of this message, we will need governments, travel industry, media and visitors alike to drop those handfuls of rice in the pot.

It can be a win - win situation for all.

Thank you!