

Building a Career in Ecotourism

By Walt Anderson

Ecotourism (tourism that is environmentally and culturally sensitive, low impact, educational, and of conservation value) should provide a significant educational experience. It is not mere fun, though enjoyment surely enhances the potential for learning to persist after the experience (Weiler and Ham 2001). Our biophilic tendencies (that is, feeling strong positive emotional attachment to the cute and fuzzy or to charismatic megafauna) get us to a certain point. This tendency, however, is superficial and limiting if not informed by good science and real understanding of how nature works. Thus there is a strong need for good education for the practitioners of ecotourism and those who regulate the industry.

Ecotourism and field studies are built upon a strong understanding of natural history. Natural history and the naturalists who represent the discipline have declined relative to lab sciences, a trend that was decried vehemently as long ago as the late 19th century by the fine French observer of insects, J. Henri Fabre (Teale 1981). This trend has continued (Noss 1996, Able 2016, Barrows et al. 2016). Fleischner et al. (2017) note that “Field experiences encourage multiple ways of knowing: observing nature (extracting understanding), conversing with nature (developing empathy), and participating in nature (using resources).” Those skills, along with articulate communication, are precisely what the ecotourism leader needs to be effective.

“Field study is how ecologists, conservationists, and taxonomists hone their craft; it is the opportunity to put acquired information, theories, and skills into practice” (Fleischner et al. 2017). There are institutions (or small departments within them) that promote field experiences; e.g., Prescott College, Middlebury College, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Sterling College, University of Washington, University of California Santa Cruz, University of California Berkeley, University of California Los Angeles (Fleischner et al. 2017). Just as employers in natural resource agencies prefer to hire people with significant field experience, so too should tour operators be looking for similar experience, especially in tour destinations. Sometimes the ideal leadership involves a team of a local and a foreign guide, whose skills with nature and people can be complementary (Weiler and Ham 2001).

While there is a place for the lecture/discussion format on ecotours, especially when foul weather constrains being out in the field or when travel by ship means time between shore destinations, it is important that direct field experience be maximized whenever possible. Clients should be encouraged to be directly engaged in nature study, not mere passive recipients of knowledge spewed out by a guide. Anderson (2006) promotes cultivating “informed imagination,” building upon existing knowledge by creating learning experiences that generate good questions and motivate the search for answers. A good ecotour guide tries to facilitate deeper learning than mere observation can provide. This requires special people skills that a research biologist, also rich in field experience, may not require. For example, the professional guide is not only good at locating wildlife and providing information; that person must also engage and motivate the participants, attend to safety and general comfort, minimize environmental impacts (including stress on animals), use time efficiently, and much more. Thus the guide needs training and experience in effective interpersonal communication (some charisma goes a long way too).

The Charles Sturt University in Australia offers a three-year Bachelor Applied Science Degree in Ecotourism (Lipscombe and Thwaites 2001). They have the following educational requirements:

1. Knowledge (e.g., contemporary philosophy and ethics, ecological and geomorphological understanding of Australia, flora and fauna, environmental impact assessment, sustainability principles, cultural heritage, business practices, communication and interpretation theory, and leadership)
2. Skills (e.g., applying philosophical and ethical practices, communicating about the natural and cultural heritage, business management, leadership, environmental assessment, and implementation of sustainable development principles in ecotourism)
3. Attitudes (e.g., appreciation, awareness, and communication of the above principles).

In identifying ecotourism as a career track, Sturt University was the pioneer. Their requirements indicate understanding of the foundational elements of authentic ecotourism. However, graduates of this program have not necessarily gained an employment advantage over students with degrees in other fields (Lipscombe and Thwaites 2001).

The International Tour Management Institute (ITMI) and the International Guide Academy offer tour guide and director certification courses, but these are short (4-15-days) and appear geared to mass tourism rather than ecotourism. Environmental Programs (2017) and Environmental Science (2017) provide general education guidelines and job prospects for prospective ecotour guides. A membership in The International Ecotourism Society gives you access to other certification and training programs, such as the fine National Ecotour Guide Certification Program in Australia (TIES 2017).

Ecotourism as a degree title might have no more employment power than a degree in Environmental Studies, Ecology, or Wildlife Biology. Genuine field experience in appropriate geographies and multilingual skills might be more important. Business experience and entrepreneurship may provide keys for success for those who wish to be self-employed. It will be interesting to see how the field evolves as tour operators better understand qualifications of potential tour leaders.

Because of its interdisciplinary nature, wildlife biology has the potential to provide skilled naturalists capable of becoming ecotourism leaders. Currently, training runs the spectrum from acquiring technical skills (e.g., radio telemetry, GIS, capture techniques) to the theoretical; usually a generalist with a broad background can be more effective as a guide than a specialist, unless the trip has a specific focus (e.g., sharks, rainforest birds, reptiles, photography). In some cases, publications, artwork, or other artifacts of expertise may be an effective marketing tool to draw participants to join a particular trip leader. Rubbing shoulders (or bumping binoculars) with a famous author may trump otherwise similar experiences with an unknown though highly qualified guide. Because the physical demands on an ecotour guide can be high, leading trips may be an occasional complement to other income-producing sources (e.g., teaching, writing, artwork, photography).

Education also contributes significantly to another objective—conservation. Education is the strongest predictor of environmental concern in most people (Smith-Sebasto 1995). Experiential education, well executed, can enhance awareness building, attitude formation, and empowerment (Ewert 1996). While it cannot *guarantee* the desired long-term outcomes (Fein et al. 2001), it can set the framework for such potential outcomes.

While one can argue that place-based learning without the costs of travel can lead to commitment to conserving nature (Russell 1994), there are certainly instances where a transformative travel experience (e.g., well-planned ecotour) can inspire, inform, and motivate a person to be an active environmental steward back home. For example, a meta-analysis of 18 wildlife-mediated experiences with whales,

dolphins, and sea turtles demonstrated increased knowledge, empathy, and desire to engage in future marine conservation actions (Zeppel 2008). High-quality ecotourism experiences in the Galapagos were shown to improve understanding of resource-conservation issues and to develop deeper commitments to conservation, including through philanthropy (Powell and Ham 2008).

Obviously, naturalist guides are only one element of the ecotourism industry. It is equally important that service providers at both source and destination understand and apply the principles and ethics of ecotourism. This is especially important as the field expands rapidly; accountability is crucial. Training programs range from small and informal to large-scale efforts to improve tourism outcomes. For example, the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) offers a professional Certificate in Sustainable Tourism Management through George Washington University and holds webinars and workshops designed to inform and empower a range of stakeholders (TIES 2017).

In summary, career opportunities in ecotourism are diverse and plentiful, ranging from guides to tourism operators, marketers, service providers, and administrators. While ecotourism is currently a niche market within the enormous field of tourism, it can provide motivation for the entire industry to become more “green.”

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