

Conscious Travel: Signposts Towards a New Model for Tourism

Contribution to the 2nd UNWTO Ethics and Tourism Congress

Conscious Tourism for a New Era

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Before I share my thoughts on Conscious Travel I wish to extend the warmest appreciation to the Hon. Minister of Tourism, Mr Freddie Ehlers for inviting me to participate in this the second International Congress on Ethics and Tourism organized by the UNWTO and to say thank you for enabling me to visit South America. I am especially excited that Ecuador is my host as it is a nation I have admired ever since it became the first country to recognize the Rights of Nature in its constitution.

I was equally surprised, delighted and impressed that Mr. Ehlers introduced the term “Turismo Consciente” as the theme of our deliberations today because, quite independently of Mr. Ehlers, I put together the words “conscious” and “travel” in my own thoughts and writings just about two years ago. I had been developing a community-based program called *Places That Care*. Frustrated at the slow speed with which the tourism industry was adopting sustainable practices, I was looking for evidence that a market might exist for providers who took responsibility for protecting the natural and cultural environment on which they depended. I came across a significant body of international research – not in tourism, I might add - that showed how many consumers were responding to the fateful events of 2007-2008 when the global economy fell on its knees. The recession accelerated a shift that had begun in the late 70s in which a growing segment of the population had decided that “mindless consumption” wasn’t for them. A snippet from a report by Ogilvy and Mather jumped out at me:

It is an undeniable fact: The recession has created not only a universal sense of anxiety and fear, but a greater level of consciousness across all ages and genders. We can't go back. We have heightened our perception; we are awake, aware and alert – whether we like it or not.ⁱ

As I associate the state of being awake, aware and alert with being conscious, you can imagine my curiosity peaked upon discovering another research study, conducted quite independently, that described a new, post-recessionary consumer as being a Conscious Consumerⁱⁱ. Not long after that, I was introduced to the groundbreaking work of some very successful business men and women (owners and senior executives of companies such as Whole Foods, Southwest Airlines, Amazon, Google, Patagonia etc) who were calling themselves “Conscious Capitalistsⁱⁱⁱ” and I began to imagine what a “conscious traveler” might look like. I created the blog Conscious Travel^{iv} to share these observations; to sense what reaction they evoked; and to create a space where the concept could incubate and develop.

In my mind, the concept of Conscious Travel has three forms:

First and most importantly it is – or has the potential to be - a **mindset** and a new operating model for how we perceive and do tourism. It has the power to transform our industry for the better and address the key flaws in the operating model called mass industrial tourism which has been applied since the 1950s and which, incidentally, has fueled the rapid and extensive growth in trip volume since the 1950s.

Second it has the potential to become a **movement**, defined as “a group of people with shared beliefs who work together to achieve certain general goals.” The goal in this case being to create a version of tourism that generates real *net* benefit and that does less harm than good.

Thirdly, being an entrepreneur, I needed it to have a **business model** that would sustain the spread of the concept and generate proof that it was providing real tangible value. Hence the notion of a networked, learning community of tourism providers (hosts) who could, together, develop ways of generating more profit for their individual businesses while delivering higher returns to all their stakeholders.

These facets of Conscious Travel are based on three core assumptions.

1. The Current Industrial Model Needs Replacing^v



The mainstream of tourism (mass tourism) is based on an industrial model of production and consumption that was derived from manufacturing. It has generated huge growth (now supporting 1 billion international trips per year) but, in a growing number of instances, is now producing diminishing margins for providers and host communities. If it continues to grow, it has the potential to do more harm than good as we are not finding or applying – *fast enough* – the measures necessary to reduce concomitant waste, to limit use of scarce resources of land and water, or to preserve the cultural and biodiversity on which tourism depends. Because industrial tourism depends on price-led volume growth, it is on a collision course with the rising costs associated with fossil fuel, food,

and infrastructure maintenance or expansion. Critical to the future vitality of tourism is the need to generate higher yields and more stability.

