

EARTH FIRST CAN BE GOOD BUSINESS  
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ABSTRACT

At Sea Canoe, everything revolves around "No Trade-Off" environmental conservation and customer satisfaction. All company functions from site selection to corporate formation to the actual design of the Sea Canoe itself are developed with customer satisfaction in mind.

Because Sea Canoe operates in pristine sites, the company employs a "No Trade-Off" environmental policy. Sea Canoe sees its sites as economic assets, whose pristine nature must be preserved if sustainable prosperity is to be realized.

To achieve sustainability and satisfy its moral obligation to preserve sites it discovers, Sea Canoe talks environmentalism to three publics - customers, staff and the host community. To achieve customer satisfaction, Sea Canoe introduced 50% local ownership and staff profit sharing to guarantee customer satisfaction and environmental protection.

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Something strange is happening in Phuket, Thailand. In a land noted for inexpensive travel, tourists from all nationalities are paying from \$100 a day to \$1,000 a week for the right to lie down flat in a "Sea Canoe" and slide into a dark smelly cave with little headroom.

Other, more standard trips are at least one-half the cost - if not more - yet Sea Canoe is sold out almost every day, even in the lowest valleys of the low season. Agents fight over seats in May and September, and Sea Canoe's greatest challenge is keeping up with our explosive growth.

Why?

Because at Sea Canoe the customer comes second only to the environment. Everything from our custom-made sea kayaks to our product development to our very business structure is designed with customer satisfaction as our goal.

#### PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

Site selection is vital. Sea Canoe only visits the most startling spots in the tropics. Unless a site has overwhelming appeal, we look for another. Natural drama is the major attraction for Eco-tourism development, and on today's well-trod planet, it takes money and effort to find it.

We also look for an accessible infrastructure. In Phuket, infrastructure is one of the primary keys to our success. We operated open sea expeditions in some of the Pacific's most remote coastlines for eight years before we found a spot

close enough to a visitor plant to run a day trip adventure. Now, our "slice out of a typical expedition day" makes adventure travel accessible to Phuket's everyday visitor, and our promo day trip introduces everyday travelers to the adventure travel industry.

Judging from our overnight booking board, general travel products just don't match up with adventure travel, where programs generally offer higher quality and better value than hotels and standard tours.

When we developed our day trip, we did not adapt our product for day trip service. Even if they are in and out in a day, clients are more than a voucher number - they get eight full hours of exploration, and what is more important, our respect as people rather than cattle. We take a genuine personal interest in them, and the resulting quality far surpasses the typical day trip experiences offered in any resort area. Top quality product and solid travel industry marketing are the basic keys to the Sea Canoe success story. Contemporary adventure travelers are independent and intelligent. Many are engineers, doctors, technicians - scientists in their own right. Others are business people well-versed in professional efficiencies. All appreciate an educational experience. More and more, people want something meaningful out of their free time. It's the job of Nature Tourism to send them home fulfilled.

It may be difficult to see education as a vacation experience, but there is little doubt that once in the field, today's clients want to feel that their time was well spent. Pure educational trips are their own specialty, and on all but museum tours, a balance of education and recreation make for a satisfied customer.

In our planning process, philosophy preceded product. Sea Canoe was designed for a specific goal - enhancing environmental awareness by renewing one's personal relationship with nature. That requires active personal participation.

Since I have lifelong ocean experience, we decided that sea kayaking dramatic coastlines is our way to bring people back in touch with nature. But just the word "kayak" is ominous. Most people think of icebergs, Eskimo rolls and getting trapped inside a capsized boat.

Not with Sea Canoe. Instead of the tippy hard-shells loved by the purists, I visualized a boat for the everyday outdoors person - stable, buoyant, easy to use, transportable yet a credible expedition tool.

Unfortunately, there just isn't anything like that on the market. Far from being serious expedition craft, most factory stock inflatables are a step up from bathtub toys. I literally had to invent the boat - and therefore the activity - before I could develop the Sea Canoe product. (Of course, we subsequently trademarked and copyrighted the "Sea Canoe" name and logo.)

The ultimate outcome was a product for almost anybody, from the family with children to the serious explorer. By paddling, people get closer to nature than they have ever been before. In the Sea Explorer, they also feel relaxed in

safety and security while at the same time feeling like a true adventurer.

Sea Canoe strives to deliver intimate perceptions of Nature, to reawaken the animal spirit that rests within all of us. We want people to think lofty thoughts about their place in the Universe and their relationship with Nature. They can only do this in a relaxed state of mind. In life-threatening situations, anxious thoughts of survival supersede philosophical nuances - and even if people are safe in the operator's mind, the perception of danger is distracting.

#### NO ECONOMIC "TRADE-OFFS"

One of the harsh realities of adventure travel is that we operate commercial activities in remote pristine sites of overwhelming natural beauty and fragility. We are visitors, somehow granted the privilege of entering these areas on a temporary basis. Most nature tours operate in places somehow touched by Man, but since Sea Canoe was the first to visit many of our sites, we have an extra responsibility to keep them pristine.

Along with the moral responsibility that comes with our "first entry" capabilities, we are also protecting the environment as an economic asset that allows us to exist. Thanks to these factors, Sea Canoe developed a "High Quality, Low Volume Meaningful Experiences" format. All three factors afford environmental conservation.

