

PAYING IT FORWARD

UWERN JONG examines sustainable luxury and eco-tourism in a meeting of minds with **JOSÉ KOECHLIN**, pioneering conservationist and founder of the Peruvian eco-resort brand, *Inkaterra*.

2017 was a big year for sustainable tourism – a hot topic that surfaced over and over again in a year of epic travel for me and also as part of OutThere’s participation in an array of inspiring global tourism conferences. From Chiang Mai to Marrakech, buzz words like “Community Based Tourism” and “Eco-Luxury Development” emerged at every level, from keynote presentations by international tourism ministers and other industry leaders, to the factsheets sent out by hotels that accompany their press releases. It seems everyone has jumped on this bandwagon in an effort to harness the economic power of eco-tourism. It’s no wonder, really – with the UN naming this year as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, awareness of the topic is certainly raised. It has been a point of discussion for many decades now, but I feel that until now, it’s mainly been lip-service to a subject matter that is actually quite complex to understand and break down into actionable objectives. More so, it’s very hard to prove that specific, responsible or ‘paying it forward’ tourism initiatives have had an impact on the ‘eco’ that they are supposed to be helping – that’s ecology, not economy.

While I know a thing or two about responsible tourism in environmental terms, I’m really a novice – my general contribution to eco-friendly travel is hanging up my towel at the hotel to save the water used for washing it again. Back in 2006, I was proudly one of the UK’s first ever CarbonNeutral travellers; that was until my sponsor realised that my carbon footprint from air travel was just too daunting a cost to offset. These two little anecdotes are testament to how I feel the travel industry generally views the subject, the – “we’ll do it, because it makes us look good, as long as it doesn’t cost us too much money, or better yet, if it saves us money” – school of thinking.



59%

of OutThere readers
will consider taking an
eco-tourism holiday in
the next 12 months*

So you can imagine how refreshing – inspiring even – it was to meet José Koechlin of Inkaterra in Peru. He’s known worldwide as a pioneer and leading figure in eco-tourism, but also a success story when it comes to the business of doing so, fusing the perceived parallel universes of luxury travel and environmentally responsible and sustainable tourism. As we talk, he makes sure to address the elephant in the room first, firmly stating that he sees no paradox between the worlds of luxury and eco-tourism.

“I am confident that just because our guests choose to stay in an eco-hotel, there is no reason for them to compromise on luxury. There are many hotels like ours that are beautifully designed and sensitively built using local workmen and responsibly sourced materials, to ensure they are true to the local environment, both during construction and afterwards, when in operation.”

José’s bond with nature began at an early age. As a child, he lived in a fishing community in coastal Naplo in Southern Peru and at the age of ten, embarked on a trip which took him to the Amazon, Cusco, Puno, Arequipa and Nazca. It was a Jesuit mission organised by his school, and together, they travelled in two vans with loudspeakers to announce their arrival in streets and main squares. They carried with them a portable cinema to project old films from Chaplin or Laurel and Hardy onto any wall and brought entertainment to communities with neither electricity nor running water; while of course spreading the word of the Church.

I remember this happening in the rural Malaysia of my upbringing – except it was not so much the Church, but political parties canvassing votes. Bring in a hit movie to a community and draw a crowd, with an hour-long sermon or statement as a compromise – and you have a simple but effective way of delivering a message to a captive audience. Through this experience, José learned that Peru was an

amazing, untapped resource, a country with different regions each having its own unique landscape and biodiversity. He was completely captivated by its culture and the wildlife he encountered. Secondly, he learned about the power of entertainment and marketing.

“Even today, I seek to capture this ‘childlike amazement’ – in both natural wonder and providing enjoyment in everything that we do as a brand,” he tells me.

Later in 1971, in a chance meeting with Werner Herzog, José shook hands and made a verbal agreement with the famous filmmaker to co-produce his film *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. His aim was to encourage tourism to Peru by reaching out to the world via moving image. As they filmed at Machu Picchu and in the Amazon, José realised that creating some kind of accommodation would be helpful. Moving people in and out of the jungle was no mean feat. After shooting ended, he went in search of a place in the Amazon with access to Cusco and established his first lodge in 1975, the Madre de Dios. His aim was at first not about ecology – it wasn’t as big a deal back then – but really to create a space that complemented the area, inspired by the local Ese’Eja culture, using native materials and operating in harmony with the environment. This site is now home to the Inkaterra Reserva Amazónica Lodge.

