

The coverage of place

Ecotourism meets, and thrives,
on the Internet



“How do we connect the circle that unites readers-travellers-locals-writers-travel companies-social activists-educators?”

In November 2001, Planeta.com sponsored the Media, Environment and Tourism Conference (MET) (www.planeta.com/ecotravel/period/metevent) which brought together more than 160 journalists from around the globe for a forum that linked the environmental and tourism beats.

Discussion ranged from reflections on the state of travel guidebooks to the ethics of environmental journalism to suggestions for niche publishers. Most of the discussion focused on the urgent need for journalists to improve the “coverage of place”.

Since 1994 Planeta.com has been a pioneering website at the intersection of environmental and travel journalism. In recent years it has facilitated 10 online conferences and more than 50 forums. The MET Conference was the seventh formal conference and was co-sponsored by Guidebookwriters.com, National Geographic Traveler, Society for Environmental Journalists and Sustainable Sources.

The MET Conference invited participants to reflect upon, and answer, a series of questions about the linkages between media coverage, tourism and the environment:

- Do journalists have a definition of what constitutes ecotourism?
- How will journalists cover 2002's International Year of Ecotourism?
- What is the status of media outlets interested in publishing articles, books or websites or producing documentaries about environmental travel?
- Is there a difference between taking a free trip from a travel company or an environmental group?
- How reliable are ecotourism statistics?

- How reliable are eco-related certification standards?
- How can journalists work together to evaluate and cross-check tourism destinations and services?

Active participation in the MET Conference was limited to media professionals with at least two years' experience in either environmental or travel media. The result was a frank discussion and some intriguing proposals for follow-up work. The conference developed a number of innovative proposals:

- As journalists, we should focus more on place instead of destinations. The market for this type of reporting will have to be developed with editors and publishers.
- We need to create our own list of questions that should be standard for a review of sustainable tourism practices.
- We recommend that specialists offer Internet workshops for local leaders working toward environmental conservation and tourism development.
- We recommend the development of synergistic networks of websites dedicated to environmental travel.
- We encourage local roundtable discussions around the globe.
- We should develop our own publishing arm for a literature that focuses on the quality of place.

The media and ecotourism

At the dawn of the International Year of Ecotourism, “ecotourism” remains a buzzword – still undefined in most newsroom dictionaries. Check out the variety of businesses listed when you plug “ecotourism” into a web search engine,

Author and journalist Ron Mader lives in Oaxaca, Mexico and presents workshops and presentations throughout the Americas. Mader hosts the award-winning Planeta.com website and is the author of the Mexico: Adventures in Nature guidebook and the Exploring Ecotourism in the Americas resource guide. In 2001 he hosted the online Sustainable Development of Ecotourism Web Conference, hosted by the World Tourism Organisation and United Nations Environment Programme. The summary of the online conference was used in the preparation of the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism which will be presented at this year's World Summit on Sustainable Development.

A key tool in the dissemination of information

Few will argue that the Internet provides any issue a ‘wide web’ of possibilities... if you know how to use it. Many environmentally-minded individuals, groups and journalists are using the web to disseminate information about the environment in the form of ecotourism. It has been argued that ecotourism can romanticise the seriousness of sustainable development by luring tourists to exotic sites, not polluted waterways. However, if done properly, others feel reporting on ecotourism can raise public awareness, ‘luring’ people to locations where they will not only enjoy themselves but learn something in the process.

Planeta.com, under the direction of Ron Mader, is developing a network of like-minded journalists by facilitating dialogue, resource links and tips for ecotourism

reporting. For Mader the web is a key tool in the dissemination of information for those wishing to see the long-term success of environment and socially-friendly projects. The watchdog function of journalists is being shared among stakeholders with access to the web.

Increasingly, journalists, like other professionals, are just learning to use the web in more effective ways. The web provides not only for global distribution of edited materials, it also provides the community forums and specialised listserves in which questions can be asked in public. Up to now, the preferred means has been using private email. Journalists are just beginning to learn how to ask questions in these public forums, says Mader.

The website host says during the Dot-com bubble, the Internet provided incredible salaries for freelancers.

Those salad days are over, but there are still jobs available for those writing for the web. Publishers are also learning how to weave the web into more traditional venues, like books, newspapers, radio and magazines.

Debuting in 1994, Planeta.com was one of the first sites on the web to focus on ecotourism. The site explores both environmental issues and tourism, particularly in the Americas. According to Mader, ecotourism is considered a practical development/conservation strategy.

Planeta.com has been named one of the 50 best travel-related websites by *Trips* magazine and one of the top 1 000 sites on the Internet by *PC Computing*. In 2001 the Mexican government presented Planeta.com the “Lente de Plata” (Silver Lens) award for its coverage of Mexican tourism.

and very few have a relation to either local communities or toward environmental stewardship. Planeta.com features a special guide to definitions – which outlines the terms used on our site as well as links to related resources. Other magazines and wire agencies are not quite so diligent with terms.

