



# BEST

Business Enterprises for Sustainable Travel

P r a c t i c e s

Volume 3 Number 1

Category	Resort
Ownership	Privately Owned by Richard Evanson and Andrew Fairley
Area of Operation	Yasawas Islands, Fiji
Affiliations/ Awards	Conde Nast Johanse Award for Excellence 2002: Most Outstanding Resort; Green Globe Achievement Award 2000; International Hotel and Restaurant Green Hotelier Award 1999; Sport Diver Magazine and Continental Airlines Pacific Ecotourism Award 1999; British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow Award Pacific Region 1999; Travel and Leisure Magazine: Voted 9th best hotel in the Pacific region, rated 3rd among the "Top Hotels for Food in Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific"; Associate member of the International Hotels Environmental Initiative
Practice Keywords	Community relations; resource conservation; evaluation; cultural audit; guest involvement

## Turtle Island Resort: To Be a Vital Resource to its Community

In the early 1970s, having sold a successful cable TV network in the Pacific Northwest, Harvard-educated Richard Evanson was 36 years old and burned out from his fast-paced life in the United States. Evanson sought refuge in the South Pacific, and in 1972 bought the uninhabited island of Nanuya Levu, renaming it "Turtle Island."

The island however, was in not much better shape than its new owner. Uninhabited and largely barren, decades of overgrazing, neglect, and abuse had resulted in only 15 percent of the valleys on the 500-acre island still supporting forest growth. Significant soil erosion was also evident, and as a result the island's many eco-systems (mangroves, coral reefs, and beaches) were under threat. Native fauna were few and far between.

Even though the idea of a resort was still many years away, Evanson, who remains as one the owners and the Managing Director, made a commitment to restoring the island to its original state—not because he anticipated living there indefinitely, but because he perceived it as the natural, necessary, and "right" thing to do.

As a result of this ethos and commitment, Turtle Island is now internationally recognized as a prime example of how environmental and cultural sustainability can be integrated into a quality tourist operation. Turtle Island has demonstrated that a resort can achieve financial success by being a socially and environmentally responsible operator; and that Turtle Island's ethos of responsible tourism is in fact fundamental to the success of the operation.

## The Vision

The Turtle Island Vision is that Turtle Island will provide a genuine and loving Fijian experience for caring people, and will be a vital resource to its community. During over 20 years of operation (the resort opened in 1980), a number of unique and innovative programs have been undertaken, setting Turtle Island apart from other tourism developments. Reflecting Turtle Island's vision and commitment to its community, these programs and activities represent aspects of a sustainable future for tourism and





provide a model for other tourism operators—not only in the Pacific, but in other developing nations as well.

The Turtle Island vision also includes several broad statements of commitment:

- to be staffed by a team of people who are committed to high standards, and who exhibit a caring and loving attitude towards the guests and each other;
- to provide an environment which facilitates a positive and unique guest experience;
- to be regarded as one of the leading ecotourism resorts in the world;
- to be recognized by their communities as a vital resource.

## The Turtle Community

Turtle Island seeks to establish itself as an indispensable and valuable resource to its communities. All strategies and action plans for Turtle Island are measured against this ideal. “Communities,” in the sense of Turtle Island, span a range of stakeholders including:

- the guests of Turtle Island;
- the 160 staff at Turtle Island;
- all of the close to 3,000 residents of the seven villages in their Tikina (region);
- all of the residents of the Yasawas (the island group in which Turtle Island is located); and
- the population of the Fiji Islands.

Turtle Island guests play a vital role in the success of community development programs through financial and in-kind contributions to various programs. The “Turtle experience” as it is known, is predicated on a unique sense of “family” created on the island that is shared between the

guests and the staff. Turtle Island staff and management take the formation of this sense of family very seriously. The intentional facilitation of a collective and shared experience engenders an intercultural sense of community between employees and guests, as well as among the guests themselves. Staff are encouraged to take an active interest in the lives of the guests, and vice-versa. Through shared events, activities, and experiences, guests develop a sense of closeness and community not often seen in the tourism arena. Clearly, the guests who choose to stay at the resort appreciate these efforts—36 percent of its guests are returnees.

## Yasawas Community Foundation (YCF)

Turtle Island Resort encourages guests to take an active role in protecting and enhancing the lives of local people. They are often so touched by their experience on Turtle Island and the warmth and hospitality of staff and local villagers that they want to give something back by making a contribution. The Yasawas Community Foundation (YCF, formerly known as the Turtle Island Community Foundation) was created in 1992 to generate guest donations and ensure that they are applied to projects which provide solutions to real problems facing local residents. The foundation supports a number of innovative community projects in healthcare, education, and employment.

## Education

The area faces a number of educational barriers. There are no secondary schools in the local area of Nacula Tikina (the area in which Turtle Island is located), and many families cannot afford to send their children to boarding school on the mainland. As a result, the attrition rate between primary school and secondary school is close to 50 percent.

To help families send their children to high school, Turtle Island identified two strategies:

- to create employment opportunities so families could afford to send their children to school; and



- to build a school on Turtle Island so that the children from the seven local villages can live in their home village and commute to school by boat each day. (This goal was realized in 2002, with the first class of seven students commencing study. It is anticipated that the high school will be finished in 2005. Ultimately, it will cater to 100 local students.)

## Healthcare

In addition to other health concerns, Fiji also has a particular problem with blindness-causing cataracts and diabetic retinopathy. The healthcare facilities in the Yasawa Islands, the group in which Turtle Island is situated, are rudimentary at best. There has been no resident doctor for many years, and nursing stations lack electricity, running water, significant expertise, and medical equipment.

