

Ecotourism--Making a Difference by Making Meaning

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It's nice to meet all of you. Many thanks to the Ecotourism Australia, the South Australia Tourism Commission, the Department of Environment and Heritage, and my colleagues at Flinders University for making it possible for me to be here today.

I have to say I feel very comfortable with this group. Although I'm meeting many of you for the very first time today, I already know we have a lot in common. The fact that we're all here at an Ecotourism Australia conference sends an undeniably clear signal about that. I've had the great fortune to work with ecotourism operators, guides and interpreters in many parts of the world. Everywhere I go, it seems they all look a little different, dress a little different; they listen to different kinds of music and eat different kinds of food, watch different kinds of television, and sometime they even smell differently.

But despite all those superficial outward appearances, when we sit down together and really talk about what's important to us, we find instantly that we have far more similarities than differences. When the conversation turns to what we care about most in life, I mean that subset of 3 or 4 or 5 key values that each of us has wrapped our personal and professional lives around—the lessons we live by, raise our children by, vote by and shop by—we discover just how alike we really are.

Let me ask you:

How many of you feel it's your moral responsibility to leave a clean and healthy environment for humans you don't know and who aren't even born yet?

How many of you believe that protecting and preserving biodiversity is a worthy end in and of itself, even if some species don't have utilitarian economic value?

How many of you think that preserving and perpetuating the great lessons that history has taught us is one of the most important things society does?

See how weird you are?

And even weirder is that most of us in this room have wrapped our personal and professional lives around these things with an eye toward making them *actually happen*. We want to make a difference.

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I've always said that there are few professions outside of the clergy that are as value-driven and value-laden as ours. We want to make a difference and be paid for the pleasure. In fact, in some ways we're very clergy-like. We in the business of ecotourism get paid to make other people fall in love with what we love. That's nice work if you can get it!

Making a difference is what my presentation is about today. It seems an appropriate message for this occasion because "ecotourism" has set itself up as a sort of "make-a-difference" ideological form of tourism. Though some would have us all think that ecotourism is a kind of tourism that expresses itself in the numbers, kinds and mindsets of the tourists, themselves. There is virtually no evidence to back that up, and arguments about what an "ecotourist" is or is not lead inescapably to undercurrents of elitism and a self-serving superiority attitude of "them and us" "bad and good" that has even less empirical basis and virtually no practical value, that I can see anyway.

But the supply side of the ecotourism industry, when defined according to its ideological principles --its goals if you will-- is solidly defensible. You see, it's the ideological end game of ecotourism that distinguishes it from other forms of tourism, not the tourists themselves. EA knows this well because it has emerged, by any measure, as one of the world leaders in bringing industry itself not only to accept, but to embrace and put into practice, the broad principles of ecotourism. And I can tell you that much of the rest of the world is following the Australian example with great interest.

About five years ago, a postgraduate student (Steve Edwards) and I completed a study of policy-based definitions of ecotourism in more than 50 countries. As you can imagine, the definitions were all over the board and virtually anything that involved a tree or temple or a rural community in a developing country might conceivably be called "ecotourism," depending on the country. But despite all this variation, our content analysis of those definitions revealed three common elements that defined ecotourism as an ideological end game:

Ideologically, ecotourism..

1. Is a positive force for conservation
2. Benefits the host community
3. Raises "awareness" of local environments and culture

Although other desired outcomes were scattered throughout the several hundred documents we analysed, these three emerged with such frequency that they constituted, in our view, some degree of international consensus about what ecotourism is trying to produce in the way of outcomes--the *end game*.

We can more readily envision the end game of the first two, and indeed, certification and accreditation programs like NEAP provide well-reasoned checklists of criteria precisely for this purpose. These are things a business either does or doesn't do that can be evaluated objectively. That is, applying the evaluative criteria we can arguably determine whether conservation is being strengthened and whether host communities are actually benefiting from a tourism operation—whether the end games of conservation and community benefits are being achieved.

