

*By Megan Epler Wood
April 2010*

Business Pioneers Forge Green Tourism Models

Ecotourism 20 Years Ago

Before ecotourism emerged, adventure travel was already 10 years old and counting. After rafting, mountain trekking and climbing in Africa and Latin America took off in the 70s, ecotourism businesses began to test out trips with more "nerdy" international ecology themes popularized in the 80s. Most early ecotourism pioneers carried binoculars, watched birds as second nature, and could be found crawling on the ground to observe insects and mushrooms more often than scaling dramatic peaks.

Ecotourism entrepreneurs grafted their own interest in wildlife and ecology to the growing market for specialty travel, and tapped a client base that was ready to see the world's last undisturbed ecosystems. From the early ships of the Sven and Lars Lindblad, who pioneered Antarctica travel, to the first tours to view wildlife from boats in the Galapagos, ecotourism was a phenomenon from day one that drove many to claim it was the fastest growing market for niche travel in the world by the mid-1990s.

According to Richard Ryel, co-founder of [International Expeditions](#) (IE) and former Chairman of the Board of [TIES](#), early adventure and nature travel pioneers shared business information to help build more symbiosis and greater market share. Surprisingly, they found only a "5% overlap" in target clientele, even though their demographics were very similar, with the Antarctic being one place where adventure and ecotourism markets merged.

Ecotourism has always attracted a loyal clientele of nature enthusiasts, who were more than willing to pay to see wildlife. Pioneers like Ryel and IE co-founder Steve Cox, created a sturdy enterprise model that opened new destinations, such as Belize, where travelers could quickly see toucans, Mayan tombs, morpho butterflies and parrot fish all in a 10 day expedition. Kurt Kutay, an environmental science major who launched [Wildland Adventures](#), was soon finding that trips to animal-rich parks like Manuel Antonio in Costa Rica, were gold. His business became a mecca for travelers interested in birds, wildlife and culture - particularly the warm Costa Rican "Ticos", who had a knack for making visitors feel like part of the family.

Meanwhile, Stanley Selengut of [Maho Bay Camps](#) in the US Virgin Islands was already proselytizing around the world about his low-tech, low-impact green model for hotels. Stanley was never shy about discussing the "amazing profits" his firm was earning from simple tents on platforms by a sugary sand beach on St. John. And, he was the first to point out that travelers frequently care more about simplicity than they do about luxury, which as far as he was concerned, only improved the profit margins.



These pioneers and their many partners around the world helped to create what Arthur Frommer described as the "New Age of Travel," a book first published in 1989. Frommer, the dean of American travel writers, described mass tourism as "dead." His book described hundreds of unique experiences, which each traveler could tap, even before the Internet, and experience "authenticity." This je ne sais quoi of the new age of travel, was about helping travelers to emerge from bus tours and introducing them directly to cultures, society, landscape and wild lands.

The ecotourism business pioneers knew instinctively that their focus should be on wildlife. But it had to be charismatic wildlife, like mountain gorillas, which were becoming available to view for the first time in history thanks to intensive research by wildlife biologists. As the field of wildlife science advanced, it became feasible to see ecosystems with increasing insights into animal behavior and the most intimate secrets of wildlife survival. Darwin's laboratory on the Galapagos was attracting 40,000 tourists by 1991 with rapid increases in demand already raising concerns in the conservation community. Here, visitors could learn why birds became flightless and land-based iguanas became sea creatures. The African plains were converted into a huge observatory for tourists to view the annual drama of millions of wildebeest migrating across the Serengeti. In Asia, India was showing off the exclusive wildlife preserves where the maharajahs had once hunted, and the endangered Bengal tiger could be photographed hunting chital deer at dusk.



The early ecotourism pioneers sought to bring these dramatic experiences to average, middle class travelers and remove barriers between people and places. They quickly formed partnerships with local business people in countries around the world, bringing first hand information to their clients on wildlife and culture. A network of inbound operators, who provided the large majority of the know-how and services at the local level, became the foundation of the ecotourism business model.

In Costa Rica, local businesses, [Horizontes](#) and [Costa Rica Expeditions](#), were the founders of an ever growing number of enterprises, which provided sensitive, in-depth experiences with Tico culture and excellent wildlife viewing. In Ecuador, long-time operators such as [Metropolitan](#) and [Canodros](#), who made their fortunes running ships in the Galapagos, began to expand to the "Oriente", or the Amazonian region of Ecuador, where new jungle lodges quickly emerged. Local businesses, like [Nuevo Mundo](#) and [Tropic](#), launched tours based solely on Ecuador's native culture and biodiversity. In Peru, Machu Picchu



became the launch point for more in-depth explorations of native cultures and the far reaches of the country's extraordinary Manu and Tambopata reserves with companies like [Rainforest Expeditions](#), launched by a team of young Peruvians in 1989.

