

Healthy Ecosystems = Healthy Business

Presented at the Annual New Zealand Ecotourism Conference
Nelson, 5-6 August 2009

Maryann Ewers and Bill Rooke
Bush and Beyond Guided Walks
Motueka

Background

Bush and Beyond Guided Walks were started 16 years ago in 1993. When we heard the Northwest Nelson Forest Park was being gazetted as a national park – Kahurangi – and opening in 1996, welcoming concessionaires, we were a little worried on how tourism would impact on the natural ecology of the area – whether it would be run sustainably. So, as conservationists, we decided we would set up a business, thereby acting as a ‘watchdog’ within the park, and generating a seasonal income, doing what we love most – being amongst our natural biota.

Therefore, Bush and Beyond was born out of passion. It is this passion for protecting our natural heritage, which naturally leads us to want to put something back into Kahurangi with its fragile ecology.

In 2000 we contacted the Department of Conservation, about setting up a stoat and rat trapping programme in the Flora Catchment area under Mount Arthur, which is on the eastern side of Kahurangi. This is an area where we regularly take clients, and over the years we were noticing a definite decline in all birds, and a major decline in some birds such as the blue duck/whio. To this end, we set up an incorporated society – the Friends of Flora (FOF) – and set about bringing in volunteers (60 volunteers and about 20 regular) to help us with this major undertaking. FOF has become a real community project, with us on its leading committee as Chair and Secretary. Our Society has 460 trap stations – 46 kilometres (100metre

spacing being DoC best practice), and along with DoC Motueka looking after a further 178, this is giving an approximate 5,000 hectare protection to the birds within. We have successfully brought the blue duck back from the brink in the Flora, through translocation, and, for the first time in 12 years, a pair has successfully fledged 3 young in the catchment. And our bird data shows all bird species rising – some more so than others. We are now well on the way to re-introducing the great spotted kiwi back into this protected area, where they can breed in safety. All permission required for this to happen, has been attained, and we are now seeking funding to carry out the re-introduction in March/April of 2010. FoF is working in conjunction with DoC on this. We liaise closely with the Department.

Three years ago, we (Bush and Beyond) also set up another stoat trapping programme in the Cobb Valley area, which is an area north west of the Flora. The new line now comprises more than 160 traps, over 16 kilometres. These lines are monitored and maintained by Bush and Beyond staff. We called upon others in Golden Bay to join us in this area to further increase the trap lines. Between all groups we have about 100 kilometres of traps. We are now in the process of joining these projects in the Flora and the Cobb area together, which will make them one of the largest volunteer trapping projects in the country. Once joined, the area of protection will be greater than 10,000 hectares.

FOF has become an integral part of Bush and Beyond and visa versa, in that we have been giving a \$5.00 donation for every person who

books with us, back into either of these projects since their inception. Many of our clients also give personal donations (sometimes substantial), to these projects, once they have learnt about how important it is to save what is left of our natural biodiversity. These ongoing donations have been vital for the day to day running of these projects, such as baits, petrol vouchers for volunteers, and any other equipment we need.

On all Bush and Beyond trips in these areas, our clients are shown these projects, and are encouraged to help us with the bird counts we do. As well, on all trips we record bird species seen and heard, rare plant species found, and any other important ecological information that DOC may be interested in.

Philosophy: Ecotourism versus Conservation Tourism

Our whole philosophy is conservation education through true and correct interpretation. We changed our branding to 'Conservation Tourism' rather than Ecotourism, many years ago, as we found, once this labelling became the 'in thing' in the tourism world, people were jumping on the band wagon and, as long as they passed a tree or a bird on their tours, were labelling themselves as such. We believe the term 'ECO' came to stand for 'economics', not 'ecology'. More about the dollar return than what we can return to our ecology. New Zealand has been very late in catching on to the Ecotourism Brand Name. Ecotourism was well established overseas as a brand when our business started but virtually nonexistent in New Zealand and to day there are many places in the world where Ecotourism is in fact getting a bad name through exploitation and green washing. In a changing world with such issues as habitat loss and climate change of major importance to our very survival, Ecotourism could be viewed as a contradiction in terms

unless it is willing to embrace, not just sustainability, but also limits on growth and also controlling numbers. There are parts of New Zealand that are already showing overcrowding to be detrimental to our perceived image.

