THE FUTURE OF WILDLIFE

As part of a yearly networking event held by responsibletravel.com, one of Biosphere’s directors was asked to be part of a panel of wildlife tourism experts to discuss how wildlife tourism has developed and what the important issues for the future are.

It is interesting for Biosphere Expeditions to be included in a debate like this, as our mantra on expedition is ‘this is not a holiday’, and we do not see ourselves as part of the tourist industry. Having said that, people do use their holiday time and their holiday money to come and work with us, so we can see why the industry included us ...

A GROWING MARKET

Within the travel industry, wildlife tourism is a growing market – this was something that all could agree on. It is, in fact, the fastest growing sector of the tourist industry and over recent years this has attracted the set-up of many new organisations with the purpose of helping people to get all over the world to enjoy (and sometimes support) the wildlife that exists there. People were warned to beware of operations that are just there to make money for themselves and that do not make a positive contribution to the wildlife or the local areas to which they go.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

There is a greater awareness of the damage that we are doing to our environment and the growing sense of an appreciation of nature. This has meant wanting to see wildlife in its natural state and not simply through TV documentaries or zoos, and also wanting to help to protect some of the animals and environments that are under greatest threat. The important aspect here is that when people travel to have wildlife experiences, that they come with realistic expectations and that organisations who take them do not try to give people experiences that are not ‘authentic’.

There are wonderful wildlife documentaries that move and inspire people, but sometimes they also encourage people to believe that animals will be jumping out at them every minute and that the jungle or the savannah, or whichever habitat it is, will be a pristine wilderness devoid of people. Wilderness has been romanticised and it is time for a better understanding of the place of people in natural landscapes to be shown in documentaries.

Close encounters with wildlife cannot be expected at every turn on a real research expedition. This picture was taken by David Kamholtz in Hervey Bay, Australia, and was the winning photo in a recent Facebook photo competition.
SUPPORTING LOCAL PEOPLE

Wildlife tourism has also become more and more important as a way to support local communities and fund conservation. When tourists become interested in an area because of its wildlife, they not only go to the area and help create jobs through staying in hotels, buying local food and local souvenirs, but they also often pay quite large park fees or other payments that ideally go directly to conservation management. The importance of this is twofold. It means that local people will value their wildlife as a source of income and this means that they are more inclined to protect it. It is no good asking people to stop hunting animals for food or to sell parts of them for supposed medicine or as curios, if this means that people are much less well off. We cannot ask people to put themselves at risk for the sake of the wildlife around them. There needs to be a clear financial benefit for local people in protecting wildlife as ultimately this is how long-term conservation will work.

THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism, if it is well managed, can be a powerful tool for communicating science and teaching people about the environment and wildlife. ‘Citizen scientists’ are needed to fill gaps in knowledge and to gather information about species and habitats. There aren’t enough scientists to do the work, so volunteers are needed!

The panel closed in agreement about the value people place on an ‘authentic’ travel experience. Travelling that helps people to learn about habitats, wildlife and people, and allows them to exchange ideas with people abroad were highly valued.

For better or for worse, wildlife is often romanticised. This picture was taken by Jiri Haueljuk whilst tracking the famous Susa group in Virunga, Democratic Republic of Congo. It was one of the runners-up in Biosphere Expeditions’ recent Facebook photo competition.