

**Code Green: Lonely Planet Ecotourism (Book review)**

**Author**

Buckley, Ralf

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## Book Reviews

### *Lonely Planet Blue List*

R. Hopkins, A. Wheeler and D. George (eds). Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications, 2006. Pp. 328. ISBN 1-74104-754-X.

### ***Lonely planet lite?***

The original *Lonely Planet* guidebooks need neither introduction nor review. For any small-scale tour or out-of-the-way ecolodge, a mention in the relevant regional or country volume is a guarantee of business, the earthly equivalent of a listing in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. This, however, is not a guidebook. Its editors hope that it will be 'the start of something big, new and different' (p. 7). Whether in travel or publishing, they do not say. Does *Lonely Planet* have sufficient market influence to affect global travel fashions? It's not impossible. Or is it just a way to recycle text into a more rapidly-obsolescing format?

The first hundred pages or so are devoted to 40 sets of top-10 lists, with themes such as: art, bars, beaches, boats, cities, ecolodges, extreme, festivals, films, food, gadgets, gay, history, hostels, jobs, kids, markets, music, naked, nature, odd, politics, races, remote, retreats, roads, rushes, scams, sports, structures, sustainable, tough, trains, treks, value and wildlife. The rest is a continent-by-continent summary of selected countries, covering statistics, politics, fads, experiences, conversational topics, equipment and travel tips. Exactly how the countries or top-10 lists were selected is not explained. 'We didn't just pull them from a place where the sun doesn't shine', says the publisher (p. 7). But no alternative source is suggested.

There is lip service to 'responsible travel' in the introductory pages, but the theme is not really followed through. From 40 hotlists, few have any kind of environmental theme: wildlife, natural attractions, sustainable tours, ecolodges and perhaps remote areas. And even these are questionable. Southern Sea Ventures is a good pick, but why its Fijian option particularly? Whale watching is fine, but there are doubts about Kaikoura. There is a code of conduct for Antarctic tour operators, but they don't all follow it, and a ship ploughing through ice isn't the best way to illustrate it (p. 68). As it happens, I have visited two of the 10 'ecolodges' listed and written about three more, and my own list would be very different. I would endorse Crocodylus Village in the Daintree as a 'hip hostel', except that 'hip' is a baby-boomer word, conveying little to today's backpackers except the age of the speaker. I'm doubtful, however, that tourists visit Uluru as a 'spiritual retreat'; and I would definitely not consider Perth as one of the world's 10 most remote places, nor Banff as one of its 10 most extreme!

The book is heavily illustrated throughout, with the characteristic *Lonely Planet* fondness for heavily saturated colours, especially deep blues. Perhaps this represents the world as seen through polarising sunglasses. I guess it is a

blue list. There are large-font text boxes in the country summaries, excerpts from travellers' letters and e-mails. My favourite is from someone who fell asleep in a Japanese hot spring and awoke to find monkeys grooming her hair in search of fleas. The excerpt does not say if she returned the favour. These tales make interesting reading, but do consume space. Indeed, style takes precedence over content throughout the volume, with major sections separated by two space-wasting double pages of blue. Using Australia as a test, the content does seem somewhat eclectic. Does an alleged drug smuggler really merit a special section? But perhaps this is a subtly presented travel advisory. The spelling of place names is somewhat idiosyncratic, not always matching local maps. Each of the country summaries ends with a three-word wrap-up. Argentina's, for example, is 'beef, vino, tango', (though surely 'carne' would be more appropriate than 'beef'). Greenland's 'not particularly green' so, can a reviewer come up with an equally epigrammatic encapsulation? It sounds a bit brutal, but here it is—*Lonely Planet* lite.

Perhaps ironically for a travel guidebook, there is no guide to navigate through this text itself, neither contents nor index. Countries are listed alphabetically within each continent, but only a few are selected. Some years ago, *Lonely Planet* made a small foray into a different format, with publication of the activity-specific *Watching Wildlife Australia* and several volumes on *Diving and Snorkelling*. This seemed like a good idea at the time, but does not seem to have taken off. The Blue List may be another such venture. Perhaps the Blue List is basically a marketing tool, a way to persuade people to pick a destination and buy the full guide. The basic *Lonely Planet* guidebooks remain an invaluable tool for the independent traveller, ecotourists included. They have long provided an invaluable service to travellers worldwide, and I for one am still an addict. I would not consider the Blue List one of their best efforts—but it is only a first edition, and perhaps it will improve. If you want to contribute, log on to [www.lonelyplanet.com/bluelist](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/bluelist) and have your own say.

