

## Can the hospitality sector ask customers to help them become more sustainable?

Chris Warren & Alexander Coghlan

Imagine a 4-5-star holiday marketing “frugal abundance” (Alexander, 2014) to their guests, whilst maintaining guest satisfaction. The two, at first, may seem poles apart but when positive psychology is applied to the design of an experience, holiday-makers happily curb their material consumption.

This is the substantial challenge that hospitality faces in the drive to decouple consumption growth from resource depletion and pollution. By what means can they provide a sustainable service that also encourages and brings about customers’ happy participation?

### The consumption issue in the service sector

The accommodation and food sectors are major emissions contributors (Clune, 2011). Tourism, often an expression of our modern hedonic desires, is particularly high in resource use. Whilst many of us advocate for a decarbonised tourism sector, efficiency in energy use (see Hall, *Guilt free tourism*) is not going to be enough to make tourism sustainable.

The call to switch to sustainable consumption is growing, often through combining a degrowth model with the decoupling material consumption from wellbeing and happiness (Alexander, 2014; Clune, 2011; Pretty, 2015). But these ethical, moral considerations around sustainable consumption appear to have relatively little substantial effect in the long-term (Hart, 2011). For the service sector, particularly, the predicament to become more sustainable directly involves the customer. Asking customers to consume more critically (Wallies, 2011) might be a confronting prospect. But not always, as we show here.

### Showing Strength of Character

Our solution lies in applying positive psychology, and the intrinsic fulfilment that comes with activating our own character strengths (Lomas, 2016; D’Olimpio, 2014). It builds on the evidence that focussing on character strength-building and human happiness works better than any other approach when it comes to sustainable change (Evans *et al.*, 2014).

So, can this be applied to tourism, a sector driven by its promise of care-free behaviour? What would a luxury tourism experience, designed around less-material consumption and the application of character strengths look like? And what impact would it have on guests’ experience and sustainable tourism practices?

Today individuals seek personalised experiences. Here lies the opportunity for business people seeking to build their brand in the most sustainable way possible. Co-created experiences which draw on people’s strength of character can lead them to behaviour in new, fun ways. These three examples show how tourism enterprises can directly involve their guest in responsible actions and positively create a brand point of difference.

At *Chepu Ecolodge* (Chile) they have water and electricity sensors at the accommodation which indicate to guests how much resource they are using. The proprietors encourage guests to use within an 'Eco Limit' of 40 litres of water a day. They justified this through the provision of renewable harvesting of rainwater and solar generation. Despite this concept of 'rationing', guests positively embrace the direct challenge to their 'normal' everyday life behaviours. "We ask the guests how much water they think they have consumed after the first night at breakfast. They are often surprised by the amount used. We tell them how much each item uses of water like the toilet uses 7 litres and the shower is regulated at 7 litres per minute". Some guests appear to enjoy the challenge, others see it as educational and a minority have claimed to later change their domestic home practices. This bold approach has enabled the business to receive international recognition through awards which also positively sustains the proprietors (Chepu Ecolodge, 2014).

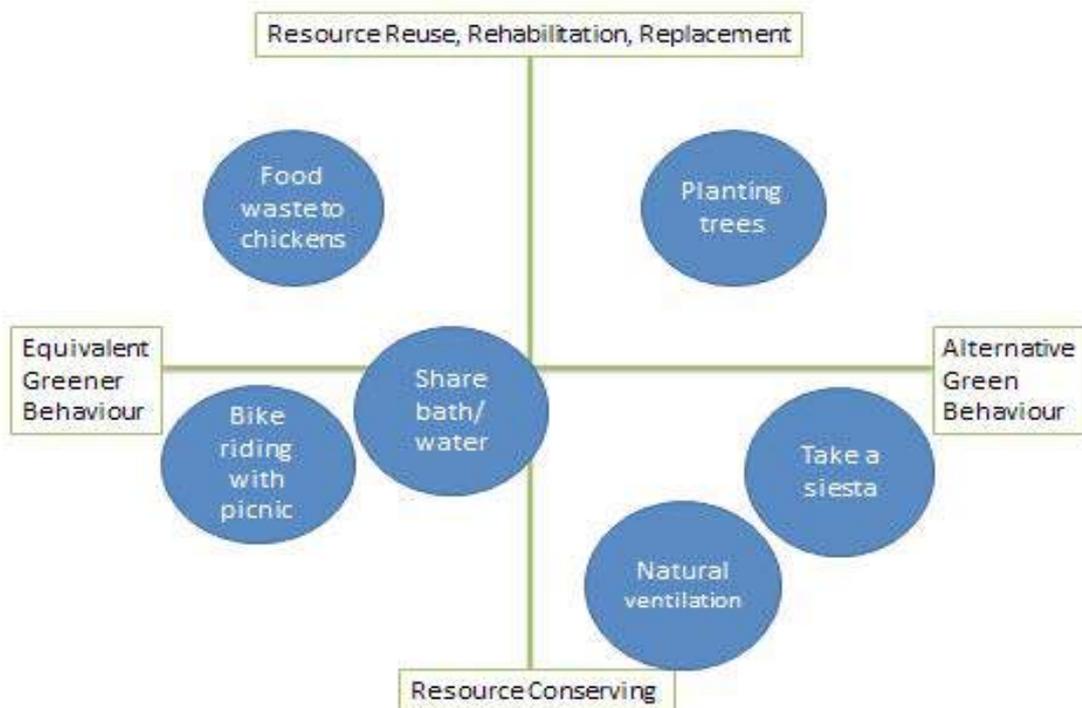
*Montague Island* (NSW) is a tiny island managed by National Parks and Wildlife Service which has reused the empty lighthouse keeper's quarters for short stay holiday lets with guided diving activities to observe sea lions and learn about the heritage of the island. A key part of the stay involves visitors activity participating in conservation work which can involve a day inspecting baby penguin borrows and or removing weeds to restore their habitat. It is not light work and involves plenty of bending and physical exertion. Visitors appear to love donating time to this worthy cause. They get joy from knowing what they do benefits the wildlife and they feel good about themselves putting something back (Westwood, 2008). It is also a fascinating activity that children appear to enjoy (which can be confirmed by the first author's family responses to their holiday) as they may sense the authentic connection between their actions to improve the 'cute' wildlife's habitat.

