



Putting the **ECO** in Ecotourism

Tips for ensuring your wildlife experience doesn't harm the animals and habitat you want to conserve

By Katharine Fletcher

When travelling, we want to respect and support wildlife, ecosystem biodiversity, local communities and diverse cultures. Yet we've all heard about nightmare trips that promise green but deliver negative, sometimes damaging experiences.

Moreover, for those of us who love animals, our fascination with them can cloud our common sense — and our responsibility to keep a reasonable distance from wildlife. The prospect of snorkelling with spawning salmon in British Columbia's rivers, hand-feeding elk or swimming with belugas may trigger an eager "I'd love to do

that!" response. But it's precisely at these times that we have to summon our conscience and choose instead to keep wildlife healthy and protected in their habitats.

When considering opportunities to get close to wildlife, travelling sustainably and responsibly isn't quite as easy as it appears. Before booking any kind of seemingly green ecotour, it's important to educate yourself. Authentic ecotourism encourages conservation of biodiversity, sustainable local economic development and education about wildlife and local cultures.

And then there's the other kind. Kelly Bricker has seen it all. "I've

been on several misadventures which lacked key aspects of good ecotourism," says the chair of sustainable tourism at The International Ecotourism Society or TIES. As an ecotourist, she says it's inappropriate to destroy wildlife. Yet on one trip, "we killed and ate an octopus."

Of course, plenty of ethical companies committed to tourism take visitors into nature without destroying it. But maintaining those standards is a constant battle. Christian Wolters is the Toronto-based marketing manager of Intrepid Travel, which prides itself on authentic trips where

clients interact with local peoples and cultures, often in spectacular natural settings such as Jasper National Park.

When Intrepid co-ordinates with third parties which offer such activities as horseback riding, the company does continual due diligence to ensure its values are upheld. "I have tons of horse stories where the animals were maltreated, underfed or overworked. While Intrepid offers very few horse riding adventures, we always audit how the animals are treated," Wolters says.

If it's difficult for those in the field to ensure high standards, how can the average person tell whether an ecotourism trip is authentic? "First, we ought to understand the meaning of ecotourism," advises Jim Coffey, owner of Esprit Rafting Adventures based in West Quebec. The company operates on Leave No Trace principles, supports river advocacy groups, urges clients to use carbon offsets and fuels its vehicles with biodiesel where possible.

"Search the web for discussion groups so you develop your own personal ideas. Then, don't be shy to ask the outfitter questions based on your research, and ask for references."

Bricker notes that successful ecotours have common elements: "Most trips I have thoroughly enjoyed have created low-impact venues for wildlife viewing, utilized funds from tourism to protect habitat, improved the health and well-being of local communities with tourism dollars, operated excellent interpretation programs for guests and employees, established programs to protect the area's ecology and created limits on tourism activities in the best interest of wildlife, habitat and capacity of the local communities."

Her list is useful to keep in mind when doing your own pre-booking research. "Low-impact



venues" are viewpoints where humans don't stress animals by venturing too close while they eat, mate or live their lives. For instance, several British Columbia ecotourism operators use platforms that allow guests to safely and unobtrusively observe grizzlies fishing for food.

By asking the right questions, you can help ensure support for wildlife-friendly travel operations, and higher standards for the industry as a whole. ☺

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WAITING FOR GUIDELINES

International certification for the ecotourism industry is coming . . . slowly. Visit www.sustainabletourismcriteria.org to follow the process as an international association of more than 40 organizations works toward defining sustainable tourism practices.

Meanwhile, many tourism operators in Canada and abroad are working hard to deliver sustainable, wildlife-friendly tourism. One example is the Wilderness Tourism Association of the Yukon; visit www.wtay.com and click on Code of Conduct.

THE VERDICT

To ensure you're booking a vacation that respects wildlife and the environment while delivering insights into nature, start by visiting websites of The International Ecotourism Society at www.ecotourism.org and Leave No Trace at www.leaveouttrace.ca.

Ask tour operators:

- How close do you recommend guests get to wildlife?
- Do you adhere to Leave No Trace protocols?
- When and how many trips do you operate? (Be sure the company stays away when young are most vulnerable and when parents are most protective.)
- What specifically are you doing to contribute to and improve habitat?

For more ideas, visit the Rainforest Alliance site at www.rainforest-alliance.org and from the left menu, click on tourism, then on tips and resources for travellers.