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Heritage Tourism in the Canadian Rockies

An Interview With R. W. Sandford, Coordinator, Heritage Tourism Strategy



Bob Sandford, founder of Interpreters of Natural & Human History Ltd, and presently the coordinator of the Heritage Tourism Strategy. (Photo courtesy of Bob Sandford)

Leslie Taylor (MRD): How would you summarize the mission you've been on for the last 30 years?

R.W. Sandford: I've been looking for ways to preserve natural processes and opportunities for transformational experiences within a natural context, ways to bring people together so that we understand, appreciate, and preserve the landscape. I've also been looking for ways to ensure that commercial interest is not the overriding factor in decisions that affect the common good.

Can you describe tourism in the Canadian Rockies as you first experienced it?

My first tourist experience was as a downhill skier at Sunshine Ski Area in Banff National Park in 1966. It would be fair to say that, as a tourist, I didn't really know I was in a national park. But I clearly remember standing at the top, looking out on the endless views of mountains, and saying to myself, "Holy ****, there's *something* here!" It was a transformational experience.

So what has changed for the first-time visitor since those days?

Well, to be realistic, there are lots of winter visitors who still "ski, shop, and drink!" The summer visitor probably has a better chance to absorb the values of this place. But many more people who operate here now are sensitive to how this place is special and important. And they pass that on to visitors in many ways. If you take the example of our recent "Year of the Great Bear"—hundreds of events and programs by operators in every sector of the tourism industry here, information through all sorts of media—you can see the new emphasis on natural heritage in the visitor experience. And the same group of partners is working to make the International Year of Mountains meaningful for visitors as well.

You've been a key factor in that change to a heritage-based tourism experience—how has that worked?

As you know, I started out as a park naturalist with Canada's national parks in 1970 and had a particular point of view that was common at that time—a feeling that the visitors were not coming to the parks for the right reasons, were not having a "valid park experience." I thought that the private sector tourism operators were unreasonable and ill informed. And, of course, they thought that we in the public sector were unrealistic, out of touch with the visitor, and that we mostly sat around drinking coffee.

Gradually, as I gained more experience in private and public sector work, I realized that the "two solitudes"—the public and private sectors—were working against each other and diminishing the visitor experience. I wanted to find ways to bring people together.

I think my key success has been an understanding of the depth and history of the problem and the capacity to build bridges between the public and private sectors. Once those bridges are solid, good things happen from the cooperation.

I give lots of credit to several big players in this change. Parks Canada (Canada's national park agency) was willing to try new partnerships. Brewster (a large transportation and tour operator) has always been a company proud of its place in national parks—they cooperated in heritage tourism early and enthusiastically. Canadian Pacific Hotels (operator of major hotels in the Rockies) have a history and a sense of place, and recognized heritage tourism as an opportunity. They and many other organizations showed leadership in wanting to give the visitor a real heritage tourism experience.

I've worked with every major tourism operator in this area at one time or another and have also found it very valuable to connect with cultural organizations such as museums.

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Was there an "Aha!" moment for you—a moment when you realized that change had to happen and that you could contribute to it?

When I was working for public and private sector interests on 2 different contracts, I'd get to hear the story of the same event from each of them and it would sound like 2 different events. That's when I realized how much damage the "two solitudes" were doing to the visitor experience.

I notice you use the term "heritage tourism" rather than "ecotourism"—how do the terms relate in your mind?

I've had trouble with the term "ecotourism." It seems to be used in many different contexts—and it seems not to be universally defined or adopted. Ecotourism seems to be a framework without a sense of place. In building our regional concept of "heritage tourism," we've bypassed the ecotourism controversy and emphasized ecological and heritage themes with a sense of place. I think in the end we arrive at the same principles but get better buy-in.

Our heritage tourism objectives are simple, and I think you'll see how they match up with ecotourism principles:

- To make sure that all visitors know that they are in a national park and World Heritage Site and what that means in terms of responsible behavior.
- To encourage and develop tourism opportunities, products, and services consistent with heritage values.
- To encourage environmental stewardship by hotels, restaurants, and everyone in the tourism business to preserve the values upon which sustainable heritage tourism depends.
- To strengthen employee orientation, training, and accreditation so they can share a better heritage understanding with visitors.
- As we have worked with these objectives, people's concerns about local and regional environmental impacts have led them to care about national concerns, then global concerns.

What can people in other parts of the world learn from the Canadian Rockies experience?

If I had to make a list of key learnings I've gone through, it would look like this:

- The need for public/private partnership, sparked by good governments reaching out to break down adversarial walls.
- The need for responsible government to curb the possible excesses of the private sector.
- The need to integrate your ecotourism values at the highest strategic levels, *not* as an add-on.

The role of personal persuasion and the experience of success in small things—these 2 factors motivate organizations to want to do better.

"'Ecotourism' seems to be a framework without a sense of place. In building our regional concept of 'heritage tourism,' we've bypassed the ecotourism controversy and emphasized ecological and heritage themes with a sense of place. I think in the end we arrive at the same principles, but get better buy-in." (Bob Sandford, 2002)

Bob Sandford (RW Sandford Interpreters of Natural & Human History Ltd) is a naturalist, historian, and writer who has been working to celebrate the nature, history, and culture of the Canadian Rockies for over 30 years. He has authored or edited a dozen books on the Rockies and is also well known for his photographs and films. Bob is presently the coordinator of the Heritage Tourism Strategy, a leading-edge partnership among Parks Canada, the Canadian Rockies business community, the towns of Banff, Lake Louise, Waterton, Field, Golden, and Jasper, and local and regional cultural institutions. The Strategy aims to deliver quality heritage tourism experiences to visitors to the Canadian Rockies.

MRD is grateful to Leslie Taylor, Associate Director, Mountain Culture at the Banff Centre, for interviewing R.W. Sandford in Banff on 7 January 2002. Leslie Taylor's background includes 14 years with Canada's national and provincial parks, diverse management consulting projects, and 6 years as the Mayor of Banff, in the Canadian Rockies. *Ed.*

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