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Ecotourism and the Media - Opportunities & Challenges - Global Ecotourism  
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#### Abstract

The travel industry is currently not sufficiently confronting the issue of travellers concerns over the harmful impact of aviation on the environment. The media approach to this threatens to make travel 'the new tobacco', however absurd that may seem. Despite this, considerable opportunities exist to market, promote and raise awareness of ecotourism and related products and issues.

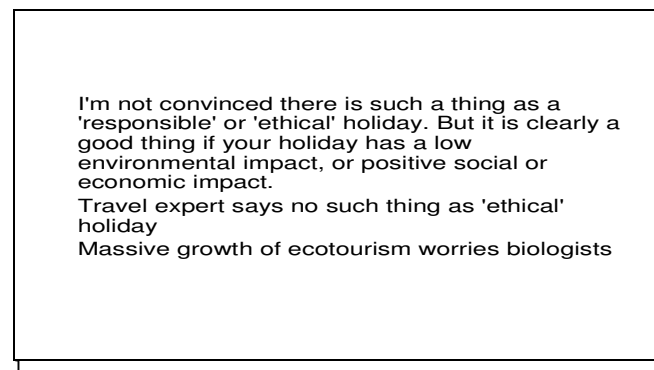
### *Travel: the new tobacco*

I'm very honoured to be representing Lonely Planet at TIES. I'm especially pleased to be here because I nearly wasn't – challenged by colleagues to travel overland from London I resolved to do just that. Thanks to the eccentricities of the European rail network I have therefore spent the last two nights on a bench in Brussels Zuid station and in the Swedish equivalent of a Travel Tavern. Still, the journey had many wonderful moments, none more so than the final journey to today's destination and I'd recommend it to anyone. If journeys like that are the end result of minding your carbon footprint then travelling will continue to be lots of fun.

I've been asked to talk about ecotourism and the media, with particular stress on challenges and opportunities. The media is very much a double-edged sword, and working in guidebooks means you see both sides close up. Now I don't know what delegate's perceptions are of the media and its portrayal of ecotourism, and perhaps this is something we can touch on if there is time later. On the whole, it represents a tremendous opportunity, and an enormous challenge. Nothing can give an effective boost to business as a positive review, but nothing else has the power to chew up an issue or industry, spit it out and move on.

I'd like to start with challenges – because I feel at the moment that there is a huge conflict taking place within the media on the subject of travel and the environment. If you haven't been exposed to it yet, its coming soon to a newspaper near you.

Here's some recent coverage from the UK media:



I'm sure none of what I'm about to say is news to any of you.

There are two competing forces covering ecotourism, and travel issues generally. The media works in two ways: an editorial or news agenda and a features agenda. These quotes cover the first. The news agenda is constantly looking for fresh angles on

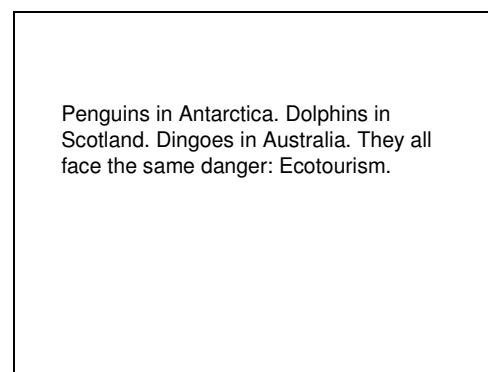
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<sup>1</sup> "Travel: the new tobacco", Amelia Hill, [The Observer](#), Sunday May 6 2007 ; Ibid.; "Massive growth of ecotourism worries biologists", Anil Ananthaswamy, New Scientist, May 2004

stories, looking for something to sell papers, something sexy. Politics and public obsessions play a part in this. You don't need me to tell you the extent environmental issues, which ecotourism often falls into, are high on personal and political agendas.

A features-based agenda, such as newspaper travel sections, tackles subjects in detail and while also looking for something new and fresh, seeks to inform in detail without so much (what we in England would call) muck-raking.

The media is always looking for the next big thing - and ecotourism has been around for a while. Incredibly valuable and positive pieces such as the recent Travelling light: a green guide in the Wall St Journal from last month are increasingly rare: awareness of ecotourism issues is maturing in many markets media. Some appear to have decided that the next big thing is bashing ecotourism, or dismissing it as a fad. In many cases, concerns are legitimate and cannot be simply dismissed.



Is this something to be worried about? Of course. I'm sure headlines like this are a source of frustration. But it's also important to anticipate this. The very nature of the media is oppositional and green opps cannot expect an easy ride.

The solution? Focus on the travel sections of newspapers, but if tricky questions come from the news desk be open, transparent and honest. The headline we have seen bring into focus some of the issues pressing ecotourism: the need for high standards, education and communication, the risk of even the perception that a particular attraction or hotel's green credentials are just greenwash, and the problems inherent in mass tourism which won't be solved overnight.

There is naturally a difference in approach between news and travel angles. Let's have a look at recent coverage of the Galapagos to see some examples of what I mean.

