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JOURNEYS: ECOTOURISM; Traveling the World to Help Save It

By BONNIE TSUI

AS a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1960's, Lynn Franco, now a 62-year-old psychoanalyst who lives in Berkeley, Calif., had always been interested in the underdeveloped regions she had traveled through. She said that longtime interest was what led her to join a March trip to Borneo with Seacology, a Berkeley-based nonprofit organization that seeks to preserve island environments and cultures by providing services in exchange for local conservation efforts.

"The project we visited was a micro-hydroelectric generator," Ms. Franco said, "which was funded by Seacology and built by the community, in exchange for the community's preservation of some of the surrounding lands." She and her husband, Nathan Kaufman, met residents, participated in a traditional dance, hiked through the rain forests and explored the nearby coral reefs on scuba-diving expeditions.

"We were able to enter a society more quickly and deeply than would otherwise have been available to us," Ms. Franco said.

As exotic destinations become more commonplace and travelers seek out more unusual and broadening experiences, nonprofit groups are responding. By promoting and helping to organize ecotourism, nonprofits benefit by raising awareness -- and money -- for their causes. The draw for travelers? Gaining access to places that they wouldn't be able to get to otherwise.

According to the International Ecotourism Society, the market for conservation-oriented tourism continues to grow; in 2004, worldwide ecotourism and nature tourism were growing three times faster than the tourism industry as a whole. The popularity of nature-based travel led the United Nations to hold a World Ecotourism Summit and declare 2002 the International Year of Ecotourism. More than 55 million Americans are interested in sustainable travel, which protects both environment and culture, according to a study by the Travel Industry Association of America sponsored by National Geographic Traveler.

Duane Silverstein, executive director of Seacology, said, "These people are looking for two things:

access to unique areas that most tourists can never visit, and a way to improve the quality of life of the people and places they do visit." This year, the group opened its fund-raising expeditions to the public for the first time. These trips visit project sites in remote places like Fiji, where the group built a kindergarten in return for the establishment of a 17-square-mile marine reserve, and Tonga, where a floating medical clinic was set up as incentive for the creation of a nature preserve.

The fund-raising trips were initially limited to major donors, but their success made it increasingly obvious that Seacology could raise more money by opening the trips to the public.

"I can speak until I'm blue in the face about our projects," Mr. Silverstein said, "but there's no substitute for having a potential donor see this for themselves."

Tourism can be a powerful conservation tool, said Alasdair Harris, founder and executive director of Blue Ventures, a British nonprofit that offers three-to-six-week expeditions for scientists and volunteers to its marine field station in secluded Andavadoaka, Madagascar. The nonprofit-meets-travel model has worked well for the organization. In three years, Blue Ventures has won the United Nations Seed Award and opened the world's first community-run marine-protected area for octopus, which has improved catches among local octopus fishermen and led the national government to use the project as a model for other marine-protected areas in the country.

Gabrielle Johnson, 35, a teacher from Santa Barbara, Calif., traveled to Andavadoaka as a volunteer in 2004. "I loved interacting with the local people, and learning how they respect the area where they live while still having to fish and depend on that for a living," she said. "And getting to dive every day, getting to know the corals and the fish and collecting data, was amazing."

Blue Ventures' latest project is to develop a community-run eco-lodge in Madagascar; in 2007, the group will also offer short-term marine survey expeditions to the Argyll Islands, which are being considered as a possible location for Scotland's first coastal and marine national park.

Well-established nonprofit groups like the Nature Conservancy, whose Yunnan Great Rivers Project supports sustainable ecotourism development in China's Yunnan Province, are also using local connections to draw attention to larger programs. Yunnan's lush landscape is rich with rare plants and animals that are threatened by dams and deforestation, and the Nature Conservancy has worked with the tour company Mountain Travel Sobek to develop river-based ecotourism in the area. Mountain Travel Sobek now offers rafting trips that benefit the Great Rivers Project, as well as guide-training courses for local citizens. On the customer side, you get to raft the great bend of the Yangtze before it's gone -- plans are afoot to dam it by 2009.

