

A Report on the
2010 International Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Conference

Held September 8 – 11 in Portland, OR
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Summary

This was my first Ecotourism Conference, so I wasn't sure what to expect. The other attendees came from a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives, from economic development to wildlife conservation to more traditional tourism professionals and college students. The current focus of the organizations supporting this conference appeared to be developing a uniform sustainable tourism certification process. While excellent reasons were given for certification, I know from research that other ecotourism groups don't agree that it would be a benefit to the destinations or the traveler; therefore this conference didn't draw representation from all corners of this movement. It did offer excellent speakers on a great many subjects and lots of good networking time. For those who wish to learn more about sustainable tourism in a conference setting, I would recommend attending the next ESTC which will be hosted by Hilton Head Island, SC in 2011.

Lessons Learned

Our Drive the Top 10 website homepage currently has a small tab at the top of the page labeled "Green Tourism". While this page does provide good links to sustainable tourism resources and to our Sustainable Supplier Agreement forms, overall our site doesn't show a strong commitment to these practices. Ideally we would incorporate the concepts into the main website pages; perhaps highlighting some of the efforts of partner organizations and businesses in a location easier to find and encouraging those suppliers to emphasize their sustainable practices.

There are a number of resources available for helping to develop the training program proposed in the Top 10 project. (<http://www.sustainabletourism.travel/traveleducation.html>) Incorporating the ideas mentioned in the Brainstorming Session paragraph on Page 5 will help make the training more realistic and acceptable to those who haven't had a chance to learn about the benefits of sustainable tourism. On that note, there are many statistics and studies published which can be to use to explain and validate those benefits. (<http://www.ecotourism.org>)

In Detail

According to my roommate, a volunteer who assisted with registration, there were approximately 340 attendees representing over 20 countries at the conference, which started with a BANG! I highly recommend seeing the Portland Taiko drum ensemble if you ever get a chance – just be warned that it is a loud performance – but a high energy way to start a very interesting three days. The conference was based on a theme of practical ways to implement the idea of Triple Bottom Line – people, planet, profit. (Term first coined by [John Elkington](#) in his 1998 book *Cannibals with Forks: the Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business*.) Sessions were grouped into four Tracks, including Creative Approaches, Practical Ideas, Strengthening (the Triple Bottom Line), and Beyond the Triple Bottom Line. With a great variety

of speakers and panels it was difficult to choose which breakout sessions to attend; I picked those topics that seemed most appropriate for our Top 10 partnership program.

The opening Plenary focused on Oregon's Sustainability Story; Creating Livable Communities and a Great Destination. Oregon Congressman Earl Blumenauer was key speaker and has been a huge supporter of livable communities and active transportation initiatives at the state and national levels. He proudly stated that Portland has increased cycling by 400% in the last 20 years. A panel discussion followed. Nancy Stueber, President of the Oregon Museum of Sciences and Industry, encouraged destinations to create partnerships with museums, cultural attractions, and education facilities – programs such as Elderhostel are popular as travelers look for hands on experiences. Christian Ettinger, owner of Hopworks Urban Brewery, explained how he leverages his many sustainable building and operations practices into great publicity; encouraging stories and questions on social media has replaced traditional advertising for this very successful business. He cautioned business owners that while green sells, it must be real and not just “greenwashing” – authentic sustainable practices can be competitive and people are willing to pay \$0.50 more for a locally crafted “green” beer. Dawnielle Tehama, Marketing Director for a southern Oregon tribal casino and DMO (Discover Klamath) board member, described putting together a sustainable tourism program with small, easy starting steps to educate and encourage traditionalists to adopt and embrace change. Mention was made of The Natural Step Framework – see www.naturalstep.org for details on this program.

Thursday

The conference was “carbon neutral” thanks to a partnership with www.offsetters.com – the same Canadian company that provided this service to the Vancouver Olympics.

Rick Ridgeway, Vice President of Environmental Programs and Communication for Patagonia, shared his new project, the “Freedom to Roam Coalition”, an umbrella organization designed to help NGO's with landscape connectivity. (He showed great footage of the Path of the Pronghorn migration from right in my own Sublette County backyard!) The group is promoting collaboration rather than confrontation with business and industry – partnering with BP instead of blasting them for the oil spill, for example (see their Business for Wildlife section of the website at www.FreedomToRoam.org). One of their projects is www.WitnessforWildlife.org, a citizen naturalist community dedicated to chronicling and protecting North America's wildlife corridors.

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), a new initiative launched in 2010, is a membership council that will provide universal principals and criteria for sustainable tourism. It will work to support the set of 37 voluntary standards representing the minimum that any tourism business should aspire to reach in order to protect and sustain the world's natural and cultural resources while ensuring tourism meets its potential as a tool for poverty alleviation. (See www.sustainabletourismcriteria.org for details.) The organization is working to develop educational materials, to promote trust in the certification by the public and make sure that definitions are clear and avoid “greenwashing”. There are

many certification programs around the world already but having a common language is critical to fostering trust. The Rainforest Alliance supports this effort as it believes tourism can protect or destroy biodiversity. As the 1st or 2nd economy in 83% of developing countries, it encourages the creation of sustainable livelihoods.

