

Call of Nature

The rivers, valleys and mountains of the Kootenays call to a special type of tourist. But is ecotourism a low impact, high return venture or will the very success of the industry alter this region's unique lifestyle? *By Art Joyce*

Eco-tourism—it's the buzzword of the 90s, a growth industry that claims it could take us prosperously into the next century while traditional resource-based industries are falling like old growth timber. But like all buzzwords, ecotourism is meaningless if it does no more than provide empty promises and snazzy soundbites.

"We were involved in eco-tourism in the Kootenays before it was even called that," says Kootenay Country Tourism Association manager Geoff Sturgeon. "People come here for the pristine wilderness and spectacular scenery—it attracts a certain kind of person."

While traditional tourism ventures like hunting and fishing resorts and theme parks aren't likely to pass off the scene anytime soon, there is a growing segment of the tourist population hungering for a more environmentally sensitive diversion. But what exactly is eco-tourism? Rock climbing? Interpretive nature centers? Whitewater rafting? All this and more—limited only, it seems, by the imagination.

Defining an "eco-tourist" is an industry in itself. According to a study to be released this month by Serence-Weicker and Co. Management consultants on behalf of the Columbia Kootenay Society, a recent market study indicates: "Eco-tourists are nature and outdoors education oriented, tend to be over 30, affluent, and equally male or female." Furthermore, a report by the Nelson Economic Development Commission's Amber Kendall says "the level of physical activity is an important factor in traveller profiles," with average ages being between 25-65. "Ages 20-34 tend to pursue strenuous and often risky activities such as mountaineering, kayaking, river rafting, heli-skiing and scuba diving. Ages 35 plus tend to pursue lower risk activities which may include bicycling, cross-country skiing, sailing and nature observation." And, depending on who's talking, the perception of what an eco-tourism outing is can vary drastically.

"There are a lot of people who think eco-tourism is taking a lift up to Whistler, walking around the mountain and picking up a name-brand sweat-shirt," says Geoff Sturgeon. "In the Kootenays we're looking for people who are interested in getting into the woods from the ground up."

Some question whether eco-tourism, or "adventure tourism" is a viable alternative to traditional revenue generators or merely a market niche. In B.C., the Pacific Rim Institute of Tourism estimates there are about 1,000 operators of such businesses in the province. The Serence-Weicker study estimates 1.6 to 3.2 million eco-tourists could visit B.C. and Alberta in the next 5 years. If only 5% of this potential market were realized, combined revenues for both provinces would be between \$176 and 352 million. Figures from a 1989-90 study, the B.C. Res-

ident Traveller Survey, indicate only 2% of the tourist population pursued wilderness and adventure type vacations. Yet a further 16% indicated a preference for exploring the outdoors. This figure is growing rapidly.

Results of a recent KCTA survey for the Kootenay region appear promising. Of visitors surveyed, 53% spent an average of 8 nights away from home, with 5.2 of those in the Kootenays. Expenditures of 47% of respondents were more than \$1,000 per vacation, of which the majority, \$652, was spent in the region. Yet by far the majority of the tourists still spend time and money on more traditional accommodations—49% staying in hotel-motel facilities, 40% in R.V. campsites. The overwhelming drawing card for tourists to the Kootenays? The KCTA study indicated 95% are seeking "pristine lakes, mountains, and rivers," and a "safe, quiet and unique place to vacation."

Sturgeon balks at considering eco-tourism the "economic saviour" of the Kootenays, compensating for the fading fortunes of the resource sector. He sees it as a complementary process—one sector of the economy contributing to and balancing the other. As an example, he cites the Prestige Inns project, which will be a year in construction.

"That brings thousands of dollars in wages to truckers, tradesmen and local businesses before a single tourism employee is hired," says Sturgeon. "Our number one tourist is a B.C. resident, so if they're working, they can continue vacationing in other parts of the province."

Some longtime Kootenay residents have nightmarish visions of another Kelowna looming on the mountainous horizon—with traffic jams of sea-doo's and pleasure craft tearing up the lake surface the way trail bikes do the backwoods country. Sturgeon, however, remains optimistic. He maintains it's up to

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Geoff Sturgeon, Manager, KCTA

us to decide now which way we want tourism development to grow. After all, developers can only build what City Hall signs the permits for them to do. Ironically, Kelowna's proximity to Vancouver, just a three-and-a-half hour drive away, may have been its undoing, attracting too many weekend party types. An additional 4 or 5 hour drive tends to require a more thoughtfully planned trip, from visitors likely to spend at least a week here. Only about 3% of the province's total tourism traffic diverts to the Kootenays.

"We could never become a Kelowna here," says Sturgeon. "For one thing, we don't have the land base. The communities have the right to control what happens—we'll be the losers if we don't." ■