With high quality comes that personalized staff: client ratio. More than just butlers, our guides are also policemen. Well intending as they may be, many people just don't know how to act in Nature. Somebody who may think that tossing an orange peel is a sin may have no qualms about breaking a stalactite for a souvenir.

Even so, adventure travelers are generally more discriminating than general tourists are. They notice commercial impact. By making conservation our highest priority, we accomplish several things:

- Sea Canoe demonstrates that prosperity can be achieved without an economic: environmental trade-off. If we feel our programs involve "trade-offs", we simply don't run them. We share our philosophy with our guests, and they see that we are not hypocrites. Sea Canoe's "No Trade Off" concept is our basic reason for existence.

- Our guests feel good about keeping our sites perfect, and help market us upon their return home.

- Our staff sees that we truly stick to our word, and our environmental ethic becomes contagious. In a country noted for its deplorable environmental record, our Thai staffs are now rabid environmentalists, closing caves to guests during bat mating seasons and limiting the number of guests in the smaller caves.

Low volume is almost a mandate in environmental tourism. I can't think of a

pristine setting that can cope with volume tourism, a great destroyer of beauty. Our basic challenge as environmental tourism operators is to achieve economic prosperity with low volume programs - a concept that requires organization and creative energy.

The Sea Canoe experience says people don't mind paying a fair price for a quality, low volume product. If you match the expectations of your customers, they will be satisfied, and they and their friends will return paying top dollars as long as we as operators deliver a fair value. More and more, the market understands that efficient use of resources, low volume, consideration to time management and top quality luxury camping, great food and no surprises costs money.

Remember that Ecotourism is not a "mint". Don't think you can cut corners on your product and still maintain high prices. You can't. The adventure travel business is tough. But as five-star hotels discovered long ago, people will pay a proper price for a better value.

## DOING BUSINESS IN RURAL SETTINGS

If you as an operator are truly committed to conservation and quality (and you must be or you won't be sustainable) you serve three basic "publics" - your customers, your staff and your host community. Satisfying all three simultaneously isn't easy.

Environmental awareness is peaking, and if you run a "dirty" trip, your customers will be your own worst critics. People who don't understand the difference between throwing a fish-head or a plastic bottle into the sea are automatic experts on the preparation and care of field latrines. Your only hope for customer environmental satisfaction is to maintain the highest level of preservation.

Government officials need to be educated, but once they understand that your program brings prosperity (and tax dollars) along with conservation, all but the most corrupt will stand behind you. Do their work for them and give them the credit, i.e., make the bureaucrats the heroes without burdening them with work. You can't lose.

That leaves your staff and managers. Building camaraderie with your staff is vital to customer satisfaction. We understand that happy staff makes for happy clients. Repeatedly, we are told that our staff is what really makes the Sea Canoe experience.

Sea Canoe employs the most progressive management concepts to develop a happy staff - profit sharing; excellent benefits; career advancement and ownership opportunities; and participatory management.

We also create a pride in providing the best service and best product in the business... and it never hurts when a happy customer confirms to the staff that our operation is the best vacation product they have ever experienced.

A Nature Tourism company is nothing but its people, i.e. staff. Sea Canoe treats our staff as equals, and provides more than the legally required benefits (including a profit sharing plan) despite a compensation plan well above the industry standard for our areas.

Every day, our trips return with singing staff and smiling guests. Customer satisfaction means "No Complaints" and that means happy travel agents, whose primary objective in life is to avoid problems. Over and over, agents tell us they book Sea Canoe because they know that no matter what the price, we return satisfied customers. Rather than complaining about our \$100/day price tag, guests thank their agents for helping them book Sea Canoe.

## BUSINESS STRUCTURE

Now a final word about doing business in foreign lands - don't expect a cash flow for at least two years, don't trust anyone and don't pay corruption even if it is the norm. Once you start, you can never stop.

When you visit a foreign land on your survey trip, devote half your time and efforts to business structure. Go to the country's capital city and find an international lawyer with a good track record. Ask for references, and check them.

Once you are satisfied with your choice in a lawyer, go slowly, make sure everything is translated into your native language and cleared by legal counsel before you sign anything.

In Asia, the definition of business ethics takes on a new meaning - especially in booming resort areas that attract fly-by-night con men (or women). Rather than being perceived as a benefactor, you are seen as a walking bank account. Once you've built the business, lesser souls will try to copycat or take it away. Those who are consumed by money don't have the vision to see that the vision of the original operator is the fuel that makes a successful environmental business.

Listen to the Sea Canoe voice of experience - don't make anybody (except your well-researched lawyer) a legal partner until you've worked with him or her for at least a year, and then make them sign a blank share transfer agreement before they sign on as a shareholder. Find a host country accountant willing to report to your accountant back home - and then get them bonded.

If everything isn't perfect, future problems are guaranteed.

If you have the creativity to see an Ecotourism experience that others missed, the patience and economic resources to wait out a two year start-up time (give at least a year after your survey trip before you can even market your product) and the patience to develop an environmental awareness where none existed before, you might have fun in this business - but unless you've got a commitment to "Environment First, Business Second", I suggest that there are plenty of

easier ways to make a living.