



Backyard Blitz

ALENEY DE WINTER looks at how families can use travel as a force for good as we explore our own beautiful backyard.

The combined impact of fires, floods and COVID-19 restrictions has created a Venn diagram of chaos for the Australian tourism industry, leaving Australian travellers more reflective in their travel choices.

Consumer research conducted by Tourism Australia in April 2020 found that today's travellers are increasingly seeking out brands and experiences that are not only good for them, but good for the destinations they visit. Whether that's through supporting local businesses, choosing eco-friendly accommodation or getting hands-on with restoration efforts via recovery tours and experiences, 74 per cent of us are actively searching for more meaningful travel experiences that allow us to give back.

Raising reef rescuers

Sailaway Port Douglas is one company that's long been delivering more meaningful experiences to customers. Owner and operator, Steve Edmonson, is passionate about teaching kids the importance of protecting the Great Barrier Reef and giving back through their travel choices.

"We gently educate our guests on the threats and challenges to the reef, and they become invested as they snorkel with the

turtles, and among the cold gardens and giant clams. Children are especially receptive. It's not what you do. It's how you do it. There's no guilt, there's no shaming – it's about positive messaging and best practices," he says.

Just by joining a Sailaway tour, families are giving back to the local environment. Twenty dollars of the ticket price of every passenger on board is contributed to sustainable reforestation and carbon offsetting in the neighbouring World Heritage rainforest, which Steve believes is a sound investment to benefit the future security of our children. Sailaway is also one of five Marine Tourism Operators participating in the Coral Nurture Program, which involves out-planting corals in order to boost live coral cover on the reef and also helps ensure reef sites with existing high coral cover stay healthy.

Education leads to understanding

Dr Freya Higgins-Desbiolles, a senior lecturer in Tourism, Business Unit, at the University of South Australia, suggests that tourism is a tool for education. Historically people travelled to gain culture, education and understanding and that is a pathway we should re-embrace. "I think tourism at the best basic level is good

for people. We need holidays to breathe, to be with family, to have opportunities to share things, and create life memories and time together. Because when we're in our ordinary lives, we're frantic and don't get that. But if parents can gear travel toward children's creativity and curiosity and engagement, they set them up for life with skills like critical questioning," she comments.

Freya believes responsible tourism should be embedded back into the school curriculum to empower and educate kids to make more ethical choices. She also believes parents should understand and educate their children on the techniques of tourism and how they have the choice to ensure their money is spent in local communities.

"It can be as easy as staying in a campground that's locally owned, and buying your food in the local supermarket, supporting local tour companies, buying from local artists and engaging in local festivities. But tell your children why you're choosing certain things, so that they understand why they are important choices."

Being a good traveller also means being a good guest, suggests Freya. "I would encourage us to start thinking about solidarity with other communities and how our visits





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01 Educating children about conservation issues should be part of your experience on the Great Barrier Reef © Visit Port Douglas & Daintree/Matt Harvey 02 Family on Nudey Beach at sunset © Tourism and Events Queensland/These Wander Days 03 Coral restoration by marine biologists at Daydream Island © Tourism and Events Queensland/Liam Brennan 04 Wildlife on Kangaroo Island © Virgin Australia 05 Wilsons Promontory, Gippsland © Destination Gippsland

can help. And that's more than just bringing money into the economy. If families commit to repeat visitation, to form bonds with a regional community, it's more sustainable and makes a difference. Families should seek out citizen science projects as a chance to get into nature and have experts guide work that can actually lead to restoration and regeneration."

Small citizen scientists

Rowena Johnson, tours coordinator and resident marine scientist at Queensland's Fitzroy Island, believes that one of the most important aspects of travel is teaching our children to not just take for our own enjoyment, but to give back wherever possible and appreciate what we learn along the way.

On Fitzroy Island, empowering and educating children about conservation issues is part of the experience. Visits to the Turtle Rehabilitation Centre are accompanied by a 30-minute educational talk, there's a program of guided nature activities and even workshops on making sustainable products.

Fitzroy Island also facilitates beach and underwater clean-up events on the island for organisations such as Tangaroa Blue, Reef Check, Parley and Sea Shephard, encouraging visitors to get involved as a family.

But for Rowena, one of her favourite parts of the week is the Junior Marine Biologist Program. "We help engage children with the natural environment through a series of hands-on and fun activities, such as beachcombing and the glass-bottom boat tour. We also touch on citizen science initiatives, water quality and the impacts upon reef health, as well as the impacts of

marine litter upon wildlife. It is such a great way to educate children while actually just having some fun."

An attitude of gratitude

Dr Antonia Canosa is a social anthropologist and Research Fellow with the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University. Her research focuses on children's rights, wellbeing, participation and ethics in the context of tourism and researching the role children play in promoting more responsible, ethical and sustainable forms of tourism.

Antonia believes that most of the time when we travel we feel a sense of entitlement; we've just spent all this money, and we feel as though we have the right to relax and enjoy our holiday. These attitudes and behaviours then trickle down to children, so often there is an attitude of taking. But we need to form conscious habits of express thankfulness and appreciation for our privilege and the impact that it has on our surroundings and the communities who live in them.

Even in Australia, she says we should consider travelling at off-peak times and encourage children to think about the impact of their holiday. Consider visiting new areas that aren't major tourist attractions where you can connect with the locals and have more time to experience the culture of a place and contribute to local business and livelihoods.

When travelling with children, food is especially important. An act as simple as supporting local businesses by shopping big at a local winery, bakery or butcher gives back to

the community while teaching kids to reflect on things like the climate and the traditions of the area and how they impact the local produce and cuisine.

A helping hand

Another aspect of thoughtful travel is choosing destinations that need us rather than the other way around. Bushfires tore across more than 320,000 hectares of land in East Gippsland and 30,000 visitors were evacuated from holiday villages in the final days of December 2019, resulting in a huge economic loss to the area. But thanks to the #emptyesky and #roadtripforgood campaigns, visitors rallied in the weeks that followed, returning to bushfire affected towns in droves to support accommodation, tour operators and local restaurants. Businesses were buoyed by the outpouring of support until COVID-19 restrictions put a stop to the recovery.

"These campaigns reached out to people on a personal level. The understanding that regional communities are built on small, family-run businesses who rely on visitors turned travel from something that can be quite indulgent and self-driven to something that can give back to communities," says Terry Robinson, CEO of Destination Gippsland.

"We can feel quite helpless in the aftermath of a crisis but visiting bushfire-affected communities this year offers us a really tangible way that we can help," he adds.

"I think that both visitors and communities get the most value out of a stay when visitors really engage with the destination, taking the time to learn about the region's history and

local environment – this is especially true of family holidays."

Visiting during the quieter winter months is a simple way that families can beat the crowds and support regional communities. Terry suggests that families with teens eager to do their bit might like to join Echidna Walkabout Nature Tours on a four-day Wildlife Journey through East Gippsland, where participants can get hands-on to help with a wild koala research project, conduct bushfire-recovery wildlife surveys in the biodiverse forests of East Gippsland and remove ghost nets from beaches.

But it is the little things, he asserts, like teaching children the importance of taking their rubbish with them after camping or picnicking and collecting plastic from beaches, that fosters good travel habits even among the youngest of travellers.

Antonia agrees. "What we ought to be doing is creating opportunities to teach our children that although it is our right to go on holiday, we must think about the impacts that our holidays have on host communities and the environment. When we choose ethical forms of tourism and travel responsibly, we are better placed to teach children the value of giving back through travel." ●

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We are all one, no matter in what form, space or time. As one we can change the world if we start changing ourselves.

— AKIANE KRAMARIK



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