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Shannon Stowell

Helping others, one holiday at a time

ADVENTURE TRAVEL SAVES THE WORLD

Anything or anyone claiming to save the world is appropriately met with eye-rolling and sighing. We're a cynical people who've been there, done that, and know there's no magical panacea that can save the world.

The general global consensus is that every human action contributes a piece to the world's grand fabric and potentially its demise. Yet travel professionals from Greenland to Brazil and from Norway to Canada have a determinedly similar view: adventure travel – combining physical activity, cultural immersion and the great outdoors – is a potent force in helping solve some of the world's most intractable problems.

How does a seemingly trivial activity like an adventure holiday hold a key to helping affect life on this planet for good?

Think of world tourism as the earth's circulatory system. Mass tourism venues and major attractions like Disney World or the Great Pyramids of Egypt are the heart, aorta and major veins of this system. They're where mass transit happens – for better or worse – and keep economies pumping and revenues flowing. Keep in mind that tourism is estimated to create 10 percent of all GDP on earth – larger than any other industry.

Adventure tourism from the world's largest three markets (Europe, North America and Latin America) is a \$50bn industry. This doesn't even take into account domestic adventure tourism – that \$50bn is purely the outbound market. It's roughly the same amount Bernie Madoff stole. How

much Lehman brothers 'hid.' It's less than what Bill Gates is personally worth. Which means adventure travel is a really, really good social investment. It employs millions of people and supports millions more through the ripple effect of the revenue that hits restaurants, artisans, guides and lodges.

In the earth's circulatory system, it is adventure tourism in all its various forms – eco, rural and nature tourism – that keep the limbs and extremities alive. Adventure travel acts as the little veins and capillaries of tourism. Hundreds of thousands of eco-lodges, trail systems, wildlife preserves, tour operators, nature preserves and the like that drive people and resources out to the far reaches of the planet.

HOW MANY OTHER INDUSTRIES TURN THE CASUAL TRAVELLER INTO AN AVID ADVOCATE FOR CONSERVATION?

Travellers concerned with their environmental impact should note that it is often only tourism that protects some of the world's most treasured wildlife reserves and animals. Once the local populace understands that killing and selling or eating the last of the local wildlife is a short term benefit, then it is often tourism that replaces the value and revenue.

We should ask ourselves how many other industries:

- Transfer money from the developed to the undeveloped world and leave it in local communities (instead of huge multinational hotel chains where all the profits go back to the same old cities)?

- Introduce people to other cultures and ways of thinking to open the way they see the world?

- Have a clear focus on the 'triple bottom line' of helping local economies, protecting the environment and preserving cultures?

- Turn the casual traveller into an avid advocate for conservation and cultural understanding?

- Encourage governmental authorities to think about preserving and supporting local companies before saying yes to homogenous multinational brands?

- Get people to buy hand made products and locally grown food as part of a normal trip offering?

I've shared tea with Kurds in Iraq who desperately want to know and understand Americans, watched Rick Steves on PBS reel in surprise when Iranians tell him they love America, spoken with groups of Uighur Chinese who as one agree that the people of China love America but that the governments continue to get in the way... the beautiful stories go on and on.

Sometimes the impact is direct. I was privileged to be part of a delegation to an area in the world where the government is very repressive of local minorities. The government was our host and gave us a fairly in-depth tour of the destination with the specific request that we give an assessment and feedback for their consideration. As they desire incoming revenue from tourists (and this destination would only serve the adventurous traveller), we had the ear of the highest authorities in the region including the Governor, to whom we were able to carefully deliver this difficult message: If you want tourists to come, you must find a way to preserve and care for the local minorities who have an amazing culture of stories, song, dance, food and way of life that people will pay big money to see. In other words, turn down the oppression. □

Shannon Stowell is president of the Adventure Travel Trade Association. He has travelled the globe extensively, speaking on adventure tourism and sustainability practices.