The third part of the ideology (creating “awareness”) is a bit more problematic, however. Because it’s a vague concept, what constitutes “awareness” is often unclear and leaves ecotourism providers only a fuzzy notion of the interpretive end game. What does “awareness” mean and how do we observe it? In other words, what is it that we’re even trying to accomplish, and how will we know when we’ve done it? As a communication psychologist, I’ve been deeply interested in this question most of my professional life.

And, of course, it’s been the subject of a lot of studies going back as far as the early 1970s. On the whole, evaluations of interpretation typically have emphasised tourists’ ability to correctly recall factual information, and I’ve seen many dozens of these so-called evaluations over the years. Recall of isolated facts has been called in various studies anything from “awareness” to “understanding” to “learning” to “enlightenment” to “enrichment.” But I do not believe that a visitor who can correctly recall more facts has necessarily “learned” or “understands” any more than a visitor who can recall fewer facts. In fact, it might even be precisely the opposite. Often it’s because the first visitor simply knew more ahead of time, and other times it’s because s/he simply happened to pay attention to the facts that were included in the test. Had the test asked for recall of different facts, those same visitors might have done poorly. And since the selection of which facts to include in such an evaluation is generally arbitrary, the whole process begs the question: “So what?” Who cares if someone can remember facts X, Y and Z better than someone else?

But that isn’t really the question I wanted to put to you today. What is ultimately far more important is whether factual recall of *any kind* after an ecotourism experience even matters? I mean, even if 100% of the people can recall 100% of the facts presented by a guide or interpreter or exhibit or ipod audio, what does that tell us about the impact of the experience on those people’s “awareness.” Not much. This is the fallacy of what I call the “teacher-tell model” of interpretation. It focuses our attention on an end game that doesn’t matter, one that has little to do with the actual phenomenon of interest. What I believe that phenomenon of interest is, in other words, what constitutes the interpretive end game of ecotourism, is the subject I’d like to explore with you in the rest of my remarks today.

Going back to our evaluation question, anyone with a lick of experience in interpretation knows that 100% recall by 100% of the audience is rarely, if ever, going to happen. And that’s because only some of the facts get through to begin with, and those that do are soon forgotten unless they were already there in long-term memory or they were reinforced in a relatively short period of time. I don’t need to tell this group that if we did a test of visitors’ recall just a few hours after even a riveting guided tour, we’d find that most of the newly acquired facts were no longer in memory. And, of course, if we did the test a couple of days later, they would all be gone, except those that were already there ahead of time, or those that were somehow reinforced in that 24-48 hour period following the tour. So my real question is:

Once the facts are forgotten, what then remains between the tourist’s ears that might be important to what the ecotourism operator is trying to achieve?

-- that person, like you and me, who just wants to make a difference by raising “awareness.”

If the interpretive end game is simply getting visitors to recall the facts, it’s pretty clear that we’re going to fail most of the time. Isn’t it?

So since tourists will predictably forget much, most or all of the factual content gleaned from an interpretive experience, what potentially remains in their minds afterwards is a question of central importance to all of us who want to make a difference.

I mentioned the “Teacher-Tell Model” of interpretation but didn’t really tell you too much about it. It’s certainly not intended as a slap against the teaching profession, but it invokes what I hope is an old model of education in which teachers tell their students various facts and then expect the students to regurgitate them back at the appropriate time, usually during an exam of some kind. In ecotourism, the “teacher-tell model” is alive and well to the extent that evaluations persist in using factual recall as a measure of interpretive effectiveness.

Let’s take a hypothetical example of a guide whose performance evaluation is based on visitors’ ability to faithfully recall facts from her guided tour. Let’s say that her objectives were for the visitors to be able to recall the three main ways we benefit from protecting wetlands. If this were really her objective, and if this end game were really, really important (OK, let’s say it was so important that if she failed to achieve the objective she would lose her job), then she would be well served to dispense with anything she had ever learned about interpretive guiding and instead get herself a whiteboard and write those three benefits on it. And if she’s smart, instead of leading the group through some kind of experience in a wetland environment, she would simply sit them down in a room in front of that whiteboard, and she would say to them: “OK, this is all I want you to remember today. Please memorize it and don’t think about anything else. Just commit these three benefits of wetlands to memory, and then I’m going to give you a test of recall. If each and every one of you correctly remembers all three benefits, I will be ‘effective’ and I get to keep my job!”

