

Bad Nature Tours

Ecotourism is supposed to help nature, but does it always? Also, billboard blight, Italy's "clean town" flag, and geotourism for Appalachia.

By Jonathan Tourtellot

SEX, FOOD, AND FEAR: profitable material for TV, yes, but also for nature-tour guides. Just whistle a mating song, set out food, or play a recorded alarm call, and out pops the pheasant, reef fish, lemur, whatever, for your viewing pleasure.

Problem is, the guide isn't showing you nature, he's altering it. It's the dark side of ecotourism, whose premise is pro-conservation. Ecotourist dollars are intended to provide a local incentive to protect what tourists are coming for.

But when tourism alters animal behavior, the animals are at risk. In the fall, when the polar bears of Churchill, Manitoba, should be resting up for winter hunting, the bears instead rouse themselves seven times more often than usual when tourist vehicles are around, say researchers. Tourist traffic elsewhere has caused dolphins and nesting birds stress, putting both health and reproduction at risk.

Does that mean you should avoid ecotours? No! Political support for protecting habitats relies on

ecotourism's economic benefits, as in the Galapagos, whose iguanas, incidentally, display no stress hormones from frequent human visits. As for whales, responsible whale-watching rather clearly causes less harm than hunting, and it supports whalers-turned-tour-guides.

* Geo-savvy Tip Avoid over-toured, poorly managed situations that put animals at risk. Choose tour companies that emphasize conservation. (Tell those that do not to please start.) To find responsible operators, go to www.ecotourism.org; click on "Travel Choice."

* Signs of Sense in the South Pacific

Fiji's tourism minister, Pita Nacuva, has noticed something: Billboards are ugly. To make his paradise more paradisaical, Nacuva has urged Fijians to ban what he calls a form of littering.

Good for Nacuva, who sees clearly what many tourism authorities elsewhere in the world do not. Billboardfriendly politicians in the U.S., for instance, might note that the highest rated American destination on last year's Stewardship Index (see below, left) was Vermont, billboard-free for a generation. By contrast, I recently saw on one North Carolina highway the ultimate in cluelessness: an unsightly billboard advertising, yes, an ecotour.

* Italy's Orange Flag

Inspired by Europe's Blue Flag certification for beaches, the Touring Club Italiano now has an Orange Flag program to certify inland areas for environment, aesthetics, and touring quality. A town with the Bandiera Arancione is a place that has cleaned up its act.

* Geotouristn Comes to Appalachia

In this issue you'll find the world's first Geotourism MapGuide, for Appalachia. What's geotourism? Whereas "ecotourism," from "ecology," refers to beneficial nature travel, geotourism extends the idea to all elements of geographical character-heritage, culture, aesthetics, and people, as well as nature. In Appalachia, that means mountain music, great scenery, Civil War sites, storytellers, hardwood forests-all in distinctive flavors found nowhere else, submitted here by the people of Appalachia themselves.