

Real sustainable travel also involves getting off beaten path

Claire Allison

I RECENTLY spoke to around 100 creative students about sustainability at one of Cape Town's top advertising schools. I watched as their spongy minds devoured my words and concern around effectively communicating the importance of sustainable travel. They too were concerned. But what struck me most is how they seemed to grasp only one element of sustainability.

Despite me barely mentioning it, all their creative ooze was purely environmental. While renewable energy is vital and being environmentally-conscious is a big part of being sustainable, it's not the only thing to consider.

Sadly, these students aren't the only ones with this restricted view of sustainable tourism. Run a quick Google image search on the term and you're inundated with a screen full of low-carbon emission

infographics, happy people planting trees or riding bicycles and pristine river scenes. It's no wonder the general public have a skewed idea of what it's all about.

Don't get me wrong, protecting our environment is important. But the truth is most of us tend to focus on the "sexy" side of sustainable travel. Wildlife conservation, tropical islands and eco-friendly lodging get the attention while conservation of a country's economy and its people's livelihoods are too often forgotten.

Looking after the economic health of the world's rural areas is critical. Rapid urbanisation due to lack of opportunity in these areas has its own set of negative socio-economic issues such as unemployment, poverty and housing shortages.

Sustainable travel is about supporting people and infrastructure long after you've departed. It's about the Triple Bottom Line; environmental, economic and socio-

cultural sustainability. Tourism needs to be sustainable in these three areas to be considered "sustainable tourism".

That means that while you may support that solar-powered, bamboo-walled, low-carbon-emission guesthouse and re-use your towels while you're there, it still needs to benefit the people around it.

It should support small businesses by sourcing fresh vegetables and meat from nearby farmers, or furniture and artwork from local artisans and entrepreneurs. Economic sustainability is about building linkages, keeping the money local and revitalising the economy.

When an area starts to see an influx of tourists there can be many negative impacts. There may be overcrowding in towns, the introduction of migrant workers and an increase in crime. Socio-cultural sustainability is about including the local people in a tourist venture by employ-

ing them and minimising the negative impacts of increased tourist traffic.

It's also about preserving the local heritage, which offers travellers a more authentic experience.

While taking a bicycle tour is eco-friendly, taking a guided bicycle tour with a locally-owned business through a township is even better. Stop for some shisa nyama and buy a piece of traditional artwork from a resident artist and you're a sustainable traveller! You don't necessarily need to incorporate all three elements of sustainability into your trips all the time.

Leaving your bicycle at home, packing up the car and heading off the beaten track to support rural businesses also makes you a sustainable traveller.

So why aren't more people adopting these kinds of travel habits? Everyone wants to plant a tree, save a rhino or adopt a baby gorilla and these kinds of conserva-

tion efforts are not only admirable, but increasingly fashionable. If environmental causes can become this trendy, how do we do the same for travel that supports local communities and small businesses?

Fortunately the world has entered a new tourism age with globalisation and technology in key roles. Travellers are looking for more authentic experiences and rural entrepreneurs can now access a market they couldn't before the internet.

The crux of sustainable travel remains: buy from local businesses, embrace the local culture and leave the place as if you were never there. Consider what it means to be sustainable traveller and it may just change the way you see the world.

● Allison is the marketing manager of Open Africa, a NGO promoting sustainable travel through a network of 63 self-drive travel routes in Southern Africa. See www.openafrica.org for more information.

Ironically iCONic new party is convicted of poll success

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Jonathan Ancer



CONS ain't worried about punishment (8). * A new political party has entered the election fray – the Patriotic Alliance. It's a party of ex-cons, former gangbangers and