### ***Code Green: Lonely Planet Ecotourism***

Review of K. Lorimer *et al.* Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications, 2006. Pp. 215. ISBN 1741047919.

Consisting of 82 case studies in what Lonely Planet® refers to as 'responsible tourism', this compilation is effectively the Lonely Planet contribution to the ecotourism literature. About a quarter of the case studies are written by the principal author, with the remainder by 30 or so contributing authors who wrote between one and four pages each. The title is catchy but a little confusing, since some of the cases refer to social rather than environmental contributions. The volume is subtitled 'experiences of a lifetime', but it is not clear whether this refers to the authors or the readers. Each case study has a page of text, one full-page photograph and one smaller shot. Some have captions while others do not.

Besides the case studies, there are 13 one-page summaries of particular issues or quandaries which travellers may face. These start with the Lonely Planet

definition of responsible tourism, which 'can be more-or-less defined as travel that takes into consideration ... "triple bottom line" issues' (p. 9). Other text boxes aim to distinguish 'green' from 'greenwash' (p. 30) and discuss issues such as begging, porter protection, indigenous perspectives, cycling, greenhouse gases, hiking clubs, minimal-impact walking and camping, culture shock and volunteering.

Of course, this is not an academic text, but even so, it is a little disconcerting how little acknowledgement is made of previous publications on relevant topics. For example, the idea that tourism can help promote peace is mentioned in several places, but the list of organisations at the back of the book does not include the International Institute for Peace through Tourism. Minimal-impact practices are mentioned, but the language of Leave-No-Trace® is referred to only for a coastal sailing tour, and LNT Inc. itself is neither listed nor acknowledged. Surprisingly, the list does include Green Globe 21, even though that scheme is aimed principally at the kind of large-scale tourism operations which are criticized elsewhere in this book. The listing says that Green Globe 21 is backed by the United Nations, which is, I think, incorrect.

Each of the case studies contains a brief description, a list of responsible travel 'credentials', and in most cases, some basic logistic information on tour operators or other travel options, including prices. Most of the descriptions seem to indicate that the individual authors have taken part personally in the various products reviewed, but this is not stated explicitly, and some of them may simply have been taken from commercial marketing materials.

It is, nevertheless, a very readable and enjoyable book, and most of the case studies sound quite enticing. From an ecotourism perspective it is, not surprisingly, a far more useful and interesting compilation than the contemporaneously published *Lonely Planet 'Blue List'*, reviewed elsewhere in this journal. To the extent that I can judge, the content of the case studies seems accurate enough. I have visited about one third of the places referred to, but often with different tour operators or independently, so it is difficult to assess the 'responsible travel' credentials, but they sound plausible.

Tour operators featured include large and well-known companies such as World Expeditions, Wilderness Safaris, Peregrine Expeditions, Southern Sea Ventures and many more, as well as little-known local operators, volunteer programmes and aid-funded organisations. There are some notable omissions: conservation Corporation Africa, for example, surely deserves a mention in any global review of responsible tourism. This is not simply a question of price: the case studies include several which cost over US\$ 500 per night, and one which costs over US\$ 2000 per night – a long way from the original Lonely Planet stereotype.

It is neither a research review nor a teaching text, so there is no particular reason to own a personal copy. If you are running any kind of university course in ecotourism, adventure travel or even outdoor recreation, however, it would not hurt to have a couple of copies in the library so that students can take a look at the Lonely Planet perspective. Given the enormous range of places, prices and activities covered by these case studies, almost any individual reader is likely to find something of interest. Equally, however, it is unlikely to

provide a global guide for any reader, except perhaps a few ecotourism researchers. So it is perhaps unclear exactly who it is intended for, and what it is expected to achieve.

Perhaps, in fact, its principal purpose is to promote the Lonely Planet Foundation, advertised at the end of the book with the slogan 'travel widely, tread lightly, give sustainably' (whatever that means!). According to the description of the Foundation (p. 211), 5% of Lonely Planet's overall profits are used for grassroots projects on health, education and to a lesser extent environment. The featured example is an excavation of a minaret in south west Afghanistan. Perhaps, however, this is intended simply as an educational programme, a way to use Lonely Planet's existing customers, connections and clientele to spread a message about peace and poverty, culture and environment. If so, good effort! To mix an educational or moral message into a marketable product for the general public requires a difficult and delicate balance. I guess the bottom line is that I would be happy if I had written this book myself. Can't say fairer than that!

Ralf Buckley  
*International Centre for Ecotourism Research*  
*Griffith University, Australia*  
(r.buckley@griffith.edu.au)