All of these businesses were among the first to support the founding of The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). These entrepreneurs had no doubt that tourism was not only a business, but also a mechanism to create a greener earth. While ecotourism grew quickly, questions were immediately raised about the appropriate management of this burgeoning market and TIES was seen as the mechanism to get management protocols in place. They supported the creation of one of TIES's earliest documents, *Ecotourism Guidelines for Nature Tour Operators*, first published in 1993. These seminal industry guidelines were formulated in three interdisciplinary meetings held in San Francisco, San Jose, Costa Rica, and Washington D.C., with participation from NGOs, tour operators, and academics. The guidelines emphasized visitor information and education and staff training to ensure visitors are fully informed of how to prevent their own impacts.



A cottage industry of guidelines and standards for tourism began to blossom based on these early efforts, with nearly one hundred certification programs launched by the end of the 1990s. But with all this, the business pioneers remained focused on creating educational tour programs, keeping their numbers manageable, providing the best guides, and working towards a low impact style which also allowed travelers to understand the places they were visiting. Their tours began in the early morning with wake up calls before dawn to see birds, and ended with fireside chats with local guides explaining culture at night.

The number one hallmark of early ecotourism was its focus on quality local guides. Guiding in countries like Ecuador and Costa Rica became a science and an art form. Local guides had to speak good English, recognize birds in Spanish, English and Latin, and feel comfortable explaining local cultures. As tours delved into the rain forest and spread out on the savannah, the opportunity to appropriately meet and understand indigenous groups became a highly important focus, from the Maasai of Kenya to the Cofan of Ecuador. Increasingly, members of these indigenous groups were trained and became local guides, and locally owned cooperative enterprises, like [RICANCIE](#) in Ecuador, took off. (*More will be covered on community enterprise in the next column*) In all cases, the interpretation of wildlife and culture was the means to creating an experience for visitors that would leave them moved by what they had learned, and changed by what they had experienced.



Ecotourism Now

The business of ecotourism has not changed dramatically in 20 years, though it has expanded globally. Businesses around the world have increasingly adopted ecotourism principles in an effort to create more low-impact and greener tourism opportunities. This social and environmental business model has continued to prove viable for companies around the world.

In 1994, South Africa emerged from apartheid and became one of the most dynamic and innovative countries in the world for ecotourism, bringing a wide array of new tourism companies to the fore. Firms like [Wilderness Safaris](#) began to spread their wings, developing massive regions for wildlife viewing, with goals to conserve wild lands and benefit local people. Wilderness Safaris presently operates privately on 6.5 million acres of land in southern Africa with 60 lodges and camps. They are partnering with wilderness conservancies and concessioning properties while maintaining strong partnerships with local communal organizations. They manage hundreds of staff in Botswana, Namibia, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and the Seychelles. In Namibia alone they have provided entry-level guide training to over 1,000 local people in the last six years. Wildlife conservation is being supported via a portion of guest revenues that are allocated to benefit such efforts as Namibia's Save the Rhino Trust.

International Expeditions (IE) one of TIES's earliest supporting companies, was sold to a larger firm in 2000 and then sold again. Steve Cox, the company co-founder, relates that after the first sale the company was not immediately able to continue its investments in environmental conservation and social well-being; but when the TUI group of companies took over, the commitment to sustainable development was greater than ever before.

IE continues forward with a corporate social responsibility program of some magnitude in the Iquitos, Peru region with the local NGO [CONAPAC](#). In the 1990s, IE launched a variety of headline grabbing rainforest learning and exploration programs near Iquitos, including one of the first canopy walkways in the New World and seminars on the rain forest which were covered by science magazines worldwide. The commitment to Iquitos' regional population grew out of the company's investment in conserving the rainforest. They are presently reaching 200 villages with school supplies, water treatment kits to purify the untreated downstream effluent from the city of Iquitos, and on-going environmental education programs for children - a program they created and have been building upon for nearly 20 years. They now also assist local enterprises, leveraging microloans to create small-scale bakeries and other nutritional food products for sale to local residents. An entire regional trading system has emerged built upon the greater good, according to Cox. He explains, "an economy has emerged that benefits from tourism but is not dependent on it. The villages are now creating an ever growing set of products that can also be sold in the burgeoning city of Iquitos." Cox calls this a "micro-economic civilization."

In the Caribbean, Stanley Selengut's Maho Bay Camps became a network of lodges, which grew to include a state of the art group of apartment-style rooms on Maho's grounds, called Harmony, which were solar powered and built from recycled materials. Estate Concordia's Eco-tents and new Ecostudios followed soon after. The Selengut model has always been to create simple and affordable accommodations with new technologies, such as the Eco-panels that he has incorporated into the new Eco-studios.



As part of their commitment to TIES, Richard Ryel served as Chairman of the Board from 1997-2002; Kurt Kutay and Stanley Selengut were both board members for significant periods of time.

These ecotourism pioneers and others shaped a model that has now incorporated a much larger industry, driving innovation and bringing to light the importance of incorporating sustainability principles in all of tourism. As Stanley, Kurt, Richard and others worked closely with TIES, they demanded that the industry take note of principles that would not only help it be green, but also to grow and attract markets that were seeking experiences that brought them into better harmony with the environment, greater support of wildlife and wild lands, more commitment to local well-being, and a greater understanding of the world they lived in. This legacy remains today.