

HISTORY OF ECO LUXURY

by Enrico Ducrot

Since the beginning of the Eco Luxury project in 2001, many things have changed...

In the past, the pioneers of ecology, have achieved many goals and their efforts were in deed not in vain.

The public was increasingly aware of the importance of influencing the politicians in order to correct the negative impact of human activities, in better protecting the environmental resources of our planet. The frustrations of a few have spread borders, and in recent decades have affected not only the richest but also the developing countries. From the strong passions of the pioneers, were born the so-called "green" ideologies, this movement has increased and in some cases has become radical. From this, political parties were born, although these environmental groups have not always interpreted the collective community expectations and their desire to see changes made. The motivations for this need of change, which I would say is of great proportion, and numerous, because many of these are supported by scientific evidence and statistics. The nature of this historical change is complex but we all are increasingly aware that we are at a turning point of a developing model.

The transition we are experiencing is characterized by a system of values that are gradually being replaced by new ones. For example, the impact of new technologies that has profoundly changed our habits, beginning with daily life to the working world, leisure, and as well as our passions. This slow and gradual transformation process of society, economical theories, habits, and policies is evolving towards a more attentive care, interest and management of the environment.

After having reached a satisfactory level in the general quality of life, a wide range of the population are looking for instant satisfaction in those areas that are today considered a priority and have been neglected in the past. These new consumer types are gradually taking ground, but this is not happening due to the reduction of the annual income level. Therefore it would be short-sighted to attribute this change only to an economic crisis model.

In fact, signals of these changes had already begun long ago.

After a period in which man believed that natural resources were inexhaustible, a new phase has begun in which everyone has a greater awareness for the earths welfare. Nations have begun to protect their cultural treasures and their territory, this was achieved by using public administrative laws, development of parks, reserves, protected areas for local people, and not all destined for the private sector. The natural heritage, monuments, archaeological sites, urban areas, landscapes, have become a resource which needs to be preserved by the community and posterity, and thus the management processes has been implemented for this form of preservation.

Many countries have adopted the environmentalism model to make an advance in the political race. At the completion of setting suitable public administrative laws, organizations for the management of these area, tried to communicate a new culture in best using the protected heritage. Not all authorities and electoral campaigns were always consistent with their environmental policies, and acted in the common interest of the community. Many protected areas are intersected by highways, polluted rivers, are located near industries, or in polluted urban settlements that are so harmful and thus nullify the public investments. Over a short period of time, it was believed that too much public intervention in the protection of environmental resources copies the patterns of every other public intervention in other sectors, i.e. the presumption of being the best, the only ones who know, with both positive and many negative effects. Essentially the protection of the entire ecosystem, which is governed by a group of state or public experts issuing regulations, is substituting itself to the market.

In reaction to this model, which was always strongly centralized in government, a new movement has been developed over a period of time. This system of private rights is used in order to protect nature and monuments, governed by the state thus creating an efficient market, which is convenient and that can protect the collective heritage. This movement believes that economic growth and environmental quality are not incompatible and that the benefits of protection should be assessed in relation to the possible negative impacts of a dynamic economy and individual freedom.

In favour of this model is infact the countries with higher income levels, and are in greater demand for environmental quality other than just material goods. The most dynamic economies are more flexible in managing unexpected environmental problems. On the contrary, the under developed countries are facing higher rates of pollution, worse health conditions and higher environmental risks.

For over 10 years I have toured the world in search of models that would show that these two opposites could coexist in order to achieve maximum benefits in the present and the future of the local communities, their cultures and environment. It was my belief that in-between these two development models, there is an intermediate position where institutions and the private sector co-exist, with a common goal beyond extreme ideologies and politics.

I met extraordinary entrepreneurs who by their courage, their determination and vision, were able to implement projects where I found the evidence to this apparent contradiction.

How Eco Luxury was born...

When I started working on the project of Eco Luxury, I was able to use my experience as an archaeologist and a global tour operator. I was born and lived in a unique country: Italy where I was able to witness the many profound changes that took place in this country since the 70's. The Italian territory, which for centuries had changed due to man's input, has in a few decades, been completely transformed. Undeveloped suburbs have occupied the countryside, industries have replaced the original landscapes, the leisure industry has cemented the coast-line, while traditional houses have been replaced by modern ones. In cities and in rural areas, new economic activities have replaced the traditional identities typical of the areas once known. Even the protected areas of Italy have suffered incalculable damages, due to retrograde politics which colludes: i.e. arson, invasion of concrete jungles, uncontrolled pollution, as well as access denied into many protected areas. Major damage was caused by the abandonment of some areas 'protected' by government as well as often contradictory rules and laws. Italy, like many countries fundamental to the history of humanity, taught me the positive and negative effects of the protection of the environment.

