The Role of the Tour Operator
In the Environmental Education of Consumers
(Theme C)

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Statement

Deforestation, climate change, loss of biodiversity. These are just a few of the serious environmental concerns facing the world today. In the ten years since the Rio Earth Summit, little progress has been made in resolving these issues. The concentration of CO2 in the atmosphere continues to increase, the cutting and burning of the world’s forests has not slowed, and the endangerment of species as a result of human activities continues at a rapid pace.

Despite the lack of major progress on these global issues, public awareness is growing, corporations are beginning to support environmentally responsible business practices, and many countries have made significant progress in some areas, such as in reducing air pollution. Change is possible, but we must all contribute in our own way. So how can we as tour operators make a difference? What role can and do those of us involved in the ecotourism industry play in helping the environment?

First, the very act of operating an ecotourism business in the right way makes a difference. Done right, ecotourism provides local economies with a form of income that is sustainable in the long term. Through the equitable employment of guides, drivers, porters, cooks, lodges, hotels, and other local operators, we provide an alternative to slash and burn agriculture, clear-cut logging and other environmentally harmful economic activities. Flora and fauna brings tourists and the tourist dollar in turn provides jobs and opportunities for local people. Recognition that trees are more valuable standing than felled provides an incentive to local people to protect their natural environment. Further, local people benefit from the opportunity to earn a livelihood in an industry that, if managed properly, is indefinitely sustainable.
Second, as tour operators we can make a commitment to promote and contribute to those organizations dedicated to addressing environmental and social issues, whether at the local, state, or global level. There are many organizations that are truly making a difference addressing such issues as child poverty, conservation, or deforestation. By helping to conserve biological diversity, protect threatened rainforest, or working to improve the quality of life of the people whose communities we visit, they help ensure the permanence of the people and places that are the focus of our tours. Therefore, as tour operators, it is important that we recognize the degree to which we benefit from the work they do.

Third, we can educate the local people and operators with whom we work about environmental issues and why they should be concerned about them. Responsible business practice benefits not only the environment, but also the long-term viability of those who embrace it. We can teach our local partners about low-impact tourism, what it means, and why it is important. And we can show them how to establish relevant environmental and social standards of their own that are both realistic and effective in achieving desirable results.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we can make a difference through the environmental and social education of our passengers. This is an area that is sometimes overlooked as a tool of change. One of the critical components of success in bringing about environmental change is increasing public awareness. By educating the public, we will ultimately instruct the legislators who act upon the beliefs of their constituents. Without public awareness, there is no political will to effect change. Education has a ripple effect. The more people there are that demand sustainable business practices, the more companies there are that will change their corporate philosophies.

This last area is one in which we, as tour operators, have the potential to make a real and significant impact. Our passengers choose ecotourism holidays over more mainstream vacations in order to experience another culture or visit a unique wilderness area. Some choose this sort of travel because they recognize the importance of low-impact tourism, while others, looking initially only for an exotic holiday, learn about it over the course of their tour. Many however, are not aware of the broader environmental and social issues that affect so many developing countries. Here we have an opportunity to inform people about issues that they might otherwise never learn about.

Environmental education for consumers will take many forms. It means that in addition to educating passengers about how to travel in a responsible, low-impact way, we encourage and provide opportunities for discussion of a visited country’s environmental and social issues. It means including more extensive, thought-provoking information on current issues with materials sent to passengers in advance of trips. And it means educating trip leaders about the broader issues so that they can act as a resource for further information. This is
not a process that can happen overnight, but it is a goal that is certainly achievable.

At G.A.P Adventures, we developed our Ecotourism Operator Standards a few years ago as a means of ensuring that our tours operated in a manner that was socially and environmentally responsible. Our goal was to ensure that we did not negatively impact the places that we visited and that we provided economic benefit to local people. Now we are ready to take our efforts one step further. We are ready to expand our commitment to responsible tourism. We are ready to work towards increasing public awareness not only of those environmental issues that relate specifically to tourism but of the general environmental and social issues that affect the countries in which we operate. By taking this step, we can make a difference.

About G.A.P Adventures

G.A.P Adventures has been helping travellers discover the world of adventure for ten years. Its own unique style of small group travel allows the company to go places and do things that would be impossible with more traditional styles of travel. A trip with G.A.P is an immersion experience not easily forgotten. As a world leader in sustainable tourism, G.A.P Adventures works with Conservation International and PLAN International on an ongoing basis. In June 2000 the company was awarded the Ethics in Action Award for leadership in social responsibility among Canadian companies.

Founder and CEO Bruce Poon Tip started G.A.P Adventures in 1991 at the age of 22. Living in a garage and working up to 20 hours per day in a cramped office space in downtown Toronto, Poon Tip financed the company with credit cards and money borrowed from friends. Inspired by a budget trip to Thailand in 1990, his goal was to offer tours modeled on the backpacker experience. Over the years, Poon Tip has received much recognition for his efforts. In late January he had the honour of representing the global travel industry for the launch of the International Year of Ecotourism 2002 at UN Headquarters in New York. For more information about G.A.P Adventures, please visit our website at www.GAPadventures.com.