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Essential reading for marina and waterfront developers, planners and operators



Images: Catherine Booker



After proposing a marina basin with a mangrove shoreline, working with Doug Kulig of OBMI, ATM scientist Greg Braun trained volunteers of the Exuma Foundation to implement the planting.

was also reading everything I could find on sustainable tourism. At the time, I was directing a cruise destination study in Patagonia. That was a very exciting personal time, which combined my memories as a tourist in the region, my recent work experience with cruise destination projects for the cruise lines in the Caribbean, and trying to find a win-win solution for a beloved part of my country.

The book presents the academic and analytical business case for the value of experiences and presents examples of large hospitality companies. At the time, no one I knew uttered the phrase “selling experiences”. But I was reading it to apply its lessons in a place of rough natural beauty, with pioneer culture and tough people whom I wanted to benefit directly from the project that I was studying. So “authentic and personal” had a very special meaning to me.

I realised that my most memorable experience as a tourist in Patagonia was one with local people, on top of the unbelievable landscapes and treasured moments with loved ones. I also met outstanding people and local characters as part of my work, and some friends that I made on the way brought everything back with their book “Portraits of Southern Patagonia”. I may say that about that time I had my “It’s The People” moment.

Aiming for memorable experiences by Esteban Biondi

What characteristic of a successful marina is the most difficult to achieve?

I have argued for some time that the most sophisticated quality in a marina doesn’t come from the engineering, architecture or management. Of course, you must do the design, construction and operations right. But there is something more important, which a more comprehensive approach to marina consultancy can help unveil.

Guest Experience

This phrase is now part of our vocabulary but is not understood in the same way by everyone. Guest experience is not only about efficiency, seamless operations, predicting wishes and immediate service. Those issues can be addressed and solved with technology, apps, organisation, logistics, training, etc. The other and most unique facet of “guest experience” is the one that deals with words

The Kokuye project proposes yachting infrastructure to support access to the San Blas archipelago in collaboration with the local Kuna community. Docks for authentic local tourist boats are included in the plan.
Image: Esteban Biondi



like memorable, authentic, personal, profound - even transformational.

If you can recall a story years later, you probably had a memorable experience. And maybe you realise that your deepest impressions are those that relate to the people from a place, rather than the landscapes or its buildings.

This approach leads to the design objective that “the physical plan must enhance the opportunity for local people to have access to the project and interact with visitors in a positive and synergistic manner.” But let me tell you a couple of stories.

It’s about The People

About 20 years ago, I read a book called “The Experience Economy”. I

A sustainable planning approach

These early ideas evolved over many years and included fruitful discussions with eco-lodge designer Hitesh Mehta, Joe Koechlin of Inkaterra, and many others. I was always searching for the way this approach could be implemented in a way that is also justified on purely financial terms for a private business. ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) criteria was not part of the language when I started this; sustainability was not a high-profile concept; and “experiences” was not yet part of the vocabulary of hotel developers. However, when making presentations about the approach for planning sustainable marinas, I said things like: “the best human resources for delivering authentic and memorable guest experiences are in the local community.”

It takes a Team

While sometimes I am the one bringing up this approach in a project, there are times when the concept is already a fundamental part of the vision. But it always takes a team.

I started talking about how Puerto Los Cabos has a dedicated sub-basin area for local fishermen. But I have proposed plans rooted in the same principles in multiple projects for almost two decades. With Liora Hayman of OBMI we created a fishermen’s village nestled in restored mangroves south of Puerto Vallarta, among other projects throughout Latin America, the Caribbean and even China. With Stephanos Polizoides, George Moreno and Liora Hayman we designed a portion of a resort waterfront for the local Kuna boats of the Caribbean coast of Panama. With Marco Larrea of EDSA we planned local tour operator’s docks for Serena del Mar in Colombia, at the request of Rafael Simon del Castillo and his development team.

With Scott Lamont and Lei Xiao of EDSA we proposed in China an area designed to accommodate the existing junk boats, recommending the local government to keep them as a tour operation (we were later told that their previous plan was to completely replace them). With Chris Craig and the WATG team, we worked to plan small-boat tour operator docks in a system of marinas and island resorts for The Red Sea Project (Saudi Arabia), with the support of Ian Williamson and his team. In Costa Rica, this approach was



The Middle East site visit was masterfully choreographed, with a special surprise element. A routine assignment was thus transformed into a memorable guest experience.

Images: Bryan Algeo and Esteban Biondi

embraced by the new owners of Marina Golfito and we are now working on a project near San Carlos (Mexico) where the fishermen’s dock and a sea-to-table programme are part of the same plan, strongly supported by the owner’s foundation.

Proactively including ecological features as part of the marina design is also a fundamental principle of sustainability that can also be tied to the local community. With Tim Peck of OBMI we proposed a mangrove restoration, amenity and coastal protection plan for the redevelopment of the Ritz Carlton Grand Cayman, where field work was done in collaboration with the Cayman Islands Department of Environment and the Ambassadors of the Environment programme. With Doug Kulig of OBMI we proposed a marina basin surrounded by a mangrove shoreline in the Exumas (Bahamas).

