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Peruvian Tourism

Authentic nature travel since 1975

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José Koechlin, Chairman & CEO of Inkaterra



Tweet



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Inkaterra works a holistic approach that generates added value in rural areas: it encourages scientific research, whilst contributing to biodiversity conservation, education and economic growth of local communities.

I would like you to comment on the impact tourism has had on Peru's development in the last few years. How do you think this activity has contributed to the country's growth?

Tourism is a way for people to get to know a reality that could lead them to personal growth. Tourism allows the flow of people who are looking for something exotic to become a permanent interest for the places these people have visited.

In Peru, tourism has gained strength in the last few years. The globalized world is comprised by the flow of goods and services, the latter being mainly people. Almost 10% of the global GDP depends on tourism. Tourism is people's new right, it is the capacity of having free time in order to do what one wants and to enjoy life. Tourism can either be local or outbound. The latter is growing at almost 4% per year, even with all the economic issues we have had. The inflow of people has surpassed the billion, and it will probably continue increasing.

The world is telling us that there will be more leisure time, and that more people will be working in the services area. This is the robot era: USD 25,000-robots that can replace a person and have short payback period.

Thus, Peru has the opportunity to grow in the tourism area, precisely in a time when the world begins to understand that the environment and nature are suffering because of a climate change that, were it not to be noted, could lead to irreversible consequences.

More people want to go and visit places that today may look some way but, maybe, tomorrow will look another, because of those changes I mentioned. Therefore, the opportunity to see nature in a certain state, which is a pure one, is probably fading away.

Peru has a definitely greater competitive advantage, since it has been proved the country has 5,500 years of culture –thanks to carbon 14–, plus 84 out of the 104 ecosystems there are supposed to exist, according to the Holdridge System. There is such a rich diversity in nature and ancient customs. We believe tourism will be very important for Peru, and that it will eventually become the second source of foreign currency, depending on political will and on a series of domestic factors, but we are sure that it will be so. I believe that tourism is still budding in Peru, and that this activity has a high capacity for generating employment.

Yes, indeed, tourism generates approximately one million jobs per year. In that sense, what role do you think the sector plays when it comes to social inclusion, mobility, regional integration, and in widening the production chain?

The role will undoubtedly be to cover a wider space than what we can currently see. Tourism in Peru is still considered a minor activity, meaning it is not yet a core activity of the economy and implying a very high growth potential.

Machu Picchu, for example, is an anomaly, a product created between man and nature. Within our property, Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, we host the world's largest native orchid collection found in a natural habitat (372 species), according to the American Orchid Society. We have also registered 214 bird species within hotel grounds, including many endemics, confirming Machu Picchu as a top destination for bird watching.

Therefore, the concentration capacity and the assets some market segments have is very high in many parts of Peru. But we are still not organized enough in order to have a more dynamic market. This is not a Peruvian issue, but a South American one. South America is just now conveying a positive image to the Northern hemisphere, with a strong democracy and social security, and with values which first world societies like to enjoy. This is already taking place in Peru and in some countries in the region, and it will bring greater dynamism for Latin America.

So do you think that the Peruvian people are gradually realizing the great wealth they as a country have, and that makes room for a larger market, right?

Sure! Besides, there is pride in being Peruvian, thanks to our cuisine and our natural riches, among other values.

For example, Cabo Blanco still holds two game fishing world records. In 1953, the all-tackle world record (a 1560lb black marlin, filmed by Warner Bros. for its adaptation of *The Old Man and the Sea*) was landed by Alfred Glassell in this fishing cove in Northern Peru. Four years later, the largest tuna ever caught (a 435lb bigeye tuna) confirmed its international status as a sport fishing mecca. Celebrities visited Cabo Blanco, such as Nobel Prize laureate Ernest Hemingway, who went in search of standing marlins on board the iconic fishing boat 'Miss Texas,' which we recently restored. Six decades on, Inkaterra works on Peru's first marine conservation project. We have presented to the Ministry of Environment a technical proposal for the creation of a Marine Reserve in the tropical sea of Cabo Blanco, where resides 70% of the country's ichthyologic richness. By promoting sustainable fishing methods among local communities and developing ecotourism activities, it is helping to recover Cabo Blanco's biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Peru can export the chance to return to the past, not only through Machu Picchu.

