

December 2008 | Escape the Pace

The Intentional Tourist

Sustainable travel gathers momentum

By Crai S. Bower

Several orcas have gone missing from Puget Sound. Biologists presume they are dead, driven away from the security of their pods by diminishing food sources, painful noise, toxic breathing conditions, some combination of all three, or another yet undetermined reason. Another popular belief is that the whales "escaped" what is euphemistically referred to as "too much love," well-intentioned tours designed to introduce humans to these amazing beings. What if the engine roar of sightseeing vessels in the United States and the piercing whine of Canadian Zodiacs have driven the whales away? And what do we do if our seemingly benevolent interaction with these stunning creatures has ultimately produced the same consequence as a certain northern governor's potshots at wolves in Alaska: death? Should we place a moratorium on overcrowding, i.e., observing the species we adore. Welcome to one of sustainable tourism's many quandaries.

I recently traveled to Vancouver to attend the Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Conference sponsored by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). I sat rapt as Wade Davis, Explorer in Residence at National Geographic (among many other accomplishments), gave the keynote. Davis spends most of his time studying cultures that exist far from the reaches of the modern world. He certainly spends energy to get to the jungles of the Amazon, the mountains of Tibet and the deserts of Africa, but the wisdom he extracts and then shares in his books ("The Serpent and the Rainbow," "One River," "Light at the Edge of the World") seems well worth the carbon expense.

"Sustainable tourism is a return to the classic naturalist," Davis remarked. But who is the classic naturalist, exactly? According to Steve Herman, my ornithology professor at Evergreen and a classic naturalist if ever there was one, it is the trained empiricist who carefully records all observations and best understands the surrounding world.

Historically, classic naturalists either claimed intimacy with one concise environment such as in Aldo Leopold's "A Sand County Almanac," or they voyaged around the globe organizing and naming species as in Alfred Russell Wallace's "Malay Archipelago." Our greatest western naturalist, Charles Darwin, combined the intimacy of detail with the expanse of the voyage to craft his "Origin of Species" and radically change our worldview.

What would Darwin, who returned to his English estate from the Galapagos to study beetles for the remainder of his life, think of loving orcas too much?

Most importantly, what do we who wander the woods and voyage onto the waters in the Pacific Northwest think about our roles as sustainable tourists? Tourism, after all, requires travel by definition. The loggers are mostly gone, our SUVs carry us along the logging roads today, fly rods and snowshoes in tow, eager to travel within the wilderness, away from I-5's auto congestion, the Internet or the marketplace.

Conversely, service-inclusive travel presents an exciting trend, whether we restore sea turtle nesting habitat in Maui or census dolphins in Florida. We can travel almost anywhere today and, with a little web research, find some way to aid the environment we've come to explore.

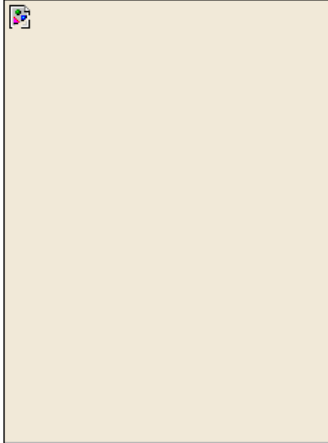


Photo: Crai S. Bower

Northwest Notables

The Cave B Inn at SageCliffe
Cave B offers EverGreen Escapes, interpretive tours to rock climb, snowshoe and track, among other great adventures with transportation provided by biodiesel-fueled vans. sagecliffe.com

Clayoquot Wilderness Resort
This resort may be pricey, but you take home a sustainable tourism philosophy lesson from proprietor, John Caton, one of the movement's most impressive movers and shakers. Hands-on salmon stream creation is one of three-dozen activities. wildretreat.com

Fairmont Hotels
The venerable chain's Vancouver Waterfront hotel has recently installed a heat-recovery system that saves an estimated 305,380 kilowatt-hours per year. fairmont.com

Wild Sky Wilderness Area
Carpool or take the bus to Index and explore one of George W. Bush's greatest (only?) environmental endorsements. experiencewilderness.org

Whistler Resort
The entire Whistler community has bought into sustainable tourism (see their new zero waste composter), leading toward the greenest Olympic Games in history. whistler.ca


Willows Lodge
Not one morsel of green matter goes to waste here, thanks to the Earth Tub, an "in-vessel" composter. willowslodge.com



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As travelers, we can insist on staying in places that care about sustainability. Explore the options before you book, as more and more destinations are highlighting their environmental commitments. Insist upon it and let the proprietor know you appreciate the effort. And it isn't just wilderness travel. Fairmont Hotels, founding members of the B.C. Sustainable Tourism Collective, are converting their hotels to clean energy among several other green initiatives (see sidebar). And don't forget to tell your friends, include your discovery in travel blogs and on popular review posts.

Wade Davis says, "There is no line item in the calculus of economy for leaving the land alone."

Will the day soon arrive when we explore nature from beyond what even we, the well intentioned, once considered a safe distance? Our answer may lie in the clues left behind by Puget Sound's fleeing orcas.

Crai S. Bower assuages his travel writer's angst by trumpeting sustainable tourism whenever possible for more than 30 publications and on KUOW radio. Visit FlowingStreamWriting.net.

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