There is more to true Ecotourism than just recycling, having a compost heap and growing ones own vegetable patch. Elsewhere in the world, this goes without saying.

We believe, if the leaders in New Zealand Tourism put more emphasis on advertising New Zealand for its inherent ecological values, rather than just the scenery, then the discerning tourist will come here to see what is truly unique about our country – what is within the scenery – our flora and fauna. Many countries have beautiful scenery and mountains. **No where else on earth has *our* natural biota.**

Advertised correctly, as a country that evolved differently than anywhere on earth, due to its 83 million years of isolation, will bring in the quality tourist we are seeking. Especially in this day and age of recession and climate change. Travel just for travels sake is going to drop to a minimum throughout the world in the future. If we are to insure they continue to travel this far, we have to ensure we are focussing on the right things.

We have to be very careful how we sell ourselves to the discerning traveller.

Conservation Tourism is one of the fastest growing tourism sectors in the world, yet it is one in which New Zealand trails behind. One only has to look in quality magazines, such as the UK's *BBC Wildlife*, to find adverts for conservation based tourism businesses all around the world. This includes the swiftly growing 'Voluntourism' sector.

People who read this, and are coming to New Zealand, would want to visit places such as Tiri Tiri Matangi, Kapiti, Karori, Brook Sanctuary, Heaphy Track and Oparara Basin. Instead the New Zealand Tourism Board has a very expensive double page ad (show ad) in this prestigious magazine, showing mountain bikers in a place that could be anywhere in the world, and the text says '100% Pure New Zealand', come and bungee jump, mountain bike, hot air balloon, taste our wines etc. Nowhere does it mention our natural ecology. This is what we have to focus on. This was the one chance for our nature based tourism operators to have a plug. A complete waste of money for the likes of us. We wish we could have helped to make this ad.

We have to also be careful not to focus on the high end market alone. We have so much to offer people from all economic backgrounds. If we aim for the wealthy tourist, mistaking this market as 'quality tourism', we will be cutting ourselves out of a huge potential world wide market. Quality isn't just about the money. It is about the service provided.

Interpretation

As we have previously said, ecotourism must focus on true and factual interpretation. Unless a business has the knowledge and the want to pass this knowledge on to its clients, then it should not be classified as true ecotourism. It requires all guides used in the field, to have an overall understanding of New Zealand's natural ecology and its fragility, and the need for us to have to look after and protect what little is left. It requires all head guides to have a deeper understanding and interpretation of our natural biota, to be able to impart to your clients plant and bird classification, and, most important, an up to date knowledge on current conservation issues and true and correct interpretation of New Zealand's natural history.

This may sound like a tour whereby the client is lectured for days on end – this couldn't be further from the truth of it. We impart our knowledge in a fun and informative way. The word 'fun' being the operative word. We have a passion for what we do, so every trip is as special to us, as it is to each of our clients.

The one constant feedback we get from our clientele is that our passion shines through on our tours, and is very infectious. One can't fake passion!

Our constant props are binoculars and magnifying glass. Our catch cry is 'we have all day'.

We attended an 'Interpretation' workshop held by the Tourism Industry Association and DoC a couple of years ago. During our day of learning how to 'interpret', we were told to keep things positive and upbeat for our clients at all times. We disagree with this philosophy and this is the crux of what we are trying to say here. We mustn't be afraid to tell people of our ecological disasters of the past 750 years. This must be told before we can lead them into the importance of what DoC and volunteer groups are doing today. Needless to say - we left this workshop realising we will never make good guides!

It is important to be yourself -- be honest and don't be afraid to say you don't have the answer for every question. Never fake it! We are all learning. *We* learn a great deal from our clients.