Of course, that is important. But stepping back, there is a question I want to ask you. You started this initiative 40 years ago. Back then, Peru's situation was radically different. There was greater political and social instability. However, you started this project, which also aims to protect the places that are natural heritage, of Peru and of the world. It seems as if Inkaterra's spirit is to preserve this heritage, and all this was done in an adverse context. Why did you decide to create the Inkaterra project and what was the main reason behind it?

Well, first of all, I should note that I am a fourth-generation Peruvian, meaning this is my world (laughter). Secondly, the fact that we shot the movie "Aguirre, the Wrath of God" with Werner Herzog, which made me come back and be immersed in the jungle. My first stay in the jungle was in January 1956. My first visit to Machu Picchu was in July 1956. I have been camping in the rural Peru, the wilderness as it was back then, for a long time. In 1971 and 1972, we came back to the jungle with Aguirre, but with a commercial idea in mind, and we decided to create a development hub that would compete from Cuzco with the Northern jungle and Iquitos in terms of tourism. Back then, we had a socialist government, a revolutionary one, led by the military, with an economic model that had no imports and was completely autarchic, under life conditions that are very different from today. Having settled in the jungle, in 1975, we started providing touristic services. Our first shelter was literally built with an axe and a machete, without using chainsaws because their import was forbidden. We evolved in the jungle and, when we saw that the world was so rich, diverse and different; we asked ourselves how we would maintain the value of such a natural structure as the one that was right under our noses. This was a natural capital that, like in any business, had to be inventoried, meaning we need to identify our stock.

We began making an inventory in 1978. They were smart and easily understood, they were academic inventories. We published a book along with the Missouri Botanical Garden, with a description of the flora, where 1,266 different plant species were described. Meaning, we conducted an actual scientific research, which led us to establishing a benchmark, making us able to compare nature now with what it used to be back then, seeing as the knowledge curve does not decrease, as we keep finding new species unknown to science. This year, the existence of four orchid species new to science has been published.

You have conducted projects for Berkley University, and you have also carried out initiatives with US organisms with the purpose of validating inventories. What value do these alliances with foreign scientists and institutions have?

Well, no doubt they have a high value, since we can currently see the results of having established these relationships. Tomorrow, a forum on biodiversity will be held in Peru, consisting on a United Nations convention regarding biological diversity. What it proposes is that biodiversity is a business asset, and not just some intangible adjective that should be isolated from men, but that should be used to create knowledge and conditions that the world will improve and preserve, thus entering a development orbit that will be sustained in nature's original source.

The world today is beginning to understand what was started years ago. Data compilation in academic terms, as a scientific description, is a model that should be emphasized. The National Geographic Society has launched the National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World, which is a completely new foray in world-class tourism Peru is the only country with four hotels in the alliance, and these are all Inkaterra. Knowledge is provided through the experience of nature and through well-being. The purpose is to create jobs, so that tourism becomes a source of new jobs, mainly in the rural area.

Besides, knowledge investment makes the administration of ecosystems effective, which implies the development of the tourism sector as a whole.

Correct. Nowadays, it is necessary that knowledge is specific and certain, because any child can use their personal computer to validate what their guide is telling them about the way they understand nature.

I also wanted to ask you about the ITA Association. Meaning, what is your job there like and what is the Association's role within the Inkaterra project?

Inkaterra Asociación is the NGO's legal name, which was constituted in 2001 due to a demand from our financial sources. They saw our balances had many non-hotel-industry related activities, which we had to take out from the balances and assign to an NGO. The purpose of this NGO is the creation of knowledge, and we do so by having a field station in our area of influence at the Amazon rainforest of Madre de Dios, which allow us to host researchers, students and volunteers. We are in the process of building more field stations to study different ecosystems, such as the cloud forest of Machu Picchu and the Cabo Blanco Ocean and Desert.

Scientific research has been promoted by Inkaterra Asociación since 1978 (self-funded via ecotourism), with flora and fauna inventories as to set a benchmark to compare its own future impact. The results have guided Inkaterra towards its endeavors on conservation, education and sustainability. A total of 747 bird species, 362 ant species, 313 butterfly species, and over a 100 mammal species were inventoried within hotel grounds and surroundings. 372 native orchid species have been registered at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, the world's largest native

orchid collection found in a natural habitat according to American Orchid Society. 26 species new to science have been described: 17 orchids, 5 amphibians, 1 butterfly, 2 bromeliads and 1 tropical vine.

What type of exchanges are there with US investigators and scientists?