In short, the industrial model needs to be replaced by one that generates higher net returns to all stakeholders.

They say that a picture can often convey the equivalent of a thousand words. The image above provides an effective metaphor for the precarious position that global tourism finds itself in – tourism as a delicate capsule suspended in mid air and held in place by a piece of engineering and the strength of a tree. Should a drought deprive the tree of the moisture necessary to keep its trunk and branches taut and strong; should an earth tremor dislodge the anchor; and should the carrying capacity of the capsule be exceeded simply because so many wanted to enjoy the view, then what would happen?

2. The Task Requires a Transformative Shift in Awareness

Success in increasing yield to the provider and higher returns to the host community will not occur by simply adding a green colour scheme to industrial tourism.

The task at hand is not modification but transformation. Here are three statements that suggest the scope of the challenge.

Problems cannot be solved with the same level of awareness that created them.
Albert Einstein.

At the dawn of the Third Millennium, human civilization finds itself in a seeming paradox of gargantuan proportions. On the one hand, industrial and technological growth is destroying much of Nature, endangering ourselves, and threatening our descendants. On the other hand, we must accelerate our industrial and technological development, or the forces we have already unleashed will wreak even greater havoc on the world for generations to come. We cannot go on, and we cannot stop. We must transform. Alan Atkisson in "Sustainability is Long Dead - Long Live Sustainability

A world of 9 billion by mid-century will demand fundamental changes in our mindsets, behaviours, cultures and overarching paradigm. John Elkington in *The Zeronauts: Breaking the Sustainability Barrier*.

We must apply a new approach based on a very different mindset than the one that has underpinned mass industrial tourism. This new mindset, that involves a fundamental shift in values and beliefs, needs to be applied by hosts, guests and residents. This is the same challenge that is being experienced by virtually every other aspect of human endeavour, be it healthcare, agriculture, education, and capitalism itself. Only change of this depth will produce an antidote to the debilitating disease called "cheap travel."

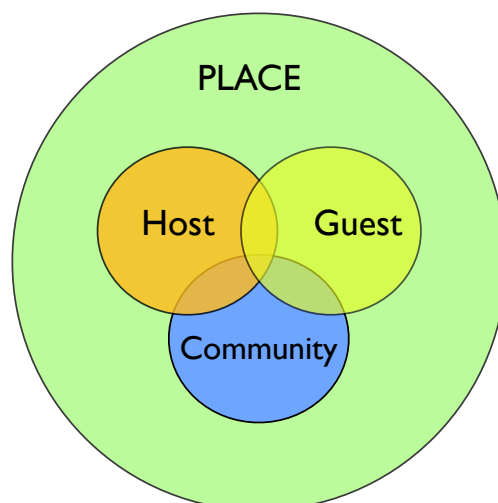
In short Conscious Travel constitutes a completely different way of seeing, being and doing – it involves the replacement of outdated, inaccurate, distorted lenses that don't enable us to make our way in this world. Until a critical mass of us (and that doesn't have to be a majority) have made that shift; understood the implications; and can create opportunities from this new way of seeing then whether we call our efforts responsible, sustainable, geo, ethical, good or green, we'll always be tinkering at the edges and not achieve the transformational shift that the three authors quoted above indicate is necessary.

3. Change will come from below not from the top

Change will come from a collective effort conducted at the grassroots – in communities where tourism hosts commit to ensuring that their economic activity benefits all stakeholders; where they take responsibility for minimizing the environmental footprint and work actively to ensure that local cultural values are maintained and, in some cases, rejuvenated. Core to the Conscious Travel approach is that tourism providers, whom we call Hosts, become effective agents of change and stewards of all that the local community value.