Turtle Island recognized that this was a serious problem within its extended community. So for the last 12 years, they have closed the resort for one week each January to conduct eye clinics, during which they host medical teams of up to 20 people. Since they began this program, more than 11,000 Fijians have had their eyes tested, more than 9,000 pairs of glasses have been issued without charge, over 800 operations have been conducted (mainly cataract or pterygium operations), and more than 20 corneal transplants have been done. In addition to the eye clinics, Turtle Island also sponsors other medical clinics during the year, including dermatology, general practice, women's health, pharmacology, and dentistry.

Currently, plans for the construction of a state-of-the-art medical center on the northern end of Turtle Island are well advanced. The center, which will service 7,000 people, will be staffed by two doctors and two full-time nurses. It is hoped that construction will commence later in 2002, with a 2003 completion date.

## Employment

In the Yasawas, fishing and subsistence agriculture provide enough food, and adequate housing is available. However, employment opportunities outside tourism are non-existent. As a result, villages have high rates of unemployment, which leads to urban drift. This affects the youth of the Yasawas in particular. Those young people fortunate enough to go to the mainland for their education are unlikely to return, since there are no employment options.

In order to expand employment opportunities, Turtle Island has worked with three villages as a "social entrepreneur" to

## Benefits

### To Turtle Island Resort

An international reputation as one of the top resorts in the South Pacific region

Continued financial success through its ethos of, and commitment to, socially and environmentally responsible tourism

A very loyal and satisfied customer base, facilitated by the unique sense of community created among the staff and guests at the resort

Beautiful and sustainable natural and cultural environments through their regular environmental and cultural audits

### To the Local Community

Improved educational opportunities through scholarships, enhanced employment opportunities (to support the payment of school fees), the building of a school, and financial support and support in kind for tourism students at the University of the South Pacific

Improved health care through the provision of a range of specialist clinics (eye clinics in particular) and the building of a state of the art medical facility

Employment opportunities through jobs at Turtle Island Resort, as well as financial, training, and marketing support for a range of budget and backpacker operations in the *Tikina* (through the *Nacula Tikina* Tourism Association)

### To Turtle Island Guests

The sense of community, even "family," engendered through the staff-guest and guest-guest relationships created at the Resort

Staff and management commitment to satisfying their guests' needs

The opportunity to experience Fijian culture in a beautiful natural setting

The opportunity to contribute directly to the development of the community through the Yasawas Community Foundation





build budget and backpacker accommodations. These properties are owned by the local villages, subject to an obligation to repay Turtle Island the cost of the building (on an interest-free basis) from the profits generated.

Turtle Island has also been instrumental in creating an association of local budget and backpacker operators (inclusive of the three properties discussed above) called the Nacula Tikina Tourism Association (NTTA). Members of the NTTA have adopted their own Code of Conduct for Responsible Tourism, and have agreed to implement and be bound by its principles in their resort operations.

## Benchmarking and Evaluation: Measuring and Improving for a Sustainable Future

Turtle Island believes that regular “check-ups” are vital to the health of its operations. In the words of Richard Evanson: “The difficulty in measuring what you are achieving is knowing where you are on the sustainability continuum at a particular time.” It is a fundamental part of Turtle Island’s philosophy to test and measure the impact of operations on its environment, community, marine resources, and overall health, and to seek to improve its operations on this basis. This is done through the commissioning of both environmental and cultural audits. Such is Turtle Island’s

commitment to this process, the results of the audits “warts and all” are available in all the bureaus for guests to peruse.

## Turtle Island: A Leader in the New Tourism Paradigm

Both the resort and foundation successfully address the three legs of sustainability: community, environment, and economy. The benefits of their community initiatives are clear. Their environmental practices are equally strong, and both programs have helped the resort’s brand identity. For more information on environmental audits, re-forestation, and environmental self-sufficiency go to the Turtle Island Resort Web site ([www.turtlefiji.com](http://www.turtlefiji.com)).

Turtle Island’s vision expresses a strong commitment to its communities. Turtle Island lives that vision because it is good for guests, its communities, and Turtle Island itself. It sees community commitment as fundamental to achieving environmental and social responsibility, which it believes is the new paradigm through which the future of tourism must be seen. By adhering to sound principles of sustainable tourism, tourism operations can be of great benefit to the stakeholders involved, in both a commercial and ideological sense. To that end, Turtle Island has shown that an owner and operator can remain profitable while also behaving ethically and professionally, creating benefits for all stakeholders.



The Tourism Studies Programme at the University of the South Pacific fosters a sense of ethics to promote tourism that is environmentally, socio-culturally, and economically beneficial and sustainable. Dr. Tracy Berno is Head of the Tourism Studies Programme at USP.

### About The Conference Board

The Conference Board creates and disseminates knowledge about management and the marketplace to help businesses strengthen their performance and better serve society. As a global, independent, public-purpose membership organization, we conduct research, bring executives together to learn from one another, convene conferences, publish information and analyses, make forecasts, and assess trends.

### About BEST

Business Enterprises for Sustainable Travel (BEST) is an initiative of The Conference Board, in association with the World Travel and Tourism Council. Support is provided by several foundations, including the Ford and Charles Stewart Mott Foundations.

BEST’s mission is to serve as a leading source of knowledge on innovative travel industry practices that advance community, business, and travelers’ interests.

*BEST Practices* highlights successful business practices drawn from BEST’s extensive and expanding database of the latest sustainable travel and tourism practices. If your company has practices that we should be aware of, please contact us.

### About the World Travel & Tourism Council

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) is the global business leaders’ forum for travel and tourism. Its 112 members are chief executives from all sectors of the industry, including accommodation, catering, entertainment, recreation, transportation, and other travel-related services. Its central goal is to work with governments to realize the full economic impact of the world’s largest generator of wealth and jobs—travel and tourism.

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