

Indigenous Values Help Shape a Universal Tourism Ethic

Ben Sherman

Abstract

Indigenous communities from around the planet are defining common values in their tourism programs that attract visitors seeking authentic, transformational experiences. The Maori of New Zealand, Aborigines of Australia, Maasai of Kenya, American Indians of the United States, and First Nations People of Canada communicate a set of ancient beliefs in the intricate connection between humans and the natural world. These beliefs carry a deep and powerful message that can capture the hearts and lift the souls of people who have long forgotten the teachings of their forebears.

Luther Standing Bear of the Lakota Nation expressed the beliefs of his people as follows: “From Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit, there came a great unifying life force that flowed in and through all things — the flowers of the plains, blowing winds, rocks, trees, birds, animals — and was the same force that had been breathed into the first man. Thus all things were kindred, and were brought together by the same Great Mystery.”

From these common beliefs were created a set of values that are lived yet today. Luther Standing Bear described these values from the Lakota perspective as follows: “Out of the Indian approach to existence there came a great freedom – an intense and absorbing love for nature; a respect for life; enriching faith in a Supreme Power; and principles of truth, honesty, generosity, equity, and brotherhood...”

Indigenous people around the planet carry a deep respect and abiding love for our Mother, the earth, and all the living things that create the sacred circle of life. Indigenous values of generosity, respect and spirituality shape guiding principles for a brand of tourism hospitality and sustainability that offers universal appeal. These universal values embrace a kind of relationship to the natural world that is rarely mentioned among tourism industry practitioners and academics.

Industry professionals avoid the more intimate expressions, while Indigenous people readily embrace sacred ecology, holistic balance, kinship among all life forms, and practicing reciprocal relationships with the natural world. Indigenous people easily show respect for our Mother the Earth, the giver of all gifts. They demonstrate an abiding love for all of life, showing empathy for the stress that we humans create in nature, expressing reverence for the Earth as a living organism, and honoring human life as a part of the larger circle of life.

BEST EN Think Tank X
Networking for Sustainable Tourism

Indigenous people have long practiced the principles of what is today called ecotourism, an approach to tourism that embraces elements of earth care, authentic cultures, spectacular landscapes, and the best hospitality. Tourism enterprises worldwide that offer their versions of earth stewardship can do well to learn the wisdom and teachings of Indigenous people that express the importance of treating our planet with the greatest respect and care.