Tourism is a Human System

Figure 1: The Tourism System



Change will occur in tourism for the simple reason that it is first and foremost a human system. We like to call it an industry, and our leaders are often pleading with decision-makers to recognize it purely as an economic engine and creator of jobs, income and taxes. The truth is tourism is not an industry but a complex, self-organizing system or network of relationships. It obeys the laws of networks not machines. As illustrated in Figure 1, this system has four elements – three of which are human: HOSTS invite and care for GUESTS so they can meet and experience a COMMUNITY. The PLACE is the geographical and temporal container that shapes the nature of the guest’s experience because the PLACE shapes the identity of the Host, the Host Community and the guest’s experience.

The way tourism is structured and operated depends on what the humans involved in the system value; how they understand the world to work; and how they perceive reality. In other words, the operating model depends on the mindset or worldview of the system participants. Change that and the nature of tourism will change.

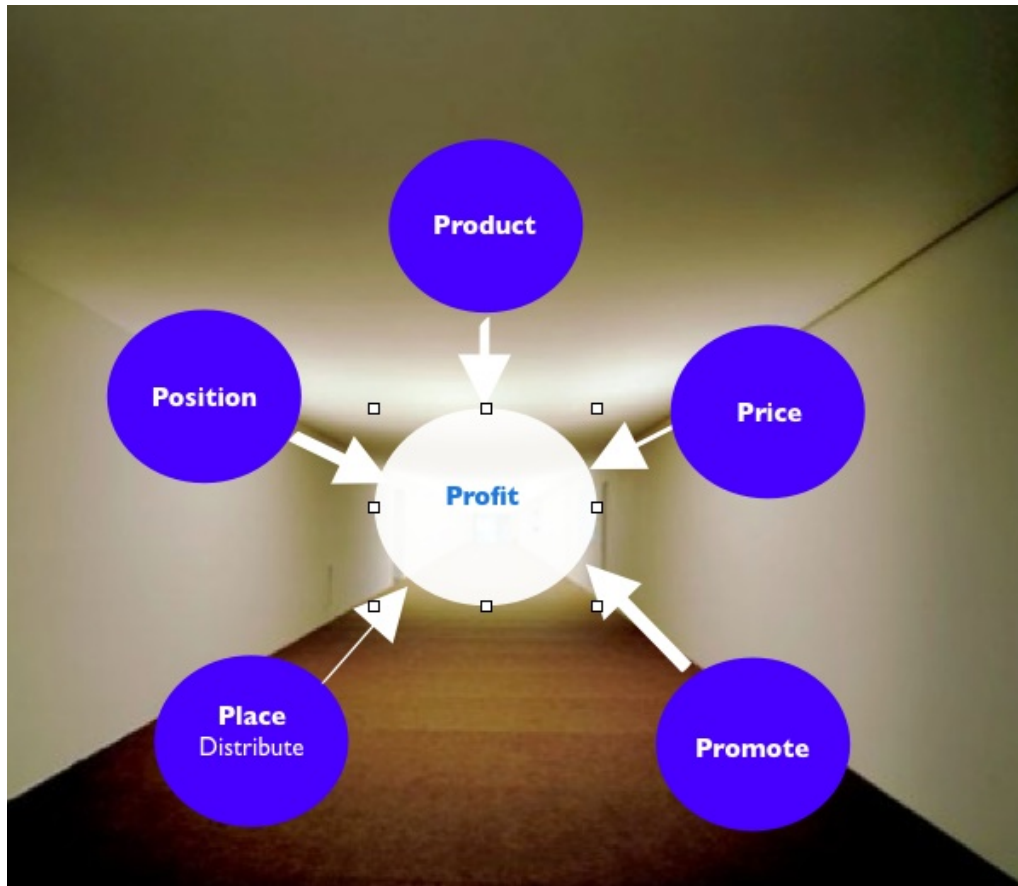
Features of the Old Industrial Model

Bearing that in mind, let’s look at the industrial model and its key principles. Let’s remember how have we been trained to “see, be and do” tourism.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the desired outcome is that tourism makes a profit for the provider and generates benefits in the form of foreign exchange, jobs and tax income to the host community. In exchange for their spending, the guest enjoys a material, emotional, mental and sometimes spiritual benefit. The outcome (Profit) is synonymous with purpose (businesses exist to make money) and the primary unit of activity is the transaction.