*Echidna Walkabout* (Victoria) is a Responsible Tourism Award winning wildlife guided tour based in Australia. Tours are predominantly filled with international visitors from Europe, North America and Asia. Following time viewing koalas in their native habitat with personalised interpretation, the guide will then invite members of the party to remove weeds in the surrounding area. This was initially tentatively done as the company expected only a mild response and didn't want to annoy paying customers. To the operator's surprise visitors enthusiastically participate, some put a great deal of effort and time into the process of removing harmful weeds. Their work is self-sustaining. For example when some visitors see larger weeds it becomes a positive challenge and then they like to admire the results of their work. Duration of this volunteer behaviour ranges from 10 minutes to an hour (Duffey, 2016).

According to the operators, neither Chepu Ecolodge nor Echidna Walkabout have received any negative visitor feedback (the conservation work is advertised within the Montague Island package). Looking towards 2017 as the year of Sustainable Development form Tourism such guest engagement might have wider impetus and be successfully employed to involve visitors to help create better destinations.

Our research (Warren & Coghlan, 2016) suggests there are multiple approaches to help guests become co-creators of their green tourism experiences. These are applied in these six 'real world' examples:

- Guests save their food scraps and feed them to the chickens. They get to meet their feather friends and collect eggs (often for the first time). Result: together with recycling bins has halved landfill waste and sustains egg production. Guests apply the strengths of self-regulation and kindness
- Plant a native tree. The host provides interpretation and materials, guests plant trees and take photographs. Guests receive a certificate and sign a register Result: bird species increased from 20 to 50 on site and guests physically connect to the soil. Guests apply hope, spirituality and love.
- Choosing a siesta and staying up later. Host provides ceiling fans, cool drinks in fridge (made from the property's own limes) and attractive al fresco BBQ setting. This encourages guests to rest in hottest part of the day, then enjoying cooler extended evenings connecting with nature. Result contributes to 30% electricity saving. Guests apply citizenship, self-regulation, creativity and perspective
- Selecting natural ventilation at night instead of a/c. Host explains how to use the natural ventilation in the accommodation, cooler night air in summer means cottages are 4C cooler in the morning. Result: contributes to 30% electricity saving and guests hear charming frogs at night. Guests apply self-regulation, social intelligence and appreciation.
- Host explains rainwater harvesting resource limitations and benefits of home-made aromatherapy bath treats. Guests choose to share baths or rotate bath use. Result contributes to 25% gas and water saving while natural essential oil recipes last longer. Guests apply leadership and social intelligence.
- Choosing greener travel, guests can choose not to drive but use the complimentary bicycles and buy picnic of locally source treats. Guests relax and reconnect. Result: memorable experiences (including proposals of marriage) less CO2 car pollution. Guests apply zest, love appreciation of beauty.



**Figure. 1:** Co-created experiences that helps guests be sustainable partner (GREENDIAG)

## Happy, frugal tourism

Today people want personalised travel experiences. Here lies the opportunity for business people seeking to build their brand in the most sustainable way possible.

Involving people in creating a sustainable tourism experience can lead them to behaviour in new, fun ways. The examples we have given all directly involve the customers to help conserve resources. Successful guest engagement requires multiple communication steps performed by the tourism business which combine to persuade others to reciprocate (see Warren, *et al.*, 2016).

This year commemorates 20 years of the Responsible Tourism movement (WTM, 2016). Tourism is slowly evolving and with it opportunities for individuals to apply new knowledge and skills which can become transformational experiences. These small actions (the Copenhagen effect (Stark, 2015)) can make a significant difference. By introducing positive psychology into the design of tourism experiences, guests willingly and happily trade in their material consumption, for forms of non-material consumption that benefit them, their health, and the environment, allowing hospitality to ask customers to tread more gently and happily.

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