Ecotourism can mean anything from a community lodge to a jet ski operator. Too often editors allow their advertisers to define the word. I've chastised several colleagues for referring to golf courses as "ecotourism" simply because the courses were green. (This is not to imply a disdain for golf courses, but rather the need for distinction.)

Worse than greenwashing occurs when the mainstream media simply dodges stories. Incident: In 1997 a Norwegian cruise ship literally plowed over a reef offshore Cancun. The story received little press in Miami – the cruise ship's home port.

Could the reason for the absence of such stories have anything to do with the advertisers? These accounts are some of the most lucrative for the largest dailies and magazines. Editors and publishers may say their readers are not interested, that travel writing is escapism. If so, readers need to demand more from their publications.

There is one other attitude at play – editors aren't sure where to place these environmental/travel stories. The newsroom divide between "travel features" and "hard news" is a gulf at most dailies. When it comes to stories such as the negative environmental impact of cruise ships, editors debate whether to play it as a light feature or news. Too often, papers ignore this type of story as one that editors can ignore since it lies "out of the box".

Media disintegration

Nothing is more frustrating than the demise of environmental media after it flourished at the top of the 1990s. The great collapse occurred only a few years after the 1992 Earth Summit. Promising magazines, newspapers and newsletters such as *Texas Environmental News*, *Environment Watch: Latin America* and *Mexican Environmental Business* disappeared.

In travel media we have seen a similar collapse. Post 9/11, publishers are cutting back on publications and operations. Avalon has announced it will cease the "Adventures in Nature" guidebook series and other specialised books are also being removed from the shelves.

On the web, the OAS-funded "Destination Management Services" websites for Central and South America disappeared and defaulted on payments to writers and editors. Other projects pulled their own plug, including Central America-focused Green Arrow Guide and UK-based Geographic.

Having insider experience with several of these ventures, I am keenly aware of the challenges.

It's a paradox that while we have a great number of superb writers and an interest in ecotourism, the paying market is very small. Outside of a few wonderful niche magazines and journals, international reporting seems limited to what was discussed in official meetings or distributed by NGO communications offices. We find very little investigative reporting unless it is tied to fairly sensationalistic topics.

What we don't find are more modest fact-checking endeavours. Questions that we could ask include: What are the results of internationally-funded ecotourism projects in the developing world? What are the results of WWF's or CI's conservation programmes? How well does certification work in forestry or coffee? Can these lessons (and should they) be

transferred to tourism certification?

Any of these questions could be "answered" via a phone conversation or email, but it would require a costly trip to confirm the details, and frankly, few media outlets are interested.

My solution – we need to pursue a new direction.

Healing the disconnect

There seems to be a pattern here: the lack of communication leads to the lack of continuity and subsequent failure of journals, of ecotourism projects, of environmental conservation initiatives. The solution seems quite clear. We need to improve communication across the board.

Let's interpret communication as those reports and publications in the public realm. Whether the reports are polished magazine articles or in-house digests, they play a role in focusing attention on the issues. If we are seeking effective environmental policies, then what is needed, post haste, are honest reviews of what is taking place. Too often NGOs and government offices alike use the web to provide brochure-level materials that put their projects in a good light. There's nothing wrong with this, but the institutions could go a step further – provide timely reports, case studies, budgets, personnel lists and other contacts. Likewise, professional media outlets could dedicate themselves not only to reporting what people say they are doing, but instead the fact-finding missions in which to investigate the claims.

Where is the press coverage of failed development initiatives? These topics lack the sex appeal of a cruise ship disaster, and even that's poorly told. I don't believe it is the role of the media to play the eternal doomsayer and critic, but it is our job to pay attention. Publications need to report failures and successes alike.

Improving communication should be our number one priority. If we have more work than we have markets, we need to be more creative. And I don't think it requires an us-versus-them attitude. How do we connect the circle that unites readers-travelers-locals-writers-travel companies-social activists-educators? It's what we do online every day, but this hasn't yet filtered into our "natural world" in an effective manner.

One of the frequent discussion threads during the MET Conference is the continued discussion of the value of local reporters versus parachute journalists. Why don't we write more about the places where we live? (Mind you, it's not just journalists who have trouble working locally. How much do international ecotourism organisations or conservation groups work in their own backyard?)

As we cover the globe, we need to pay attention and participate in our own localities. If there is a disconnect, let's find a way to heal it.

How?

- Writers should form alliances and networks to assist each other.
- Publications should dedicate more space to explaining the complexities of ecotourism. (It doesn't need to be dry!)
- Development agencies and government offices should be more honest about their initiatives and welcome participation from individuals and institutions alike.
- Foundations should support the meetings and initiatives that foster open, cross-sector dialogues. There should be an immediate end to the funding of closed-door meetings.

