



The adventure travel industry must **TREAD CAREFULLY** as it strives to grow.



### DEFINING MOMENT

Historically characterized by activity type (what are called hard vs. soft adventure activities), the term adventure travel was most often associated with higher levels of physical activity by participants, most of it outdoors. In 2005, ATTA and Michigan State University conducted a study that revealed suppliers and consumers have evolved in their definition of adventure travel.

In the 2005 study, respondents emphasized that cultural immersion, learning and other softer psychological motivations were crucial to the experience. The findings reflect a broader social phenomenon where recent human-caused tragedies worldwide have led many to seek more fulfilling experiences that challenge their personal views of the world and question their existence. As a result of the findings, ATTA is backing what it believes is a more acceptable, understandable and broader definition, one that includes at least one, and preferably at least two, of the following three elements: a physical activity, a cultural exchange or interaction, and engagement with nature. ATTA believes that a travel experience involving all three elements is at the core of adventure tourism.

Since suppliers and consumers are identifying culture and other travel-related

# STRIKING A BALANCE

BY CHRIS DOYLE

» **SCIENTISTS ESTIMATE THAT IN THE PAST 50 YEARS,** rates of animal extinction have increased dramatically, with 10,000 to 25,000 species disappearing each year. Human activity is generally cited as the root cause.

Meanwhile, the human population is experiencing its own dramatic changes. Due to migration from rural to urban areas, half of the world's 6,000 languages may die in our lifetimes.

Put these two trends together, and we live in a world where it's increasingly difficult to find those special travel destinations with unique and well-preserved cultures and environments. Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA), representing more than 200 tour operators, marketing organizations, tourism boards and travel agencies worldwide, has worked with industry members for many years to address the mounting environmental and cultural crises. But adventure travel, often touted as the fastest-growing segment of the overall travel and tourism market, has had its fits and starts for a decade. If it really wants to become a stronger influence on the world, a couple of things need to happen.

First, we need to quantify the impact of this industry, which requires a more clear definition of adventure tourism. Without a clearer definition, researchers struggle to capture what activities people are participating in when they travel, how they make decisions, and what truly fits under the big top of adventure travel.

Throughout the years, researchers have pointed to specialized forms of tourism that have emerged as counterpoints to mass tourism—adventure travel, ecotourism, community tourism, rural tourism, heritage tourism—and with them a large list of specialized terms. For industry members and consumers, the semantics have always been confusing.

elements, such as education, learning, fun and scientific exploration as central to the experience, the outdoor and adventure travel industries stand to gain from a broader definition.

“Revising the definition of adventure travel and broadening its scope could prove to open up a wider client market and provide more insight to more effective marketing strategies,” said MSU doctoral student Paige Schneider, author of the ATTA/MSU studies. “The purpose of investigating how adventure travel is defined is to better understand the state of adventure travel within the tourism segment. A consistent definition of adventure travel has important implications for future research, marketing and adventure travel development.”

Once we clearly define adventure travel—and the public clearly understands what the term means—we can much more easily market to a broader base and grow the industry.

But once we've defined adventure travel, we must also determine the best way to promote it.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRIS DOYLE, DIRECTOR, ADVENTURE TRAVEL TRADE ASSOCIATION.



## GROWING PAINS

There's no doubt that most companies in the adventure travel industry are anxious to see the market grow. Many of them have yet to reach the critical mass necessary to survive. But market growth brings a whole set of ethical dilemmas.

For one thing, we must preserve our ability to provide unique experiences and avoid the commoditization of adventure travel. Just as the outdoor industry rallied around the human-powered aspect of outdoor recreation, so should the adventure travel industry concentrate on special interest travel that accentuates more meaningful travel with environmental, cultural and socio-economic challenges.

ATTA believes that adventure tourism may not be right for some destinations. It's imperative to fully assess adventure travel's impact, good and bad, and in some cases, take a stand against tourism development as the only ethically defensible option.

The travel and tourism industry is considered large and powerful—in the United States, some analysts tout tourism as the third-largest retail industry behind car dealers and food stores. Worldwide, it has the power to transform economies.