"This 'creative class' that we market to is getting more sophisticated about how they spend their money, and possibly this trend will continue and exert more influence on their decision to buy a trip," said Nadia Billia Le Bon, director of special programs for Mountain Travel Sobek.

But the rivers themselves were the big attraction for Jon McKee, 61, who traveled to Yunnan in February to run both the Yangtze and the upper Mekong on back-to-back trips.

"I do river trips all over the world, some with other outfitters," said Mr. McKee, of Brenham, Tex., "and to be honest, I'm usually very much focused on the river running."

But he was impressed with the efforts to integrate a sustainable new business with the area economy. "The guides over there," he said, "were very passionate about ecotourism and coming up with a way for the locals to get a new cash economy other than logging."

Because nonprofits are now marketing these new trips to the general public -- and not just to an audience that is already familiar with their organizations -- an expedition can be an opportunity to attract new members. "Very often, we get people on our trips who don't think of themselves as environmentalists, they just want to have a fun vacation," said Tanya Tschesnok, a spokeswoman for Sierra Club Outings, the Sierra Club's travel arm. Major donors, she added, have come to the club through the outings program: "It's a subtle -- some might say 'sneaky' -- approach that is extremely effective in fostering a lasting emotional commitment to nature."

Conservation-oriented travel is territory long occupied by groups like Sierra Club Outings and Earthwatch Institute. Earthwatch was founded in 1971 to support scientific research by offering the public a chance to work alongside experts on field expeditions. Last year, the organization attracted 4,190 volunteers from 50 states and 79 countries. It is perhaps the most successful model for this kind of travel: returnees make up a third of each year's volunteers, and over 35 years, volunteer work has led, for example, to the creation of national parks or wildlife reserves in places like Vietnam, Argentina and Australia.

"People selfishly want experiences that are real -- they don't want canned tours, they want to meet the park ranger, they want to help in an orphanage," said Blue Magruder, director of public affairs for Earthwatch. "And an increasing number of people want their time on the planet to count."

"Anything that lets people get to know locals as individuals and colleagues rather than just someone they take a picture of is going to be beneficial."

Ms. Tschesnok of Sierra Club Outings stresses that even though some of the organization's trips go to places that aren't normally accessible to the public -- like its 2007 research expedition in Peru to the isolated Cordillera Azul National Park, where new bird and plant species have recently been discovered -- the real distinguishing feature of nonprofit-led expeditions is access to people who frame a destination, even one close to home, in a new way.

"Organizations, including ours, give people access to on-the-ground activists and local experts," she said. "This is the view of the place that they would not get on a mainstream tour."

SEEKING OUT THE SUSTAINABLE

Seacology (510-559-3505; www.seacology.org) leads excursions to project sites in Tanzania, Fiji, Vanuatu and Indonesia in 2007; a \$1,000 donation is requested.

The Nature Conservancy (703-841-5300; www.nature.org) was a pioneer in encouraging ecotourism, and has worked with Mountain Travel Sobek (888-687-6235; www.mtsobek.com) to develop rafting trips on the Yangtze and upper Mekong Rivers that benefit the Conservancy's Great Rivers Project and local guides. Prices start at \$2,890.

Blue Ventures (44-20-8341-9819; www.blueventures.org) accepts volunteers on three-to-six-week expeditions to its marine field station in Andavadoaka, Madagascar; there will be shorter trips in 2007 to the Argyll Islands of Scotland, in partnership with Britain's Seasearch program. Six-week expeditions are £1,950(\$3,900 at \$2 to the pound.)

Earthwatch (800-776-0188; www.earthwatch.org) has a host of new research expeditions for 2007; travelers can study elephants in Kenya, track rare butterflies on Mount Fuji, and work with a conservation team to explore Brazil's distinctive savannalike cerrado ecosystem.

Sierra Club Outings (415-977-5522; www.sierraclub.org/outings) runs about 350 trips annually, to destinations both near (the Dry Tortugas of Florida, the Ozarks) and far (Patagonia, the Himalayas).

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