

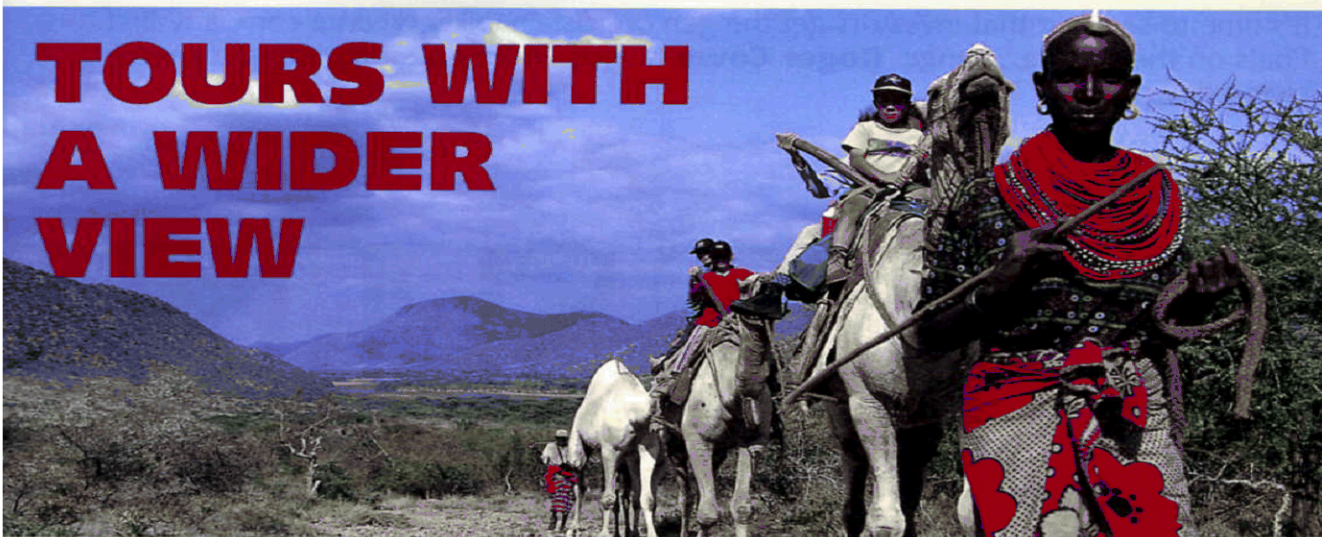
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TOURS WITH A WIDER VIEW

Friends of Conservation's holistic approach to holidays embraces visitors, wildlife and the local community. **Graham Sprigg** reports.

In the 50 years since sun-starved holidaymakers descended upon the Costa Brava in their masses, the tourism industry has changed enormously. A recent survey showed that 80% of tourists believe tour operators have a responsibility to preserve the environment, culture and economy of the destination. They claimed that, wherever possible, they would book a holiday from a company with a 'responsible' policy.

Not all of them are putting their money where their mouth is, but there's enough impetus behind this to encourage tour operators to start taking their responsibilities more seriously. Members of the Federation of Tour Operators have agreed to report publicly on how they're integrating environmental principles into their corporate strategies.

Responsible tourism, of course, is about more than protecting the natural environment. In terms of *social* responsibility, it's widely accepted that the industry is 10 years behind other sectors. Although tourism has a high earning potential for local communities, not much of your tourist pound is going to trickle down to them if your average tour operator is taking 89% of it. Whilst some companies are working to make sure that a higher proportion goes back into the local economy, by using local food and transport, employing local people and selling arts and crafts, very few are actually working to involve these communities.

Since it started working in the Masai Mara over 20 years ago, Friends of Conservation (FOC) has demonstrated that truly sustainable tourism can empower local people if they're not denied their central role as hosts. The charity's mission is to "join with local people to support sustainable ways of living in harmony with wildlife, ecosystems and the environment". In practice, residents are encouraged to protect their natural resources through incentives like employment opportunities and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. FOC also runs awareness programmes which teach both adults and children how to use their environment as a natural – and renewable – resource for economic benefit.

Coral reefs across the Caribbean, threatened bird species in Costa Rica, elephants in Uganda and rhinos in Zimbabwe and Namibia are just some of the flora and fauna that have benefited from this holistic approach. "If conservation measures are to be successful a balance has to be maintained between the needs of the local people and the wildlife and habitats that we need to protect," explains director Jonathan Hodrien.

FOC is also working at the other end of the chain – with visitors. As a founding member of the Travel and Tourism Conservation Group, it has helped create the 'Conservation Code', a leaflet which tour operators offer to clients advising them on how to minimise their environmental impact.

One of its latest projects is helping introduce an eco-tourism dimension to the biodiversity projects that the RMC Group has been supporting in northeast Poland. Noel Morrin, the group's international environment director, explains: "As one of the largest producers of heavy building materials in Europe, RMC is committed to the concepts of sustainable development – and our evolving link with FOC brings an important new dimension to this." It's a link that also boosts the capacity of their NGO partners – including BirdLife – to contribute positively to biodiversity. In Poland, the aquatic warbler, white storks and wolves are among the species that will ultimately benefit.

"Our projects in Poland have the potential to make a positive contribution to social and environmental progress in the largest new EU member state while helping us grow our business," says Morrin. Tourism is expected to create 900,000 new jobs and add €20 million to the Polish economy within the next five years. A sustainable approach to development on this scale could make a real difference, both safeguarding natural habitats and improving quality of life. ♀

This RMC partner page, written by environmental communications consultant Graham Sprigg, is donated to Friends of Conservation.

Friends of Conservation, www.foc-uk.com
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