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The future of eco-tourism in Peru

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With over 30-years experience guiding an ever increasing number of travellers through the ecological delights of Peru, José Koechlin is a world-renowned expert on eco-tourism.

As co-founder of Inkaterra, Mr Koechlin has pioneered a carbon neutral approach to the exploration of Peru's many delights; a practice particularly valuable with the world now facing the growing threat of global warming.

Here he talks to travelbite.co.uk about the many delights of his native Peru, the threats the world faces and offers his opinions on how the global community can best tackle the specter of climate change.

Now over 30-years-old what is it Inkaterra offers guests, especially those from Europe? What is it that sets it apart from its competitors?

For all our visitors, without distinction of origin, Inkaterra offers its guests authentic and unique experiences combining exceptional lodging, properties, nature & cultural activities, as well as 34-years dedicated in conservation, research and social responsibility.

These general concepts have produced specific useful outcomes which prove that ecological research which leads to conservation – carried out by local populations - can be funded by tourism. We have proved that eco-tourism is a means to conserve the primary forest while creating local jobs.

What do you find it is draws people to Peru? Is it city breaks in Lima, or a more environmentally orientated trip, drawing on the history and ruins of the country for example?

What draws people to the diversity of Peru is a very complex mixture of interests combining an extraordinary variety of offers: including both the ancient and modern cultures.

Lima, for example, capital city along the Pacific Ocean, the city of viceroys designated by the Spanish Crown to govern all the Pacific Coast of South America, including Argentine until the Independence in 1821 and now capital of Peru situated along the sea shore; Cusco the Andean Inca Capital of the Empire that covered from Colombia to Argentine, and over which the Spaniards expressed their architecture; In the coastal deserts north of Lima, Chan Chan, the largest the pre-Inca 'adobe' city in the world; the mysterious Nazca Lines only observable from the sky; and the Amazon which covers over 60 per cent of Peru.

There is also the amazing biodiversity (84 life zones with its diverse products; possibility for the Europeans to observe hummingbirds & bromeliads; 10,000 years of plant domestication, like Mesopotamia), pluri-cultural fusion in populations (natives, Asian – Japanese & Chinese, black community, Europeans, cuisine (native & fusion).

Cultural art craft (amazing ceramics, textiles music.....); Civilizations with constant new discoveries, (Caral 230 km. north of Lima, a 5,500 years' old civilisation) are also



José Koechlin in the Amazon jungle

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important.

People come to Peru because of its diversity, expressed in authentic and unique features.

Has demand for your product been falling as a result of the global economic slowdown, or has the unique offering of your organisation insulated you from its impact?

No one is exempt from suffering the counter effects of the current economic, social & financial downturn: results are slightly below 2008. However the quality and uniqueness of the products that Inkaterra offers to high-end travellers in search of authentic experiences limits the negative effects of this crisis.

Inkaterra has a base at the Machu Picchu hotel – from here do you offer tours of the surrounding areas outside of the Inca trail and Machu Picchu? Where do you find tourists want to visit, outside of the 'established' sites?

One of the greatest achievements of Inkaterra at Inkaterra Machu Picchu hotel is to have restored the cloud forest within its property, making it different from all other 'established' sites.

Inkaterra is the only one group that works on the same basis that the Incas did on the environment. Inkaterra researches and restores the cloud forest as to expose what nature was when the Incas built what is now in ruins.

Inkaterra Machu Picchu hotel offers exclusive guided tours within its property – orchid, bird watching, nature, mystic tours, organic tea plantation demonstration, visit to the bear rescue project which inspired the Paddington Bear, specialized orchid and bird watching tours, pay to the earth 'Pachamama' ceremonies and other mystical activities; besides outside the property, Inkaterra proposes individual visits to the sites, as well as accompanied hikes and treks throughout Machu Picchu Park.

Do you find your visitors are environmentally aware, what is it you hope to teach them during a trip with Inkaterra?

It's a current trend for some visitors to be environmentally aware. Inkaterra has been proposing a philosophy of investigation & conservation funded by tourism for the past 34 years. It's an opportunity for us to share our commitments and make visitors and locals feel more sensitive to these issues.

How do you achieve your carbon neutral status? Through carbon offsetting? How is this carried out?

At Inkaterra, we strongly believe we all need to change our behaviour as individuals, as countries and as a global community. We all contribute to global warming; thus, everyone needs to be part of the solution. Since 1975, based on a principle of respect for the ecosystem, Inkaterra has been developing conservation programs to preserve the natural characteristics of the Amazon rainforest, which helps prevent global warming.