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<sup>2</sup> "Penguins in Antarctica. Dolphins in Scotland. Dingoes in Australia, They all face the same danger: Ecotourism." C. Arthur, *The Independent*, March 4, 2004.

The Galápagos Islands may soon be added to the World Heritage in Danger list. Last month, at the urging of the Ecuadorean government, a [Unesco](#) mission visited the national park and marine reserve there and confirmed that it is "under threat," in part because of the "uncontrolled development of tourism.

New York Times

Wealthy, first-world visitors must share the blame for the Galapagos oil spill. Perhaps some parts of the world should be out of bounds.

The Independent

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You'll often find more pro-tourism and in my opinion more measured views in travel coverage:

Banning tourists from the Galapagos will hasten their demise.

Intelligent application of sustainable tourism will save this natural wonder for generations to come. As I said, it's elementary.

Graham Boynton, Travel Editor, Daily Telegraph

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And, while tourism gets an almost uniform bad press, in travel sections positive voices, even from within the industry can have their say:

Tourism does exploit the earth's natural wonders (let's be honest) but tour operators can ease their impact by working with companies who really do give something back. For example voyage operators that contribute to scientific research or provide logistical support to the scientific study of environmental issues, climate change, wildlife and the Antarctic ecosystem or charitable organisations such as the Antarctic Heritage Trust or the Save the Albatross campaign.

Nicola Rickett from Discover the World, Guardian Travelog

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<sup>3</sup> "Unesco Considers Putting Galápagos on Endangered List"; Jennifer Conlin, New York Times; April 29 2007; citation unavailable

<sup>4</sup> Commentary: Banning tourists from the Galapagos will hasten their demise, Graham Boynton Daily Telegraph 11 April, 2007

<sup>5</sup> Is Antarctica a Galapagos in the making?, Nicola Rickett, [http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/travelog/2007/05/is\\_antarctica\\_a\\_galapagos\\_in\\_t.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/travelog/2007/05/is_antarctica_a_galapagos_in_t.html)

So while I don't know people's views on how ecotourism is portrayed in the media, if anyone is tempted to throw their hands up in horror and say that ecotourism is universally slated, the picture is not always so simple.

If pointing out some examples of positive or negative coverage of messages was all that was needed, this talk would be straightforward. In terms of challenges, there is a far larger one than the odd headline about the Galapagos Islands.

And I would argue that the carbon question – in particular, the harmful impact of air travel on the environment - threatens to obscure any goodwill towards ecotourism in the media. And it is turning something 'Good' with a capital 'G' into something that can never be described as 'Good' even with a small g.

Here are some figures you may be familiar with.

A return flight from London to New York emits 1.54 Tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per person. That's the equivalent of boiling a kettle for two months or leaving on a flat-screen TV non-stop for three years, or running the car 24 hours a day for four weeks. But at least the shopping is cheap. A return flight to Australia will use one person's total carbon allowance for 18 months in two, 24-hour chunks of air travel.

In the UK, A return flight from London to Newcastle on average emits 120 kilograms of CO<sub>2</sub> per person. By comparison, the same journey by train emits 39 kilograms.

Aviation accounts for 6% of UK emissions, and 2-7% globally. The truth is that aviation accounts for a small proportion of greenhouse gas emissions: around 5%. In a worst-case scenario, scientists believe that figure will rise to over 60% by the year 2050. There is no existing or planned technofix to sort this out. The aviation industry has no answer to the accusations that it is wantonly contributing towards climate change.

I repeat those figures to underline how familiar they have become to many of us. In the UK, more than anywhere, the knock-on effect of these figures has been a full-frontal assault on the travel industry in all its guises.

If the travel industry rosily goes ahead as it is doing, ignoring the effect that carbon emissions from flying are having on climate change, we are putting ourselves in a very similar position to the tobacco industry.

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<sup>6</sup> "Flights reach record levels despite warnings over climate change", David Adam, The Guardian, May 9 2007

The figures I just quoted add up to more than the sum of their parts. They give a media, hungry for a sexy angle on climate change, ammunition to fire at the travel industry and travellers. At the dark green end of the debate you find commentators who are explicitly anti-travel.

Without an alternative solution, this voice has more and more impact. easyJet recently attributed a downturn in flights to the impact of the 'green lobby'. Staying in an ecolodge when you arrive in your destination is all well and good, but when your flight directly contributes to the destruction of that community there is no excuse for taking this journey. The irony of this is that it positions ecotourism on the side of helping to destroy the environment.

Whether these arguments are right or wrong isn't really the point. In the UK, and increasingly in other countries this is the dominant environmental travel story. It shadows every ecotourism good news story, in particular coverage of the vast majority of trips not accessible by land. And it is not one that is in the travel industry's power to exert influence over.

If that makes you unhappy or is frustrating, or is a message you've heard before, tough. With a few notable exceptions, the debate is in a mess - no-one knows what angle to take, or how to handle the flying question. This includes most of the travel industry. I would argue that a conciliatory response from this arm of the travel industry, embracing this question is key if the strengths of ecotourism are to be communicated and understood. This is one question that no-one in the aviation or travel industry should view as anything other than a massive deal.