If this sounds preposterous to you, that’s because it is. As I said, the problem with the “teacher-tell” model is that it focuses our attention on achieving an end game that is irrelevant to the outcome we’re after.

Awareness, whatever it is, must be something different and more profound than the mere acquisition of facts. If you get nothing more out of my presentation today, I hope it is the recognition that communicating the facts is not what awareness building in ecotourism is all about. Yes, it is inconceivable that the interpretive component of any ecotourism product wouldn’t involve facts, and probably lots of them. But the question is whether those facts are the end in themselves (as in the teacher-tell model), or are they a means to some other more important end?

I know that many of you are familiar with my EROT model of interpretive communication, which is nothing more than a sugar-coated repackaging of cognitive and social psychology applied to the reality of interpretation in leisure and tourism settings. The E, R and O in this model refer to being ENJOYABLE, RELEVANT and ORGANISED. Sparing you the detail, these three qualities of interpretation underpin the very necessary task of capturing and maintaining the attention of tourists. They’re pleasure seekers and their brains will not focus for very long on anything that doesn’t match their idea of having a good time, isn’t relevant to what they know and care about, and isn’t organised to be easy to follow. If an interpreter fails to put any one of these qualities in a tour or commentary or some other communication medium, s/he will lose the audience’s attention. In psychology, this is what we’d call a no-

brainer. I mean, if you make any stimulus enjoyable, highly relevant and easy to get to, any animal (including the human one) is going to be attracted to it. Research I've recently published with Professor Betty Weiler involving nature-based tourists in Alaska and Galapagos corroborates this fact. These same three qualities are used by tourists, themselves, to describe an outstanding guided tour experience. Except there is one more, which I'll get to shortly.

Unfortunately, this is where many guides and interpreters stop in their thinking and preparation -- with the E, R and O -- where capturing attention through entertainment is the only end game of interpretation, just as it is the only end game of a stand-up comic, a street musician, or a *Guinness World Record* book. The entertainment industry is an ERO industry. Fortunately, it doesn't concern itself with any other end game. It just wants to entertain us. And we should be grateful for that.

But unless I've grossly misinterpreted something along the way, the "awareness" goal of ecotourism's ideology isn't predicated merely on producing properly entertained tourists. Yes, of course, we *know* that entertainment is important. Heck, they're tourists for heaven's sake! And that's why the E and R and O are there in the model. As with our earlier conclusion about factual recall, it's plainly obvious that both the facts and the entertainment are necessary (infotainment, if you will). But whether "infotainment" constitutes the end in itself suggests a now familiar question:

Once the infotainment is over, what remains between the tourist's ears that might be important to what the ecotourism operator is trying to achieve?

Well, that brings us to the "T" which stands for "thematic." Again, sparing you the detail, the concept of thematic interpretation springs from three very robust theoretical traditions in communication psychology called "schema theory," "the theory of reasoned action or planned behaviour," and the "elaboration likelihood model" of persuasion. All enjoy widespread support in the behavioural sciences, and each points in its own way to an inescapable conclusion for people like us who want to make a difference in how other people think, feel and behave with respect to what we love.

A theme is a whole idea, a belief, an inference or connection that the mind makes. While any statement of fact is a belief, a theme is a belief that captures a lesson learned or moral of the story from an assemblage of factual information. It's the "so what" or "big deal" of the infotainment. Once the isolated facts are long forgotten (and most of them will be, regardless of how interesting or mind-boggling they are at the moment of acquisition), themes remain in our minds. In fact, we now have strong evidence that our operating memory itself consists of nothing more than beliefs -- all the themes we have incorporated into our psyches (or schema) over a lifetime.