There is a potentially profound win-win outcome if you can achieve the goal of community inclusion. Tourism services set the stage for memorable guest experiences and have direct economic benefits. The project developer and operator get the immense intangible value of creating a destination with soul... and the tangible benefits are measured by unique market appeal, higher occupancy and increased rates.

It is not a smooth or spontaneous process. After working on these ideas for two decades, I am starting to believe that it never ends.



It is not easy to propose ideas that are not mainstream when you don’t know how they will be perceived. Moving forward with these ideas requires a developer that is either open minded, predisposed or already fully committed. It also needs supportive design team partners. Last in this list, but first in importance, the implementation of these ideas requires a substantial commitment by the development and operations staff that work with the community.

Implementing Social Sustainability (or the “S” in ESG)

I have been saying for a while that the sustainable marina planning strategies that I promote, even if rooted in these principles, can only make a difference to the physical design. I like to say that marina planning with this vision is “necessary but not sufficient”.

The master planning process can “plant the seed” of the concept; in the plan we can “reserve” the space and “label” the dock and upland area with a function; and eventually we can build a dock the way we proposed. But the inclusion and beneficial collaboration that achieves the goal of setting the stage for personal experiences does not happen spontaneously. In fact, there are more examples of conflicts than of successful synergistic relationships.

Paraphrasing Jake Kheel

*For the Kokuye project on the Caribbean coast of Panama, an excavated marina basin was planned that integrates a mangrove fringe into the design.
Image: OBMI*

(Puntacana Foundation, Dominican Republic) “you can tell the story of how our programme with the local fishermen, their families and the resort works, but to get there, we failed in multiple previous attempts.” I remember a meeting with Clara Diago (Fundación Corplaya) that was briefly interrupted by a call from a local community representative complaining about no potable water being delivered to the town. The mangrove planting for the marina in the Exumas was led by Catherine Booker (Exuma Foundation), under the technical direction of ATM’s Greg Braun, resulting in the training of Bahamian youngsters in ecological restoration tools. It took years to get to that point but I was so happy when I got the photos of the planting!

I have intentionally “named names” - even at the very high risk of leaving out names that should be listed - to thank some of the people who contributed through their collaboration to promoting innovative ideas that make projects unique; a process where I have benefited greatly, both personally and professionally.

Story of a site visit

I started saying that community involvement should be a goal of marina consultancy about a decade ago. To some extent, after many years of seeking opportunities to include the community as part of the marina development vision, I still do not have many examples to refer to. And then came the site visit I am going to talk about next.

It was a large project in the Middle East, but the process was not necessarily extraordinary. A big team had to inspect multiple sites in a pristine lagoon with ninety islands over several days. The area only had a small government building and fishing camp, where some of the local fishermen had small tour operations for few local tourists. The development team hired several of the local boats with their skippers to take them and the consultants around.

I was in one of the boats with a specific assignment to visit a few sites on different islands. Our boat captain was Mohammad, a leader of the local



fishermen. During several trips over the week-long site work, he demonstrated that he knew every corner of lagoon, every sand shoal, every coral head, and routinely made small detours to show us dolphins and sea turtles. Even if we did not speak the same language, we had some interesting communication when it mattered.

The day opened with a majestic dawn at the harbour; but after sunrise, the site visit started as expected. And then Mohammad waved at a boat far on the horizon. And our tour boat got side by side with a local fishing boat with fresh catch. Mohammad had a short conversation with the other fishermen, opened a cooler with ice, and loaded it with fish from the boat. After the short stop, we went on.

Following one site inspection and shortly after departing to the next site, Mohammad turned towards a shoal next to a mangrove forest. I was not aware of all the itinerary details, but something was not as expected in the plan. We then realised that some other fishermen were working on those shoals, waist deep in the water and with their nets deployed. Once closer, the younger of the two fishermen showed us a net with their catch. His smile was bright even in contrast with a very sunny day.

We were approaching what I thought was going to be our next site, when I heard that we were stopping for lunch. While we started discussing our notes on the site observations, another boat approached with a stove and cooking equipment. And another boat came with more fish still in their nets. The fishermen started cleaning the fish and preparing our lunch. And we ate the fresh fish, wrapping each bite in

bread with our hands, in the communal traditional way, while sitting on the deck of our boat.

Not only was this a masterfully choreographed sequence, but it also included a significant characteristic of a staged experience: surprise. If I evaluate all the criteria to design an experience “by the book”, this trip scores very high on everything that is fundamentally unique to the most expensive shore excursion in a high-end destination. It took me some time, but I then realised that this was a unique proof of concept.

To this day, to the best of my knowledge, this outstanding “tour” component of the site visit was arranged by Mohammad. This goes beyond my wildest expectations of what the phrase “the best human resources for delivering authentic and memorable guest experiences are in the local community.”

The trip was part of the planning of The Red Sea Project in 2018. In the boat were Ian Williamson and Scott Henshaw of TRSDC, Bryan Algeo and Lance Walker of WATG and Alan Travers of Buro Happold. Captain Mohammad is now head of boat operations in the lagoon, but I still hope that he can lead the local tour operators when the project starts operation. That would be another reason for The Red Sea Project to be the most outstanding yachting project under development today.

In any case, this was my most memorable experience in a professional assignment.

**Esteban Biondi is associate principal at Applied Technology & Management, Florida, USA.
E: ebiondi@appliedtm.com**