In the industrial model, we start the process of generating the outcome with the “product” – objects that are packaged (manufactured/assembled) from sub products (beds, seats in a plane or train, activities, events and services) that, in turn, are created

Figure 2: Principles of the Industrial Model



from raw materials that can be mined, farmed, or manufactured. Their production follows best practice developed in the manufacturing sector by applying such methods as standardization, homogenization, economies of scale and uniformity to reduce costs.

The term “positioning” describes the decisions made regarding the way the product is described and differentiated in the market place. How is the product bigger, better, cheaper, more luxurious, better value than a competitor’s product? Overlaid on what is inevitably a fairly uniform, yet consistent product, are marketing attempts to differentiate these products by stamping on them (i.e. branding) unique logos and taglines designed to communicate a unique proposition.

Based on the product’s features and the competitive landscape, decisions are then made on price and placement – how is the product placed or pushed through the various channels connecting seller to buyer so that the providers gets the chance to persuade a consumer to buy what they have to sell? That means using every promotional trick in the trade to get people to actually make a purchase. In tourism that can be very difficult as we have to persuade a consumer to leave the comfort of their home and travel many miles to consume a product which they can neither pre- test or return if it is

unsatisfactory. Worse still, is the fact that our products are time dependent i.e. “perishable” – they cannot be warehoused or stored.

In the industrial model, guests are consumers identified not as people but as “segments” They are to be targeted, then persuaded to purchase a product at the best price the host can achieve in order to capture market share or share of wallet.

Both parties (guest and host) endeavour to win at the cost of the other. Guests now have access to instant and ubiquitous information and tools for comparison in their search for “the best deal.” Hosts have sophisticated revenue and yield management tools but are vulnerable to sudden and unexpected drops in market demand caused by factors out of their control such as currency fluctuations, natural hazards, terrorism, epidemics etc.

In such situations the most commonly used tactic for maintaining share and cash flow is price discounting accompanied by rigorous cost cutting. The latter takes the form of more automation, personnel layoffs (doing more with less), standardisation, and the application of innovative promotional concepts such as couponing. The end result of which is a drop in service quality and increased customer dissatisfaction expressed as a resistance to pay more and commitment to paying less i.e. getting a cheap deal.

In short, in an industrial model, where neither guest or host views the other as an equal partner but as an object to be manipulated or an adversary to be beaten, the effect is the same over time – a downward pressure on price, yield and satisfaction. After 60 years of steady growth, travel is no longer considered a privilege but a right and “cheap travel” an expectation.

The only way a producer can maintain income levels when net unit revenues keep falling is to increase gross sales volumes – either by handling more visitors or through mergers and acquisitions. This encourages the concentration of productive capacity in the hands of fewer producers (market consolidation) but without the potential for increased unit revenues. The end result for a destination is then a growth in visitor volumes that generates higher costs in terms of the infrastructure and services needed to support the transportation and housing of non-residents. The result: a diminishing rate of return and, potentially, (if all costs were properly accounted for) a negative rate of return. Furthermore, higher volumes of traffic often mean more congestion such that service quality deteriorates further and a destination can stagnate and appear as unattractive to the consumer.

Thus it can be seen that the Industrial model applied to tourism eventually results in diminishing net returns for hosts and the host destination and less satisfaction and real choice for the guest. In addition, the necessary focus on volume and scale leads to consolidation and integration i.e., wealth is concentrated in fewer hands. The big get bigger but, unlike banks, they have little chance of becoming “too big to fail” and even huge firms like Thomas Cook are revealed as vulnerable.

Now surely, there has to be a better way?