And yet there is an inconsistency in all this.

While alarmist, anti-travel pieces appear in one section, travel sections carry colour pieces ads for late deals, budget carriers, luxury cruises. Several newspapers have excellent regular green travel columns or features, including for holidays abroad. The money coming in from advertising, plus the unquestionable ongoing appeal of travel, however guilty readers are meant to feel ensures travel's profile remains high. If travel is the new tobacco, then plenty of people, including the media, are very hooked indeed.

This means that the media is still a land of opportunities and hopefully I can add some positive suggestions at this point.

The first and perhaps simplest opportunity offered to ecotourism by the media is that the concept of responsible, ethical or sustainable tourism is still a relatively new one. This is true in many markets, and in most others it remains a niche issue. It is certainly a modern one and one that taps very much into the green zeitgeist.

As we've heard, the media is always looking for the next big thing - and climate change/environment is a massive issue for global media. In particular, the issue of how we can still enjoy a consumerist lifestyle while living within our means: travel that fits these criteria will do well with the media. A holistic green lifestyle naturally has room for ecotourism.

What does this mean, then? It means that responsible holidays have a head-start on other ones, an immediate hook to pitch to travel supplements. The door to getting coverage which I'm sure many of you have tried to open may be a little less slammed shut. There is a challenge inherent in this, that of hanging any potential pitch off the experience rather than the ethics. That your hotel or tour is part of a local or international accreditation scheme, has a great waste water provision or a flawless labour agreement is commendable.

It is not sexy.

What is sexy is the marvellous wildlife that's a few yards from your window, that new destination that few other tourists have ventured to or an exciting new activity. And a sexy, fresh angle is what travel supplements are looking for. The emphasis must be on experience.

Luckily, ecotourism has a huge reserve of fantastic experiences to offer. A fundamental benefit of ecotourism is the amount of attention and care that goes into this travellers experience results in a better holiday. With detailed planning of everything from location to interaction with local people to the standard of accommodation, in the vast majority of cases the holiday on offer is simply a better one. Greener? Yes. Better for local communities? Absolutely. But first and foremost, a better trip, a better experience.

This is ecotourism's trump card. I recommend you use it.

This is also true for business travel. The side benefit of ecotourism - lower costs and something positive for a companies own CSR activities – present a business and publicity opportunity. If consumer travel coverage demonstrates the benefit to readers – new, better, cheaper, greener, business travel coverage needs to demonstrate to your boss the business benefit). Again, the emphasis is on experience – greener, better for the company's CSR report, cheaper, less carbon. If you're operating in this sector, you need to demonstrate more than just the green nature of your product. It should innovate, set high standards and be good value.

We are seeing green hotels in new urban locations, and top-end chains greening their businesses, but the business market remains an untapped niche. Publications like Business Traveller, and the Business Travel Magazine are desperate for green good news stories – this represents a strong opportunity to make ecotourist messages more mainstream.

This involves careful positioning and good work from PRs and Sales & Marketing executives. It also requires careful relationship-building with travel media, and effective driving of word of mouth marketing.

The second opportunity comes with the challenges I have outlined above. The travel industry needs to embrace criticism and be seen as progressive. There are rewards to this – shown through the work of Intrepid Travel, easyJet and Eurostar. Evasiveness and any lack of transparency makes you look like McDonalds.

Lonely Planet, I hope, are setting something of an example in the travel publishing industry by embracing the debates at the heart of our businesses. This means looking at our books, one-by-one, and tackling inconsistencies. It means investing in authors who can work with organisations on the ground. Guidebooks remain and should become more of a place where ecotourism issues are brought into the mainstream.

This also means pointing out tips and advice on our website, and trying to give good advice on tough issues, and not hiding from those debates. It means being constantly focussed on the traveller. It also means taking a holistic approach and being transparent about business practices.

Some futurology then – where's all this going?

The great unknown is the long-term public reaction once the media agenda moves on from carbon to something else entirely. It could be something that has negligible impact, or we could be seeing the first signs in the UK of the impact of this issue on travel patterns.

But the argument for travel remains compelling. In the short term, if tourism is to deliver the financial and social benefits to host communities in the developing world in particular then there is no practical alternative to flying. Grounding all planes tomorrow would stop a fraction of the world's carbon emissions. It would have a disastrous effect on the world's developing economies which rely on tourism. That is a key issue.

The most important concept that I would like to make relevant to you is one that the travel industry has become familiar with: that of discontinuous change: change that is radical, rapid and unexpected.

There are ways to handle and ways not to handle this debate. Firstly, it should be embraced. There aren't always clear answers on this issue. If you don't have answers, at least don't be deaf to questions.

In conclusion, in the short term: opps and inconsistencies. In the medium term, discontinuous change. In long term, there must be a solution to the flying question, whether it is through carbon credits, technology or a decline in tourism. We would all do well to be prepared for this. So working with the media is likely to be a frustrating business for everyone in tourism.