So ecotourism operators and guides who see the end game of interpretation as planting place-specific themes in the minds of their customers do something far more important than getting the "facts" across to tourists. They're giving tourists something in the raw form it needs to be in for it to directly impact their point of view, and they're giving themselves a chance to make a difference on purpose by helping tourists to make connections between themselves and the place -- by establishing personal meanings and by drawing personal conclusions and lessons

learned about the place and its significance – by forming personal impressions, and by extracting and taking home a personal moral of the story.

Contrary to what some practitioners may think, there really is little evidence to suggest that all themes, or just any theme, will accomplish this sort of meaning-making objective. That's because some morals of the story matter to tourists, but some don't. While there just isn't time here today to explore the distinction in more detail, it boils down to this key difference between strong themes and lame ones:

When a theme matters, when it provokes our minds to thought, when it causes us to marvel, to ponder (you pick the verb you like best– I personally like the verb *to wonder*), it kick-starts a mental process that must happen between the tourist's ears before ecotourism can achieve its lofty goal of raising “awareness.” This mental process is nothing more than thinking, wondering, meaning-making.

But not all themes are equally capable of stimulating tourists to think and to wonder. Some themes just don't matter much, while other themes matter so much they provoke us to think and sometimes to ponder new and wonderful ideas we'd never before considered. Tourists will predictably forget most or all of the infotainment, yes. And they may even be unable to tell you in precise words what the main moral of the story was (just as we are incapable of recounting all the facts that gave rise to all the lessons *we've* ever learned). But the forgetting doesn't matter, you see, because achieving the meaning-making end game of ecotourism doesn't depend on factual recall. Rather, it depends on the thinking and wondering that the facts caused to happen in the tourist's mind. The facts were just part of the E, R and O—the focus of the tourist's attention.

There's a lot of evidence that the thinking and wondering can be indirectly observed in what the tourists themselves say to one another during and after an ecotour experience, and of course, it also would be detectable in the amount and kinds of things they say to their families and friends when they get home and pull out the photos of their trip.

This is precisely the kind of end game conjured up by this brilliant ad from *Financial Review*. Here we have people who've all just experienced an issue of the paper. As you can see, the end game of the paper is suggested by the title in red at the top left: “Talk Provoking!” Each of these people has read the same paper, some recalling some facts and others different facts, but they're all provoked to talk about what they attended to. That's because it mattered them. It mattered so much that they want now to talk about the thoughts they're having. Clearly, they're “aware” and they're engaged! By tomorrow or the next day, they'll almost certainly have forgotten most of the isolated facts they read on this day (except, as we've seen, the ones that are reinforced or already in long-term memory). But will the morals and lessons extracted from the articles remain? The strong evidence suggests yes. And with enough reinforcement over time, they might even endure forever.

Ladies and gentlemen, let's now imagine that this same group of men and women were a part of your ecotour or other face-to-face or self-guided interpretive service you offer. None of them has paid equal attention to the same facts you gave them, and probably none of them would remember anywhere near to 100% of the content. But if the theme of your tour mattered to them, if it provoked them to thought and to wonder, what would you like them to be saying?

How would you fill in the dialogue bubbles above each of their heads? What would be your interpretive end game? I think this might be the question we should be asking ourselves when it comes to the awareness outcomes we hope to produce through ecotourism.

This is the thought I want to leave you with today. If ecotourism is to achieve its ideological goal of making a difference in tourists' "awareness" of local environments and cultures, we must move past the "teacher-tell" "Guinness World Record Model" of infotainment as an end in itself. We must embrace what nearly two centuries of psychological research suggests is the path to making a difference on purpose--by making meaning.

The interpretive end game of ecotourism is not just entertaining fact giving. It is nothing of the sort. It is purposeful meaning making.

And I hope you find *that* "talk provoking."

Thank you for your kind attention.

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