

Heavy tourist traffic has some telling writers:

# 'Wish you weren't here'



BY ERIC FREEDMAN

**E**COTOURISM IS HOT AMONG TOUR AND ATTRACTION OPERATORS, it's hot among outfitters and it's hot among the public. It's also hot for environmental, outdoors and natural resources journalists, yet we writers must be aware that our very coverage may raise ethical concerns—as well as the potential for stories about those concerns.

But first, what is ecotourism or “green” tourism?

There are more definitions than fingers on my hands, and it overlaps but isn't synonymous with “adventure tourism,” which makes a uniform definition even tougher to find. I like this one from the Ecotourism Association of Australia: “ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation.” The Indonesia International Rural and Agricultural Development Foundation, which operates several eco-lodges, proposes this comprehensive list of principal components: dependent on the natural environment; contributes to conservation; ecologically sustainable; features interpretation and education; incorporates cultural considerations; and provides a “net return or benefit” to local communities.

In this context, we often think of Costa Rican rainforest lodges, Caribbean reef diving expeditions and eastern African wildlife photo safaris. However, ecotourism opportunities abound in the United States and Canada as

well, such as rafting, camping and hiking through Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado and Utah, canoeing and fishing in the Yukon, kayaking in the Boundary Waters Wilderness of Minnesota.

Now look at some of the key challenges that ecotourism poses for outdoor writers, whose stories and pho-

tos motivate some readers and viewers to participate and provides vicarious experiences and feel-good emotions among others.

What we present and how we present it can raise public awareness of habitat and environmental threats, creating a political constituency for conservation of natural and cultural places.

But at the same time, coverage creates risks, such as unintentionally spurring overuse that damages irreplaceable resources—the old adage of “loving our parks to death” comes to mind. For example, there's fear that the mere presence of too many divers and pleasure boats harms Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Other environmental threats encompass sewage disposal from remote lodges into rivers and lakes, release of fuel from boats, trail erosion from too many mountain bikes or hiking boots, collection of endangered plants, increased access for poachers and inadvertent introduction of nonnative, invasive species.

Another concern: What will happen when ecotourism becomes mass tourism? That may force limits on the

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# Ecotourism in Australia

Five students in Michigan State University's Summer 2001 program on Australia's Media, Environment and Culture created a Web page about popular, ecologically sensitive ecotourism destinations. Here are some of their observations.

## Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory

By Lauren Jones

There are many benefits to ecotourism in this nature reserve. To start, it helps people become aware of other cultures. Visiting Ubirr lets people experience Aboriginal rock art and hear Aboriginal myths and legends. The people who inhabit the land care deeply about the area and are willing to teach those who yearn to learn. As Bill Neidjie, a traditional Aboriginal land owner said, "My people...Not many. We getting too old. Young people...I don't know if they can hang onto this story. But, now you know this story. You responsible now. You got to go with us to Earth. Might be you can hang onto this story. To this Earth."

This is his call to understand and pass on the stories. Ecotourism helps do just that.

Along with the positive effects that ecotourism brings to Kakadu, there are some obvious negative effects. The large number of people who travel through Kakadu come with a price. Pollution from vehicles, litter and trampling of precious plants are among the many adverse effects of tourism. Also, if Bill Neidjie's words aren't taken seriously, a huge part of Australian culture could be lost. People who visit Kakadu must

respect this precious heritage and help pass it on to others. Ecotourism has many benefits. However, if abused, the delicate system may vanish forever.

## The Blue Mountains of New South Wales

By Kali Keller

Ecotourist activities in the Blue Mountains consist of abseiling (rapelling), bushwalking (hiking), camping and swimming. With tourism peaking during the winter months of June and July, it is not only one of the largest tourist attractions in New South Wales, but it is the third-largest employer for nearby towns.

With the increase in popularity, there has also been an increase in deterioration of land due to misuse by visitors, especially campers and bushwalkers. Campers dispose of litter improperly, illegally mutilate trees for firewood and drive in unauthorized areas, while bushwalkers destroy vegetation and leaf litter, reducing the quality of the Blue Mountain experience.

## The Daintree Rainforest of Queensland

By Valerie Underwood

The communities surrounding the Rainforest strive to be leaders in pre-

serving this unique area through tourism. They depend on the funds provided by this industry, but they also take the opportunity to educate visitors about the importance of the wetlands. The Aboriginal people of the land also want visitors to understand their culture. Many are concerned that some tourism companies don't respect their desires to tell their own stories of the history of the land.