Signposts Pointing Towards a Better Alternative Model

So let’s imagine and create a better way – together. I don’t claim to have a blueprint - none exist - but I can share some signposts or markers that might help us create new paths through unfamiliar territory. To do that I have simply imagined a very different set of Principles or “P” words as illustrated in Figure 3 .

The starting point for visualizing a new model is to imagine a preferred set of outcomes. Here I am suggesting that, instead of profit as the sole outcome, we consider the concept of **PLENTY**.

Figure 3: Principles of an Alternative Ecological Model



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What I like about the word PLENTY is first that it encases the notion of enough or sufficiency. We can be plentiful, and we can be abundant but we don't need to be excessive. Implicit in the word plenty is a sense of limits. Food, wealth, and happiness can be plentiful and sufficient. The dictionary definition describes plenty as a full or completely adequate amount. It fills you up without insisting on you needing more. Second, it implies that lots of people benefit not just the shareholder who, according to the industrial model, has the right to maximize profits with little thought to the costs or benefits experienced by other stakeholders in of the system by so doing . And third, it encourages us to think of plenty in qualitative terms not strictly quantitative, pecuniary ones. It shifts the focus away from money and economic wealth to "wellth" as in "well-being."

So that's the first and not so subtle difference between the old model and a new one. The second difference is that instead of starting with a product we start with **PEOPLE**. Every aspect of travel is about human beings encountering other human beings while moving from home to a foreign place in order to have an experience. As it's all about people meeting, serving, taking care of, and entertaining other people, the primary unit of activity is a relationship not a transaction. In the new model, in which our connectedness and interdependence are recognized, other people are not objects and certainly not adversaries engaged in a zero-sum game but partners co-creating value together. It's the humanistic side of tourism that has really suffered when we have tried to apply a mechanistic model to it. We have become used to treating the other as an object, separate from us, who can be manipulated and used. We also lose the benefit of empathy. Regardless of the role individuals play in the tourism system – as investors, owners, employers, employees and residents, they all become guests when they travel.

The second and equally important P in this new model stands for **PLACE**. When you start with the notion of product as a thing, and a perishable thing at that, then you are under enormous pressure to discount it – to turn it into a commodity, with one product substitutable for another. If, on the other hand, the focus is on PLACE you have an amazing opportunity to sustain value because every place is unique. Every place has a unique position on the planet, a unique set of seasons, unique light, a unique climate, a unique ecology, history and culture and can offer the guest a unique experience.

Each place is the outcome of 13.5 billion years of evolution, the present geography of the setting, the history and culture of its people and the connections and relationships of its residents. **By identifying, nurturing and celebrating what makes each place unique, and therefore, scarce (literally one of a kind), its real and perceived value increases.**

If a place were a company, we'd understand that it has a distinct culture – “the agreed way things are done around here” that reflects the core values and sense of purpose shared by the people who comprise the company. This is equivalent to the Personality of a Place and emerges from its unique geography, history and sociology. It is not an artificial artefact or clever construct that can be branded or stamped onto the Place but is an invisible, organic, living Presence best described as its spirit, essence or soul that distinguishes it from all other places.

While it is true that all visitors need to be housed, transported, fed and entertained, **it will only be by conceiving and delivering those services in a way that respects and reflects the unique setting that will add value to the visitor's experience.** Without this antidote to the sea of sameness, destinations will not be able to resist the disease of uniformity and mediocrity that plagues the current model.

Instead of viewing space as “nothing but” real estate to be carved up and enhanced with amenities and infrastructure, everyone calling that place “home” (i.e. “the locals”) can also be called upon to express what it means to them and be involved in extending the invitation to guests to experience the place for themselves.

The practice of standardisation and homogenization will be viewed as harmful – mass produced, industrially designed, imported artefacts will be seen as simply “out of place” and ultimately costly as it will only dilute the value placed on “the Place” All members of a community can potentially be engaged in telling stories, explaining its past, interpreting its present and dreaming its future etc.

