Greetings!

Promoting sustainable tourism through visitor education

The most enriching holidays are those that are rooted in authentic local experiences. In other words, these are experiences which make visitors feel like they are part of a place even just for a shorter period of time! Sustainable tourism will conserve the environment, touch the lives of local people, and immerse the traveler into the landscape and culture of the locality, which is the very essence of responsible travel. However, this comes with added responsibility. Guests are required to ensure that their visits are not detrimental to the local communities and environments. To achieve this, it is important for the guests to understand the most pressing issues in their destination, whether environmental, social, cultural or economic; and more importantly also understand what they can do to maximise the benefits of their travel to nature areas. Many eco-rated facilities are already educating their guests about responsible tourism. Therefore this week, we will highlight some of the ways that the facilities have been implemented, including the most innovative measures.
1. Resource area/centre

Resource areas and centres have been found to be an effective and the most desired way of communicating to guests. These are usually stocked with publications about wildlife conservation, culture of the local people and community engagements. Guests are usually briefed about the availability of these resource areas, during the briefing session by management and encouraged to visit. In some eco-rated facilities, even young children are educated about responsible tourism. For instance Great Rift Valley Lodge in Naivasha has an adventurous club for guests aged 4-12 years old. In this program, children participate in various activities such as nature walks, scavenger hunts, bead making and t-shirt painting, which is quite encouraging because children learn about ‘caring’ for the environment and wildlife from a very young age. The illustration below depicts some of the resources found in their resource centre.

2. Guest information folder

The use of guest information folders is also one of the most effective ways of communicating about the sustainability efforts or measures put in place by properties, to protect the natural environment, preserve local cultures and build local livelihoods. Some of the information provided in the folders include: measures to conserve energy and water, health and safety measures. Some even have an eco-checklist of the wildlife and bird species found in the local
ecosystem. So when you look at this information in your room, you could perhaps have an idea of which animals you expect to see when you go out on your game drive during your stay. And even more importantly, you will also learn about the culture of the local people (see illustration below of the guest information folder at Mara Serena Safari Lodge depicting the local Maasai culture).

3. Wall portraits

Wall portraits have been used to increase guests’ knowledge and awareness on environmental challenges and cultures of the surrounding. By imparting knowledge and increasing awareness, there can be a significant shift in attitude among guests, and increased motivation to conserve wildlife and preserve local cultures. The illustration below depicts a wall portrait communicating to guests about wildlife conservation at Lewa Safari Camp.
4. Metallic and wooden models

Some of the eco-rated properties have adopted the use of metallic models to communicate to guests about wildlife species found in the surrounding ecosystem. At Mara Bush Camp, each guest room has been named after a particular wildlife species, with the model located just outside the guest room (see illustration below of the rhino model outside a guest room named ‘Rhino’).
Wooden models have also been used to communicate about the wildlife found in the surrounding ecosystem. For example when you arrive at Lake Naivasha Sopa Lodge, you will find a wooden model of hippopotamus just outside the entrance; informing guests about the existence of this wildlife species around Lake Naivasha (see illustration below).

Other visitor education methods that have been adopted and are widely used by ecorated facilities include: talks organized by naturalist, nature trails within the facility, video display and star-gazing among others.

It’s our hope that you have been inspired through this article by reading some of these examples, and you can adopt some of them in the spirit of promoting responsible tourism!