

DELIVERING QUALITY ECO-EXPERIENCES

by Ian Menzies

Ecotourism is recognised as being one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry. There are many places throughout the world where the natural environment and the ecosystems that exist within that environment are ideal for the delivery of a range of quality eco-experiences.

There is a need however, to clearly establish basic guidelines so that local operators who choose to venture into this specialist area are fully aware of the demands it will place on them in their desire to design and deliver these experiences. Operators must ensure that they not only maintain the quality of the eco-experience, but also the sustainability of the environment through which they pass.

There are various definitions of ecotourism, most of them created and quoted by academics that have never owned, operated or even delivered a true tourism eco-experience. Their viewpoint rarely reflects the reality of operating a tourism venture within the constraints of a commercial environment that is both ecologically and economically sustainable.

Some basic guidelines for delivering quality eco-experiences are:

- each eco-experience needs to be thoroughly planned through intensive field and desk research;
- the experience must be informative, educational and accurate
- know your subject matter. If you can't answer a question, find out and get back with the correct answer. Don't bluff your way through as there may be someone in the group who has skills better than yours;
- showing and telling is much better than just telling. Know when not to talk and allow the group to listen to nature;
- the delivery should be innovative and designed to excite and maintain the interest of the participants;
- guides must understand and know how to interpret the environment using communication techniques and group dynamics that draw all participants into the experience;
- participants should be encouraged to interact and connect with the environment;
- observations should be recorded and updated so that impacts on, or changes to the environment do not go unnoticed;
- objectives and outcomes for each eco-experience should be discussed, defined and documented with participants so that they become part of the process of sustaining the environment;
- detailed itineraries, briefing notes and any relevant booklets should be provided to the participants before they depart;
- if vehicles or boats are used, they should carry an on-board reference library on such subjects as flora, fauna, bird watching, landforms, geology, fossils, gemstones, minerals, the aquatic environment, etc., and any literature on the local heritage and culture;
- binoculars, magnifying glasses, compass, GPS, local cartographic maps, cameras, specimen bags and boxes are all part of the on-board kit;

- if possible, compile a photographic record of each eco-experience (the photographs can be forwarded to clients after the event or used to promote the product);
- as many ecotours venture into wilderness areas, a comprehensive first aid kit should be carried in the vehicle with a portable kit in the guide's backpack;
- participants should have their own or be loaned backpacks to carry the gear they require in the field;
- check that participants have comfortable walking boots suitable for the terrain through which you will be travelling;
- in the tropics each participant should carry full water bottles (it is recommended that they drink at least 2 litres each half day), wear a sun hat and apply sunscreen, wear cool light-coloured cotton clothing;
- in colder climates ensure that participants wear cold weather gear and windproof jackets and pants (breathable preferred) and
- above all, plan for any contingency and ensure that in the event of an emergency there is effective communication back to base and that an evacuation plan is in place. The safety and security of your clients is paramount.

The above guidelines are by no means exhaustive, but are indicative that ecotours are no ordinary tourism experiences. Every client must be made to feel that they are participating in a very special experience with a guide/interpreter who understands and loves the environment through which they travel.

Eco-experiences must be designed and delivered to ensure that the biodiversity of the environment is both sustained and enjoyed, for quality experiences that allow the client to interact and connect with that environment are remembered long after the event.

Those memories can become our best marketing tool and will be discussed in later e-papers.

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About the Author

Mr. Ian Menzies, an Expert Member of ECOCLUB.com, is the Managing Director of Menzies & Associates Pty Ltd (<http://www.tourcom.info>) and has over forty years practical, hands-on experience in tourism development, marketing and training in senior management or as an owner/operator and an accomplished academic teacher and author in tourism.

Contact Mr. Menzies at:

Primary: trees@westnet.com.au (Monday to Friday)

Fax +61 8 9861 2242

Secondary: trees@starday.com.au (Friday to Sunday)

Fax: +61 8 9734 7824