This knowledge can be built up over time. The Department of Conservation put out a folder of fact sheets for that workshop. This is a very practical way to start learning about what is around us in nature. There are many books out to study our flora, fauna, our natural history, and current issues facing conservation.

We have found, because of our niche ecology based advertising, we get many discerning foreign tourists who come here to learn about our unique biota. These people are well informed, and are not about to have the wool pulled over their eyes. They know enough about New Zealand's ecology before they come here, so will soon know when they are being misled. Many of our clients over the years have come here and been disappointed in our 'branding' In particular our so-called 'clean green image', and 100% Pure. As much as this branding has been good for tourism in general, in New Zealand for the past 10 years, it has ambiguous meanings, and is such a sweeping statement. It certainly can't apply to our natural ecology – but many think it does, and this can be our future downfall.

Once again – the world has to learn to care about our natural ecology – for the planets sake.

Many of these people in fact know more about our country's natural history than the average Kiwi does, and after being on one of our tours, many have expressed their concern that they had not been getting true and factual interpretation of New Zealand's natural history on some other tours. New Zealand's natural History is not a pretty one. Contrary to what many Kiwis think, we are considered internationally as having one of the worst records on the Planet regarding habitat destruction and species loss. We have only 5% of our lowland forests left, and 25% of our original forest cover, and this, with such a small population; in the last place on earth to be colonised. We are world leaders in some conservation areas, but mainly because we have such a mess to clean up. The negative aspects of our past should not be harped on about too much, but they must be mentioned as well as the positive. People want to hear the whole and true story regarding our natural world.

If we are advertising as 100% Pure in this day and age – we must work more on the state of our ecology.

The best thing we have found about our style of guiding is that we *can* make a difference! For our clients who come with us for a tour – whether that is a day walk or multi-day, they all leave us with a greater understanding of New Zealand's natural biota, and why we must do what we do, to insure we don't loose any more of it. Many of our clients head home with the thought of doing something in their own back yards to help conservation in their area, whether that is in New Zealand or overseas.

We think the best tip to give any other operator, or potential operator, is to focus on our natural biodiversity. If you don't know a great deal about it at this stage – then learn and up skill yourselves and your guides.

It doesn't cost anything to your business apart from the reading and cross referencing, and this is a time issue, but this is paid back in full by the repeat and referral free advertising you will get. Our repeat and referral makes up about 35% of our business.

We have learnt to niche advertise over the years – to learn what does and doesn't work for us. In our early years we had consultants left, right and centre trying to tell us what would work – “sure fire success if you following our instructions”. What we did learn in fact – was that not a single person we talked to within the tourism industry had any idea on how to market, or operate a conservation based business. How could they teach us something they didn't know about? We learnt from very early, that we were going to have to figure this out for ourselves.

We feel there is a gap in the ecotourism industry for such people.

Conclusion

In conclusion;

Defining exactly what Ecotourism really means has always been a problem. The definition seems to change year by year. Eco, we presume, does stand for ecology but in many activities branding them-selves as eco, it can be difficult to find the ecology component.

Green washing is a common term in Tourism these days. In New Zealand we have an opportunity to present a quality Eco product to the tourism world. We shouldn't be smug about this. We should learn from our mistakes and take notice, and learn from other countries as well (what does and doesn't work).

One part of doing this is for our Tourism heads to advertise *all* of New Zealand as a destination – not just be pushing the iconic places we all know. This is leading to unsustainable tourism in some areas due to over crowding, which takes away any wilderness experience we may be advertising. Because of this much targeted advertising by our tourism leaders, it is very hard for businesses outside of these iconic locations to entice tourists, that their destination is as good as say, Milford Sound or Queenstown.

We must spread the tourist numbers throughout the country before we end up destroying these 'so called' iconic places through overcrowding. If this happens – tourists will stop coming.

We would like to emphasis the need to change New Zealand's tourism focus. From one of not just a scenic nature, but to one of conservation based. The conservation based tourism business must become the 'norm' not the 'exception'.

But remember – there won't be any ecotourism unless we all protect what precious little we have left of our natural world.