## Uluru (Ayers Rock) in the Northern Territory

By Sarah Spaniolo

Ayers Rock is a site where many ecotourists come to visit. Every year 500,000 tourists journey to the Rock to learn about the rich history that surrounds it. Ecotourism has many benefits. It focuses on personally experiencing nature in ways that lead to greater understanding and appreciation. It also integrates opportunities to understand nature into each experience. Tourism is the world's largest industry, affecting the lives of millions of people. While it can bring benefits, these are seldom spread evenly. People who live in many tourist destinations are now counting the cost of development that has failed to put their interests and rights on a par with their visitors: Livelihoods are lost, religions and cultural traditions debased and environments degraded.

Ayers Rock is an example of how tourism can have a negative impact. Because the Rock has such spiritual meaning to the Aborigines, there has been controversy over the amount of

tourists who come visit and climb it. The Aborigines ask that tourists abstain from climbing the sacred rock but every day many tourists ignore their pleas. In addition, there are a few deaths a year among tourists climbing the Rock. While there is an area consensus that the climbs should stop, Kathy Cooper, a guide with the only Aboriginal-owned tour group said, "Commercial decisions take precedence over culture. Many operators actually fear they would lose a large share of the market if the climbs were stopped." Many tourists come to Ayers Rock not being well informed about the sanctity of the Rock and its people.

## The Great Barrier Reef in Queensland

By Carolina Olego

The sustainability of Great Barrier Reef tourism and recreation is based on quality and continuity. A quality experience must be provided for visitors, while improving the quality of life of the host community and protecting the quality of the environment. For sustainability, the tourism industry must also ensure the continuity of the natural resources it uses and continuity of visitor interest. Ninety percent of tourism activity takes place in only 5 percent of the entire Great Barrier Reef area. Management plans strictly regulate visitor numbers and specify exact locations that can be visited. Ecotours now include marine biologists, and the captains of the ships are tested about their knowledge of the area, ensuring safe navigation around the coral.

■ Essays edited by Eric Freedman

number of visitors, as Grand Canyon rafters and Boundary Waters canoeists know. Or it may make it impossible for government agencies and nonprofit organizations—particularly cash-strapped foreign ones—to adequately safeguard the resources.

What roles do industry and government tourism departments play in distorting ecotourism, and do we writers play into their hands by succumbing to hype? "Greenwashing" is sometimes used in the context of mega-corporations that clear pristine forests to build energy-hungry, water-hungry resorts and fail to invest much of their earnings locally. They may boast of recycling and solar-heated water, but their overall environmental impact is more negative than positive.

Certainly, we can write about efforts by government, industry and local communities to regulate and control development. When I was last in Australia, for example, there was an effort underway to give Great

Barrier Reef tour operators 15-year rather than six-year permits. The effort was intended to simultaneously spur ecological sustainability and give them more economic security for long-term operations.

How do we report and write in light of individual and cultural ethical dilemmas? Some of us have confronted this question in deciding whether or not to publicize the location of a little-known fishing or camping spot we personally treasure, or to highlight a place with a spiritual or religious meaning.

When I was writing a recreational guidebook to the national forests of the Great Lakes region, a U.S. Forest Service information officer asked me to omit Turtle Mound—an easily accessible spot within Minnesota's Chippewa National Forest that is sacred to local Native Americans—although it was already on the National Register of Historic Places. I agreed not to write a planned sidebar focusing on Turtle Mound but decided I couldn't fully serve

my readers without at least mentioning the site. Was I right or wrong?

Finally, do local people and community organizations play a significant role in the management and operation of the resource? Do local people act as interpreters, investors, guides and managers or do they merely do the grunt work? By setting land aside in reserves, parks and preserves to cater to tourists, does ecotourism cut these people off from traditional sources of subsistence such as fishing and hunting? Does it demean their places of spiritual and ritual importance?

Of course, we're not solely responsible for the public impact of what we accurately write, film or photograph. Nor should fear about the possible reactions of other people dissuade us from presenting the truth. However, when it comes to covering ecotourism, we do need to exercise our professional judgment and skills in a conscientious, informed manner. 🌐