Greater attention will be focused on the details and ensuring the distinct essence of a place is experienced through all the senses, throughout the day and at all points along a visitor's journey of discovery and celebration. By revealing more details and paying attention to the small, the local, the handmade and quirky, the guest can be encouraged to slow down and engage more. Greater engagement leads to more meaning, more purpose and more curiosity which, in turn, leads to more encounters, more relationships and more appreciation. More appreciation leads to more value and more value leads to more yield.

When things are unique that means they are scarce and when they are scarce they should have a higher value than when they're abundant, when they're everywhere; when they are commodities and when they can be exchanged at very little cost or difficulty. I believe that, in this new model, PLACE and a respect for place, seeing places as sacred even, holds the key to creating a proper return from the travel sector. I will return to the notion of sacred at the end of this essay.

The third P and one that will really help us create a better, higher value tourism, stands for **PURPOSE**. Why, as hosts, are we doing what we're doing? What will motivate our employees to bring all of themselves to work and be truly engaged while they are there? What will motivate our guests to pay a premium or stay longer? Surely it's in delivering what they value the most and increasingly Conscious Travelers are driven by a search for meaning and fulfillment. In recent years, there has been an explosion of discussion in the business community about the importance of purpose to business. Conscious capitalists, for example, differentiate themselves by working towards a purpose higher than profit – they, like many avant garde companies, now recognize that if you want to attract customers who buy on factors other than price, and if you want to attract the best and brightest employees, focusing on price, pay or product attributes isn't enough - you have to offer something much deeper. Conscious travelers are looking not just to rest and relax when they travel but to be changed, transformed by having experiences that help them see the world from a different perspective, or that enrich, challenge and provide meaning.

It's a sense of higher Purpose that ignites passion in people. It's the passion that delights the customer. It's the passion and caring that enable our people to solve problems in difficult circumstances or to reach deep inside themselves and come up with innovative ideas when times are tough. It's the passion and pride in PLACE that proves infectious, that shapes and colours memories that our guests take home and share – thereby propagating and pollinating a desire within others to visit and explore for themselves.

The fourth P stands for PULL and relates to the biggest challenge most hosts face on a daily basis – attracting the right customer. Thanks to global connectivity and consumer access to virtually perfect information, power has shifted from producer to consumer and the marketing function has turned upside down. In the old industrial model, the task was one of promoting a product through whatever means possible in order to secure a purchase. Now the challenge is to attract the right customer – the one who truly values what the provider has to offer and this requires a very different approach and skills. Instead of focusing on the product's attributes, the host must be clear about who he is, what he values, why he is in business and what he stands for as these are the factors that conscious consumers now consider in addition to and sometime over and above price.

A global research study released by Nielsen^{vi} earlier this year showed that, on average across the globe, just under half of all consumers prefer to purchase from companies they perceive as being socially and environmentally responsible. In some areas, such as here in South America, that proportion is as high as 75%. Edelman's 2012

Goodpurpose® Study^{vii} revealed that a resounding 69% of consumers want brands to make it easier for them to make a positive difference in the world. These findings provide a compelling additional reason for the fifth P in our model to refer to the concept of PROTECTION. It is no longer morally right or even sound business for tourism providers to simply exploit landscapes, ecosystems, cultures and diverse fauna and flora in order to sell services to visitors. Nor is it likely in the future that they will not be asked to pay for many of the “ecosystem services” on which their business depends.

It is in the host’s best interest to become proactive champions and custodians of the natural environment and cultural context. Practitioners of Conscious Travel will not be content to simply operate a “corporate social responsibility” program but will be committed to reducing their environmental impact where possible to zero. Tourism is a relatively greedy consumer of scarce land and water and producer of waste – garbage, effluent and carbon. It makes no sense to talk about sustainable tourism while projecting a 400 million increase in international trips over an eight year period. Tourist operators will have no “licence to operate” in the future unless they can demonstrate that they have reduced their environmental footprint as low as possible and protected the culture and livelihoods of the people living in their host community.