Inkaterra stewards more than 17,000 hectares of original forest, which have sequestered directly 3,315,000 tons of carbon. This measurement was initiated in 1989 by The University of Leeds (UK), and by the Institute for Earth and Biosphere, professor-specialists Dr. Oliver Philips and Dr. Timothy R. Baker at the Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, the first site in Peru where carbon fixings were measured.

Furthermore, Inkaterra indirectly fixes more than 12,600 tons/CO₂/has/year through its support of a variety of external conservation programs. Inkaterra hotels use clean technology and eco-friendly practices (green operations).

With these programs, Inkaterra has become a truly Carbon-Neutral organization, and every guest at Inkaterra hotels has a 100 per cent carbon neutral stay.

What do you feel are the strongest weapons against climate change? Are you hopeful the global community will be able to tackle the crisis in time?

Nature has a social function which is inherent to the concept of the interaction of all earthly factors. Inkaterra tries to create an economic model that may conserve the forest while providing permanent jobs for local and migrant human populations that would better their quality of life, as also of the flora and fauna as well.

The world needs to continue to update its efforts to mitigate the effects of human presence.

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The Kyoto Protocol looked upon promoting reforestation to sequester carbon. Monitoring primary rain forest has shown that conserving it may be a better solution: more carbon tons may be fixed while maintaining its flora and fauna; this is the basis for the concept of paying for avoided deforestation.

Inkaterra presents a further step which is providing value for those who do not only conserve the primary forest but who, in addition to it, provide jobs in the forest with no negative impact to it.

That *is* eco-tourism: ecological research and conservation funded by tourism.

Inkaterra is proactive in its eco-tourism – using funds to support ecological research with a view to improving the environment – while the majority of organisations merely seek to neutralise their impact...

Human population growth, in terms of numbers and in terms of their better quality of life expectations, means that 'new lands' are to be used. This is impossible to avoid. Thus a compromise has to be achieved by which nature complies with its social function without being changed.

Inkaterra promotes research as to learn about the environment as to use it properly. First action was to define the forest: do inventories. Then expose them to visitors and locals, by documents.

Knowledge allows longstanding actions. Constant actions create a group culture. Inkaterra promotes bettering the quality of life of all populations, humans, flora and fauna alike in an economic self sustainable way

Do you feel this is a logical next step for eco-tourism worldwide, or has it only been possible due to the unique circumstances of Peru?

This is an economic model that hopefully may be presented in Copenhagen later this year as a further step to Kyoto Protocol. The concept is applicable worldwide.

What are the biggest threats to the Amazon rainforest and the Andean cloud forest? Can these threats be conquered?

The biggest threats to the Amazon rainforest and cloud forest reside in the deforestation, the chaotic and uncontrolled increase of negative actions of migrant populations and the introduction of highways.

The big difficulty to regulate these negative impacts is the immensity of humans encroaching into untouched areas, as the Amazon regions, the lack of capacity to enforce law above social forces.

This can only be mitigated by creating alternative ways of providing jobs that do not harm the environment, along with proper education as to allow people who depend on the land as to either use it well or to learn how to work on another environment providing services, as eco-tourism....

It's a huge task which everyone on earth is part of and must act for.

You are a member of SERNANP, what is the agenda of this organisation? How do you contribute to it?

Yes, I have been designated as one of the four members of the SERNANP Board.

SERNANP is the new Peruvian Government Agency in charge of Parks with over 200,000 km², four times the size of all the country of Costa Rica. Its purpose is to create a self sustainable Agency with a strong ecotourism work.

Inkaterra is a natural example from which SERNANP may benefit from.

You worked on Burden of Dreams with Werner Herzog? Did you find the role increased awareness of environmental concerns in Peru??

'Burden of Dreams' (1982) was the film shot by California Film maker, Les Blank, which described the untold stories of the making of the film Fitzcarraldo by Werner Herzog, multiple award winning film writer, director and producer.

Before Burden of Dreams, we worked, Werner & I, on 'Aguirre, the Wrath of God' (1972), which was a very strong presentation of Amazonian Peru.

Film making is a good venue to create awareness of a given location. Thus we also worked together in producing Fitzcarraldo (1982), which was my way of honouring a

Peruvian geographical hero.

The film was presented to various film festivals, and won, among other prizes, the Best Director award at 1982 Cannes-France Film Festival.

Yes, it's the last ethnographic film document on the Ashanika native tribe.

What was Herzog like to work with? Can you tell me a little more about the film?

Werner and I have nurtured a true lifelong friendship based on mutual joint efforts amid confusing circumstances.

Interview by Chris O'Toole

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