"Tourism is the only service industry where there is a positive balance of trade flowing from First World to Third World countries," said General Francesco Frangialli, secretary of the World Tourism Organization, in a November 2004 Business In Africa Online story.

Fortunately, people are not only seeking unique experiences when they travel, they are also becoming more conscientious about the effect their travel has on a destination and its inhabitants.

According to a Travel Industry Association study published in October 2003 in National Geographic Traveler, 58.5 million Americans said they would pay more to use a travel company that strives to protect and to preserve the environment.

According to the organization Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS), about 50 million people in the United States make purchasing and investment decisions based on social and cultural values. LOHAS estimates that there is a \$226 billion U.S. market and \$540 billion worldwide market for goods and services that consider the environment, social justice, personal development and sustainable living.

It's obvious that the travel and tourism industry is expanding and evolving. This presents a tremendous opportunity, not only for adventure travel tour operators and other service providers who profit

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from travel expenditures, but also for policy makers and organizations seeking to further the goals of environmental conservation and social development.

Responsible growth serves as a cornerstone of the ATTA partnership initiative that connects corporate sponsors, related industries, trade and consumer events and resources with tour operators, destination marketing organizations and tourism boards globally.

## BUILDING A COHESIVE MESSAGE

The adventure travel industry should be at the forefront in shaping the evolution and growth of this travel market. First, adventure travel must distinguish itself and establish its voice within the expanding segments of leisure travel. Until the industry itself can effectively describe and quantify the shift in travel preferences toward adventure travel, it will be difficult to raise money, lobby and conduct outreach projects to take advantage of opportunities.

For years, there's been no coordinated voice for the industry. That's precisely what ATTA is working toward. Of course, it takes far more than a single trade association to move the needle. Success is only possible with a broad mix of partners. ATTA's vision is to form partnerships, analyze data and act upon it, debate challenging issues to find solutions, develop group buying power, build a stronger community and realize progressive visions for the future. The outcome of partnerships will better serve travelers, promote responsible tourism and optimize the industry's market potential.

The encouraging news: There are hundreds of organizations worldwide dedicated to the umbrella concept of responsible tourism.

The challenge: For the traveling public and adventure travel industry businesses alike, the number of organizations launching and promoting responsible tourism can muddy the waters and create overlapping efforts.

Dialogue, awareness, education, flexibility and patience among key stakeholders is key to wading through the challenges. Let anyone be fooled—adventure travel is just one spoke in the wheel of a community's path to economic stability. It can be vital to sustainability and is most potent and practical when it's properly balanced with other diverse and indigenous revenue sources. ☸

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» **Effectively integrate your hires and keep them engaged over time.** Recruiting does not stop the first day your new hire is on the job. It's a continual process that also involves successfully "on-boarding" your hires so that they quickly reach an equilibrium point where they are contributing more than they are learning. A recent study by the Center for Creative Leadership found that nearly four out of 10 new management hires fail within the first 18 months of the job. Why? They typically must overcome steep learning curves before they can begin to perform their jobs effectively. To integrate your new hires more quickly into the company and begin capturing your ROI, it's important to develop an effective integration plan that includes frequent communication, coaching and feedback right from the start.

Once your new hires are up to speed, it's important to find ways to retain them. One way Horny Toad works to retain its employees is by implementing an employee-friendly benefits program. "The program includes stock ownership after a certain period of time and contribution, and a newly instituted wellness program that includes health club privileges, weekly yoga classes at the office and regular chair massages," Seabury said. "Not only are these benefits focused on re-recruiting our existing talent; they also serve as an appealing sign of our priority to make Horny Toad a sustainable business environment."

It's also important to keep employees challenged by providing them with meaningful work, and an opportunity for learning and development. Studies have found that the cost of replacing lost talent is 70 percent to 200 percent of the hire's annual salary. While money and perks matter, employees say what they want most is a good boss, intellectual change and the opportunity for growth. Create a growth path for your new hires that includes training programs to develop their specific capabilities. On a broader level, develop a succession plan that identifies your company's long-term hiring needs and prepares existing employees for advancement.

By embracing these steps, your company can separate itself from the pack and reap the biggest competitive advantage you have: your human capital. 🐸

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