

**CONSERVATION TOURISM –
LEAVING A LIVING LEGACY**

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OUR ENTRY INTO THEIR WORLD

In that time-standing-still moment, the almost silent sound of twigs crackling underfoot seemed so loud that it caused a sudden, anxious catching of breath. The tracker looked back with a clear, concerned questioning in his eyes - “*are you okay?*”

“*Sorry. I’m fine. Keep going*” she whispered in response, timid eyes meeting his stare. An hour had passed. All sense of orientation was gone. Yet the tracker knew the terrain of the national park as if it were his own precious backyard. Trust and proximity to the tracker slashing his way through the thick vegetation were all that was required, she thought. And the park and expedition fees. The price of admission, high compared to other national parks, was worth every single cent. Because not only did it allow access (limited to control tourist flows) to this breathtaking, very remote corner of the country and continent, it went towards ensuring that the magnificent creatures under its forest canopy remained protected. Their home kept safe for them. Because this is their home, she was merely a very fortunate visitor.

With each slow, steady, thoughtful step gingerly taken through the heavy, sauna-humid forest of the mountains of Rwanda, the intensity of excitement grew. Nettle bushes stinging through layers of clothing created a thrilling sensation – the prick of pain quickly turning into a child-like feeling of awe in actually being where the nettles sting, where the forest dripping with vines and vegetation thrive, where the ground bounces with plush carpet-like mosses. The place where Dian Fossey once walked, and where the Silverback will soon charge to reveal his family of gorillas, was finally located!

Now, years on, those moments are still so vivid, so real. The sounds, scents, stings and surges of excitement can still be felt. They were truly moments of a lifetime. It

was an immense, rare blessing to be there, in their world, on their terms. It was a feeling more alive than any other moment in her life. And, importantly, she also knew she was making a direct contribution to their lives, contributing to their survival.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF DISCOVERY

These exceptional moments are found in truly exceptional parts of the world. Like shooting stars in a night sky these are traveller experiences which cause memories to be indelibly embedded in our minds and hearts. Their beauty, their power, and their sense of blessing is caused by a combination of factors critical to creation of experiences which go beyond adventure – they reach into the space where words such as *'magic'*, *'wonder'*, *'awe'*, *'humility'*, *'authentic'* and *'purity'* live; where lives change perspective; where tears fall because you are there.

At the heart of these incredible moments of discovery is remoteness – quiet, still, isolation. The remote chance of not just being there, but of discovery occurring...:

- catching a glimpse of baby Gorillas playing like schoolchildren high up in the canopy of trees deep within the Central African mountain forest;
- spotting the shadow of a whale nearing the boat hovering patiently in the intense blue waters of the reef;
- turning a corner and seeing the centuries-old rock art paintings of the ancient Koi-San people etched on the side of boulders sun-burnt by the dry, hot rays of the Cederberg skies;
- hearing the deep, baritone cracking of a glacier in what feels like stretched seconds before a mass of ice crashes into the frigid Arctic waters that the polar bears call 'home'.

And yet, for all of their beauty and wonder, these places and their magical moments are disappearing. Each and every day as the world undertakes the pursuit of a better way for all mankind, the lives of other precious creatures and ancient creations of our world become threatened.

How does that happen? How can it be possible that some of the world's greatest riches are being lost to us and the future generations of travellers? What does this mean for the responsibility of travellers? What really is *'Responsible Tourism'*?

And, critically, how do leaders in global tourism ensure that it is not just a policy, but an enduring philosophy?

CONSERVATION THROUGH TOURISM, NATURALLY

To enter into these remote, rich places of exploration, understanding and discovery mean, by their very nature, disturbance of a natural world. Natural environments, natural eco-systems and natural habitats become unnaturally exposed when they become accessible to travellers. The risks are real. Animals may become frightened off. Food supplies killed off. Free-growing space sold off. Waters polluted.

For all of these reasons, and more, building a tourism destination responsibly - *actively conscious of the impact which the tourism industry has on the place, people and promise of the destination* - is critical to the long-term health and well being of the destination.

It is not only about policy and strategy, it is about duty.

Responsible tourism is everyone's responsibility. The well being of the destination is not only the responsibility of the tourism sector - it is also the responsibility of the tourist.

LEAVING A LIVING LEGACY

The delicate nature of the world's natural tourism riches is, thankfully, understood by leaders of tourism development across the globe. Conservation, preservation, doing things right while doing the right things – there is no alternative if global tourism is to protect the world in which we live, travel, grow. Legacy must be a tenet of sector growth and development.

For this reason, members of both the public and private sector are increasingly coming together across the global Travel & Tourism community to talk about the fundamentals of growth and development:

- sustainability,
- responsibility,
- longevity, and
- accountability.

Principles and programmes are being created which ensure that growth of the destination takes into careful consideration the impact of travellers on:

- the natural environment of the destination,
- the established culture and traditions of the destination,
- the style and character of the destination, and
- the spirit and ethos of the people of the destination.

From a traveller perspective, growing understanding of the impact of tourism and respect for the need to *leave only footprints* has inspired the growth of niche segments focused on travellers contributing to the world's endangered destinations. *Adventure travel, Voluntourism, Eco-Tourism, Conservation Tourism,*

and *Responsible Travel*, make it possible for travellers to participate in expeditions which seek to make a direct, positive impact on the protection of wildlife, cultures and communities in their natural environments. Be it park fees, parts of itineraries, or development projects, travellers can now directly contribute to preservation of what they and the world view as precious. And through this important exposure the message of responsibility and conservation is understood and passed on.

The desire of travellers to cross the globe into new worlds previously unknown or inaccessible to tourists (and often humans) is not a right – it is an honour, a privilege and a blessing.

The world, with all of its natural, breathtaking beauty, is not the playground of tourists and destination leaders of our generation. It is the foundation of the vision of how our world grows, connects, survives and thrives because of Tourism.

Conservation. Preservation. Respect for the natural environment. Responsibility for all living things in all forms – these are the responsibilities of the global Tourism sector.

Because they were here first.

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