It varies. Either because they come to research, or to apply their research project, or because they come to conduct studies with academic value for the universities, meaning they have to complete credits. They also come to carry out courses on spalting fungi (a form of wood coloration through natural decay), which have a practical application, as they increase cheap wood's worth by giving it a natural artistic value through fungi inoculation. The course issues six credits in fifteen days, which accounts for its high academic value.

We have different research groups that constantly come to understand how the Amazon rainforest works. Groups that have the capacity to project data forty years into the past, and that have access to the primary field, besides it being comfortable, with good food, a nice bed and good service.

That is what is interesting about Inkaterra, since it is a comprehensive project. It is not just a touristic package, but more of a lifestyle you are offering, and the internships are an example of it. They offer a different way of knowing these places, through research but also by getting more involved with the environment itself. There is a constant integrated appreciation of what it is to experience the place.

Exactly, that is the main purpose, because it allows for those who have questions or ideas about nature to come close, learn and, based on that, start feeling like a better person. Besides, as a business model, it allows to communicate to others with more intensity and emotion than what can be achieved by clubbing someone (laughter).

So, advertising budgets are spent on scientific research and conservation projects on the group's purpose, which is knowledge.

And the funding of projects, what is it like?

We fund them ourselves.

Exclusively with Inkaterra's funds?

That is correct.

In a wider sense, what are the synergies with the public sector? There currently is a more proactive stance when it comes to tourism in Peru...

Synergies are still scarce.

We have submitted a proposal, produced by Inkaterra Asociación, in order to create Peru's first marine reserve and we have been waiting for an answer for four or five years now, despite Peru having signed a biological diversity agreement, in which by 2020, 10% of the world's seas have to be under marine reserves. Therefore, there is still no understanding about what it takes to actively preserve, as a business.

There is a tendency towards making business with nature, by using it.

Inkaterra works a holistic approach that generates added value in rural areas: it encourages scientific research, whilst contributing to biodiversity conservation, education and economic growth of local communities. It is simple. We go to a place, under the different ecosystems, and

the first thing we do is research the site, creating a base line. That is to say, seeing what can be recovered from nature than is no longer there. And also looking how to create jobs for the rural communities, so that they can preserve their culture in their own environment, flourishing without having to turn from their customs, strengthening their family ties, which in the end is one of the most important ways of being healthy. This is: emotional health, the influence of the soul on the body and of the body on the soul.

So, through tourism, which is our income source, we can work with liberty, not depending on donations.

Last year, 400,000 US tourists came to Peru, and figures were even higher in previous years. Considering this, what does the US tourist represent for the project you are carrying out?

The US tourist is the most interested one, besides they are the type of tourist that are more conscious, they have the emotional ease to come close with the culture's origins. For us, the English-speaking market (United States, Canada, Australia, Britain, New Zealand) is 60% of Machu Picchu.

If you had to define the Inkaterra experience, how would you do it?

Identity is the bottom line, identity that can be expressed through a word that was coined a few years ago, which is "Peruvian-ness".

As to outreach Peru's cultural and natural values, Inkaterra has published several books: Cusco Amazónico. The Lives of Amphibians and Reptiles in an Amazonian Rainforest (Cornell University Press, 2005), a 20-year-long research led by William E. Duellman, described by Cornell University as "the baseline against which future studies of Amazonian amphibians and reptiles will be compared"; Flórmula de la Reserva Ecológica Inkaterra (Missouri Botanical Garden, 2007), the description of 1263 vascular plant species at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica; Orchids at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel (Inkaterra, 2007); the Peruvian edition to Kim MacQuarrie's bestselling non-fiction book, The Last Days of the Incas (2012); and Lord of Miracles (2014), on one of the most visible manifestations of faith and Peruvian identity. This book was given to Pope Francis by President Ollanta Humala during his visit to the Vatican in November 2014, and was included by El Virrey bookstore in their 2014 Top Ten list.

Three music albums for the creation of a new trend in Peruvian music – the fusion of ancestral rhythms with modern styles – have been produced: Café Inkaterra (Platinum Record, 2004); Serenata Inkaterra (Latin Emmy Nominee, 2009); Fiesta Inkaterra (Latin Emmy Nominee, 2010). Bird calls CDs and Interactive DVDs have allowed travellers to identify bird calls from many of the 747 bird species inventoried at the Inkaterra environs in Machu Picchu cloud forests and Tambopata rainforest.

Therefore, this is not only an research of data and its correlations, and of living creatures, but also on the country's culture.