From this base, he started to notice the impact of unsound environmental practices on the local area. Illegal logging and mining was a big deal for the eco-system, as well as the rapid introduction of roads and highways.

“I could see that the jungle around us encountered some significant environmental wounds, which divided up large swathes of land and prohibited the safe passage of wildlife across their habitat. That caused me great concern.”

He goes on to explain that when a situation like this occurs, it has devastating effects on the bio-diversity and eco-system, as species are unable to interact effectively, isolating nature as a result. This leads to genetic and food-chain issues, causing decreasing populations and eventually

We asked OutThere travellers how interested they are in sustainable eco-tourism*.

36%

have visited an eco-tourism project as part of a wider vacation or have taken an eco-tourism holiday in the last 12 months.

59%

will consider taking a specifically eco-led holiday or vacation in the next 12 months.

74%

are very interested in the concept of responsible and sustainable travel and to find out more about brands that do so.

62%

recognise that they need to do more to increase their awareness of global environmental issues.

*Poll of 100 OutThere subscribers

The Inkaterra Effect

Since 1978, Inkaterra has been conducting an annual flora and fauna inventory to show the impact that sustainable tourism can have on diverse ecosystems. Through 40 years of data collection, they have uncovered the following on Inkaterra grounds.

2 new bromeliads

313 butterfly species

903 bird species (equivalent to
Costa Rica's total bird
diversity)

100 mammal species

1,266 vascular plant species

362 ant species (a world record, sponsored
in 1995 by Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson)



74%

of OutThere readers are interested in the concept of responsible and sustainable travel*

meaning that species become endangered. It's an ongoing issue; from the '70s until now, the rate of deforestation and development in Peru continues to grow – an inevitable and unstoppable part of modernisation and capitalism in the country. With that, the environment continues – but more seriously than ever – to be under threat.

José founded an NGO, the Inkaterra Asociación (ITA), in an effort to help present a solution to a growing environmental problem in the Madre de Dios region of the Amazon rainforest. The organisation proposes to dedicate some 78,756 hectares of land to sustainable landscape corridors. The protected land, running from Puerto Maldonado to the Peru-Bolivia border, will safeguard ecosystem connectivity through eco-tourism and other sustainable activities with a positive economic impact to both bio-diversity and local communities.

When it comes to conserving bio-diversity, it seems that education is a big challenge in Peru. José is committed to raising environmental awareness among the local communities. With employment low in rural areas, earning an income through illegal mining and logging is inevitably a means for survival. But by offering a lifeline through eco-tourism (which involves hospitality, field guidance, sustainable agroforestry and even niche markets such as birding), he believes that he can offer career opportunities to the local population. It is also an effective way to reduce migration and it helps to preserve local cultures.

“We have always stressed the importance of protecting the local community and culture as part of a good eco-tourism business model. There is a difference between employing locals to do jobs within a hotel and actively investing in their training and development. Many of our hotels are now run by hotel managers who joined Inkaterra years ago as guides and through experience and training,

they have learned the skills which equip them to operate the hotels, and fuel their love of the environment” he adds.

I had never thought about cultural preservation in the sustainable tourism model. But José enlightened me as to how this works, by demonstrating some of the things he does with local communities through Inkaterra. For example, he is an ardent protector of cultural practices and artisanal crafts across his projects, which are indigenous to the various regions of Peru. Inkaterra also recently hosted the *Momento Andes* last year in Urubamba, in collaboration with renowned chef Virgilio Martínez, which brought together local and international farmers, chefs, academics, artists and craftsmen to participate in a series of workshops to share their skills and enhance the understanding of traditional Peruvian farming and cuisine.

Also, through careful work with a group of artisanal fishermen in the Cabo Blanco area of Northern Peru, who use an ancient fishing technique, all of Inkaterra's restaurants will now be supplied with sustainably-sourced fish, caught by hand with a 'Sea to Table' traceability certificate. It seems that celebrating these ancient techniques and giving them a platform in modern day tourism is very important to José and the brand.

But the most significant part of the whole model is actually about the eco-system. Without understanding the environment (literally) in which you are operating, eco-tourism becomes nothing more than marketing fluff. So it's crucial that scientific research forms the basis of determining conservation initiatives.

“Flora and fauna inventories are key, as these allow us to measure our long-term impact over natural areas and share data with not just our team, but academics across the world. This way, I can also positively tell you about the numbers of new species that are thriving in the area around our properties. Birds and wildlife are flourishing, new varieties of orchids are found and insects that were previously thought to be lost are returning,” says José.