“Sustainable tourism in parks, protected areas and public lands” was a panel discussion. Danella George is the “Partnerships in Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Tourism” contact for the BLM in California – she is happy to discuss ways to work with the BLM on business ideas - she can be reached at danella_george@ca.blm.gov or #760-808-5877. Hunter MacIntosh of The Boat Company (www.theBoatCompany.com) in southeastern Alaska has many years of experience dealing with the US Forest Service, state agencies and in creating other interesting partnerships with NGO’s and travel companies such as Orvis. (He hosted a separate panel discussion on partnerships that was excellent.) Kevin Smith of Maple Leaf Adventures in BC stated that environmentally responsible providers do well even in economic downturns – in 2008 \$1.5 billion was spent at nature based businesses (according to www.wilderness-tourism.bc.ca).

Voluntourism Panel – 75% of participants are female – need a safe and secure volunteering environment – low cost programs aren’t always the best. Other countries are much more aware and participating in voluntourism opportunities. Choices range from a few days during a vacation to long-term commitments. (See www.gviusa.com for info.) Susan Thomas of the Hilton Head Island CVB (hosts of next year’s ESTC) described a unique program that they have launched. They are marketing a “Hilton Head Difference” campaign where they encourage conference groups to volunteer in the local community for a day or a few hours during their business trip. (She called this “countering the AIG effect”!) The CVB and Chamber work to identify local organizations that have projects which could benefit and team them up with visiting corporations. It becomes a great team building exercise; outdoor projects are the favorite; and a great PR piece for all involved. (<http://www.hiltonheadisland.org/meetings-groups/the-experience/the-hilton-head-difference/>)

Friday

Engaging communities and empowering travelers to “be the change”

Christina Tunnah of World Nomads (www.WorldNomads.com) – 55% of customers say they chose this travel insurance company based on their creation of The Footprints Network. Their website shows projects around the world which they are currently supporting; average donation is \$2.50/person. (This is an excellent example of a website that encourages participation and sharing by viewers – they actually asked for “the best terrible travel tales” – go to the Adventure tab - and got a ton of responses and positive PR!) Christina also recommends www.socialmediadaily.com for great tips.

Brad Nahill of SEE Turtles and SEetheWILD.org gave great advice on using conservation travel to protect endangered species. He advised ecotourism businesses to tell their guests where their donations are going – detail specific projects and their associated costs (his website www.SeeTurtles.org breaks out specifically what the Conservation Impact is for each trip). Provide travelers with tools to do something

with the excitement they feel after their wildlife experiences (this could work in other arenas as well); tell them where to share comments, photos, donate to organizations helping the area they've visited, etc. www.EthicalTraveler.org is a political action website that encourages members to "vote with their travel dollars" and provides information on social, environmental and other issues in travel destination countries, allowing the traveler to make an informed choice.

Creating and promoting a sense of place

Kristin Dahl, Travel Oregon's Sustainable Tourism Manager introduced the new National Geographic Central Cascades Geotourism Mapguide. (<http://theCentralCascades.com> - \$5 for shipping?!?)

Brian Mullis of Sustainable Travel International mentioned that National Geographic is looking to combine all the Geotourism Maps into a web-based National Atlas – haven't found details yet.

Scottie Jones of www.FarmStaysUS.com and Michelle Nowak of www.FarmStays.blogspot.com spoke on agritourism, an authentic experience that is coming of age in the US long after the UK and Australia.

We are losing 1 acre of farmland per minute in the US.

Innovation Lunch Keynote speaker Bruce Poon Tip – Gap Adventures

On average 5% of tourism dollars stay "in country" – at GAP that is 60%

Add Purpose and Passion to the Triple Bottom Line

"Enron had a nice sounding values statement" – practice what you preach!

Value innovation – Cirque du Soleil – redefined its product and became the leader in its niche

Disruptive innovation – break out of a slow growth cycle and change your industry

- Change people's lives
- Do the right thing
- Create happiness and community
- Lead with service

How to build win-win partnerships for your business and community

Excellent case study from the town of Oakridge, Oregon; a dying timber town reworked itself into the "Mountain Biking Capital of the Northwest". They used existing logging roads on the National Forest and got technical assistance from the International Mountain Bicycling Association; grants from the National Park Service, Travel Oregon, local Chamber, etc and created over 500 miles of trails, a bike park and a jump park; trails are multiuse so other stakeholders also benefit. The town has seen 8 new businesses start up in 2 years. (www.mtbikeoregon.com)

Notes from a brainstorming session on ways to encourage sustainable tourism practices:

- Bring the concepts down to the local context
- Increase local training opportunities
- Offer mentoring programs
- Define incentives – provide case studies and economic impact reports
- Make it easy – provide tools and business plans – easy step by step and how to “scale up”
- Encourage customer demand
- Emphasize transparency
- Utilize youth as change agents – “make it sexy” to be green
- Practice what you preach – Indian ecolodge that starts your stay with tour of sanitation facilities
- Educate on the financial benefits – value added marketing
- Develop resource databases for green supplies and suppliers – local sources
- Tax incentives for businesses following good practice
- Recognize and reward efforts! (Carrot mob – get large group to patronize featured business)
- Dispel myths

Other contacts of note:

www.SustainableIndustries.com – a print and online magazine “the business source for leaders of the new economy” – Associate Ray Berardinelli (rayb101@gmail.com and 503-425-9095) stated that they welcome press releases from businesses and organizations regarding green and sustainable projects.

Chuck Lennox is Principal of Cascade Interpretive Consulting LLC (www.interpconsulting.com, 206-720-4928) and has years of National Parks interpretation and environmental education experience. He is based in Seattle and works with many private and governmental agencies on interpretive plans and training programs.

Please feel free to call with questions – I have many more notes and contacts that I am happy to share.

Mindi