Which brings us to the last signpost in our model – **PACE**. It is quite possible that the greatest service that Conscious Travel could perform is to help us all slow down so that we might rediscover the art of being as opposed to the task of doing. One of the tragedies of modern society is that its members are often so busy packing so many things into a day that they forget how to live! Furthermore, the sheer volume of abrasive stimuli that assault our senses cause many to resort to what has been described as



psychic numbing in order to cope. In fact, it is this very assault on our senses that cause many to want to “escape” and to “chill.” In this context, the role of the Conscious Host is to help the guest slow down in a destination, learn to fully savour their experience by stimulating and satiating all their senses and feeling more fully alive. So it’s no coincidence that Ecuador, the first destination to

introduce the concept of Conscious Travel uses the tagline “love life.” If from the destination’s perspective the desired outcomes are “plenty” and, more specifically a higher yield and better return, then increasing visitor length of stay is a very sound practical step towards their achievement.

Conclusion

As a strategist and visionary whose task it has been to figure out what’s happening “out there” and “what’s coming next” I now feel the burden of awareness. It was Jean Paul Sartre who observed:

Once we know and are aware, we are responsible for our action or our inaction. We can do something about it or we can ignore it. Either way we are still responsible.

The evidence is now irrefutable. We are living at the most exciting and scary times in history. Civilisation, as we know it will either break down or break through. Humanity will either learn to live in harmony with Nature or suffer the consequences. Decisions each of us take throughout the next 20 years will likely determine which of those futures will be the present for our grandchildren. Tourism, which generates \$2 trillion and

employs over 250 million people has to play its part in steering us towards break through. That will mean *waking up* – to present realities; *growing up* – asking what tourism can do to help; and *stepping up* – taking responsibility for speeding the shift from a wasteful model in decline to one that puts back more than it takes out.

Hopefully this meeting in Ecuador might be a launch pad for a journey of exploration and our collective discussion will add to the signs or markers I have shared with you here. Because this journey might prompt hesitation – we all fear the unknown to various degrees – let me end this contribution with a comforting thought as intimated by the poet TS Elliot;

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

Perhaps our journey of exploration will bring us back home to the core, the essence of tourism which is to help our guests fall in love with life. For it is said that we fight to protect what we fall in love with. Perhaps our journey will also re-connect us with a sense of the sacred – for we also fight to protect that which we revere. And if we succeed in both those endeavours, we'll truly be coming home for all tourism has its deepest roots in the soil of pilgrimage. It's no coincidence that Many of our most popular tourist "hot spots" are ancient sacred sites – Stonehenge, Machu Pichu, the Great Pyramids of Egypt, Angkor Wat, Borabador, Varanasi. We'll have arrived where we started, but thanks to becoming conscious, we'll know it for the first time.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ *Eyes Wide Open, Wallets Half Shut – The Emerging Post Recession Consumer Consciousness*, available:

http://assets.ogilvy.com/truffles_email/eyeswideopen_press/Eyes_wideshut.pdf

ⁱⁱ *Conscious Consumers Are Changing the Rules of Marketing – Are You Ready?*

BBMG, 2007 available here:

http://www.fmi.org/docs/sustainability/bbmg_conscious_consumer_white_paper.pdf?sfvrsn=2

ⁱⁱⁱ [The Conscious Capitalist Institute](#)

^{iv} Conscious Travel Blog: <http://www.conscioustravel.wordpress.com>

^v The statements here regarding the decline of an industrial model describe the global tourism sector overall and therefore do not apply to specific countries or regions each of which is on its own point along the tourism growth curve.

^{vi} Nielsen < The Global Socially Conscious Consumer, March 2012, available here:

<http://www.slideshare.net/ARahmanShawon/global-social-responsibility-report-march2012>

^{vii} Edelman Good Purpose 2012 <http://purpose.edelman.com>