Of course all of this is easier said than done. It takes great commitment and determination to make such projects work. Plus one needs to surround oneself with a dedicated team of passionate, like-minded people; and constantly be on brand so that the message gets passed on. Also, efficient hotel design and everyday operation is crucial in minimising the impact on the environment.

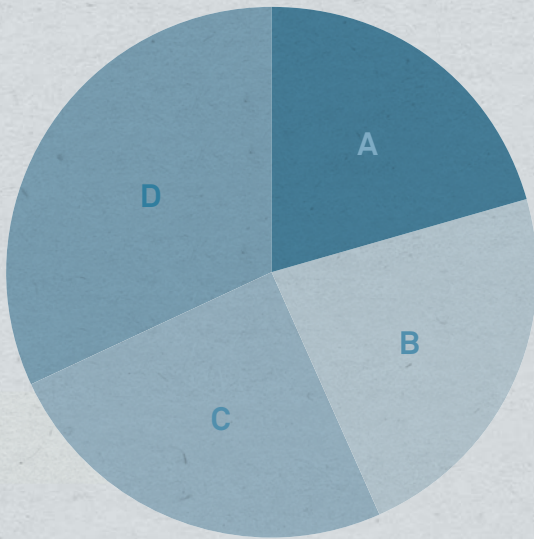
“On a day to day basis, you have to embrace green practices – reduce the use of plastic wherever you can, use renewable energy, recycle as much water and waste as possible – all of these will help reduce any negative impact on the environment. But to be honest, this is the easy bit.”

José tells me that working with a sustainable supply chain is also crucial, not just for the environment but also for long-term profitability. So finally, the dirty word in sustainability, 'profit' just reared its head.

José senses my change in mood. “When we began, eco-tourism was an undiscovered concept and over the past four

We asked OutThere travellers what it is that interests them most about sustainable eco-tourism.

- A Genuinely interested in sustainability and environmental protection _____ **21%**
- B Interested in doing good when they travel _____ **23%**
- C Looking for unique travel experiences that are different to the usual _____ **25%**
- D Interested in life-changing, experiential travel _____ **32%**



decades, through careful management, we have shown that this sustainable business model can actually be profitable. But most important in all of this is giving back. So our NGO, funded by the profits made by Inkaterra hotels, supports and sustains our key conservation projects. If we didn't make any profit through eco-tourism, then there would be no conservation project at all."

Profit is not just monetary either. Success for an eco-tourism project comes in different forms – in the goodwill and opportunities for local communities; in sustaining of old practices in a modern way; in inspiring other entrepreneurs and communities to see that development can be sustainable; and in reaching out to the wider world and hundreds of thousands of travellers – particularly people with influence and affluence, to highlight the fact that we need to do all we can to help save the world. And all this is particularly poignant at a time when the current US administration is openly denying the impact of human influence on climate change and actively pursuing pro-carbon strategies. It seems that tourism can really be a force for good through social and environmental activism.

Travellers are responding accordingly. There is a marked increase in interest in ecological issues among luxury vacationers as a whole, not to mention our very own OutThere travellers. They are making conscious decisions to book with companies that work to improve the situation. Concepts like Inkaterra bind luxury with allowing travellers to comfortably and easily access remote, bio-diversity-rich environments in an authentic way.

"It is an appealing approach for experiential travel, adventure travel, academic tourism, honeymooners or family travel, as well as for niche markets such as birding, orchid observation and gastronomy. Many will even ask what they can do to contribute on a day-to-day basis, showing that there is a real concern and understanding that changes need to be made," says José.

I like the idea of travel being a force for good when it comes to sustainable tourism. It seems we are sometimes so engrossed in the nitty-gritty of environmental protection, that we forget about the bigger picture. In our busy lives, in our big cities, it is hard to think about the impact that our actions have on the environment, because we are really quite disconnected from it all. But by travelling to diverse eco-systems on holiday, we can see it all for ourselves, up close and personal. Only then will we fully know what it is that we must fight incredibly hard to protect. ©



Since 1975, Inkaterra has been at the forefront of eco-tourism and sustainable development in Peru, dedicated to authentic travel experiences, aiming to preserve biodiversity and local cultures.
www.inkaterra.com

Uwern Jong is OutThere's co-Founder and Editor-in-Chief. Having spent part of his childhood growing up in eco-rich Malaysian Borneo, he knows full well the importance of environmental protection, particularly in tourism.