In 2001, I was interested in the development of tourism activities in protected areas and promoting initiatives in various parts of the world besides Italy.

But it was in Africa that I found the most innovative pioneers. The areas destroyed by the extraction of raw materials, local communities segregated on racial grounds, the emergency health care shortage and food crisis, the animals hunted in some areas up to extinction, are just some of the reasons that have motivated private individuals first, then followed by governments to develop new economical models for the protection of social, territorial and environmental identities.

When I arrived in Botswana, I met some of the pioneers of this development. At first, I saw with suspicious views, the model joining ecological values + luxury = eco luxury. I asked how 3 or 4 past generations were able to protect such beautiful land and how they had preserved the reasons for which customers would pay entrance to now. I thought that it was more of a marketing strategy than a business model. But thereafter, it was explained to me in this way: "How could we have preserved this territory other than to protect it ourselves? Firstly, we started off privately, then with the creation of national parks we became their partners". Regarding the business model, I asked, "Is it a business model only for the rich and privileged entrepreneurs?", and they replied... "How do you think that the revolution of the first engine was born? The evolution of the engine has lasted several decades but eventually many pioneers in the 1800's suggested different technologies until the first motor car engine was created. Who paid for this work? Individuals! Who was the first to buy cars? Private customers, paying very high prices, using untested means and then sponsoring these new technologies. An elite client, who privately supported the evolution of the technology of transport to the industrialization of Henry Ford. Rich customers have helped pioneers to spread a new way of transport that has greatly influenced the community. Today, we feel a little like when Karl Friedrich Benz invented the motor car. Our engines do not pollute and thus supports the economical sustainability of parks, and we are just at the beginning". The story continued, "We begin with small projects, flexible enough just like our resorts. Why don't you help us to perfect our developing model and spreading it in all the world? We start then by small experiments: high quality, expensive to subsidize the investment in landscape, nature, community, culture, and technology".

I found that this economic model was very interesting and could benefit different sectors and not only the environment. Furthermore, I found it ironic that the Western World wanted to civilize Africa for centuries, and today, it is Africa who is teaching us those economical developing models that are the most eco compatible and more efficient.

Tourism, a pioneering economical sector, has recently allied itself with public agencies, who were responsible for protecting the land. This is due to the fact that tourism is more than an industry, but is a flow of people attracted to different landscapes. If business sectors and local governments destroy both the natural territory and the reason to visit as a tourist attraction, the community, public administrations and businesses will pay the price of this economical, environmental or social devastation.

What we, as entrepreneurs and economists can do is to develop practical models that can be leaders in the future, but to also go a step further, as it is necessary that politics give positive answers and can trace the path to overcome such a critical and delicate moments in the global economy.

Eco Luxury and the territory

The history of Eco Luxury is made up of entrepreneurs who are able to better interpret the restrictions set in place and to protect the environment without sacrificing the economic profit margins. Enlightened

entrepreneurs have opened the doors of discussion with government agencies. An alliance started where private companies became a "partner" of their territories. To improve the efficiency of these alliances, it is necessary to select the company/institutions based on the criteria of legality, professionalism, experience, and certifications. Then projects will be implemented with specific procedures such as, natural limits, economic and operational contributions.

The area where Eco Luxury started is primarily related to natural parks: Namibia, USA, Botswana, Canada, and Tanzania, these are areas where nature is so extraordinary and has attracted for more than a century, elite tourism, and then the mass tourism market.

The alliance between business and governmental bodies is less widespread, when speaking of parks with historical monuments. I refer in particular to the cultural landscape, or those territories having unique natural features, which include monuments, villages, traditional economic activities, etc... The cultural landscape is the challenge for all those countries with civilizations and cultures that have produced products that are for example protected by UNESCO. If the context of these protected monuments is threatened, then the very purpose of protection will lose its importance.

But the most threatened areas are the cities where there is major destruction. Protecting the historical centers, the villages and their monuments, archaeological sites, and landscapes is very difficult because they are often conflicts between large commercial interests, the real estate speculation, and political influence.

But many of the most beautiful cities have become the most famous, thanks to the courage and genius of the communities who were known by their beauty, elegance, the prestigious works of arts. Thus communities have evolved through crafts, activities, and services. Without this vitality, this protected urban environment will lose its value, and would be condemned to become only a representation of the past and not the present. A slow agony that today we see in Venice, Florence, Marrakech, Shanghai in which the identity is slowly being destroyed and their monuments are transformed into nostalgia of the past.

This is a paradox, given that tourism stems from the cities who feature arts and monuments. A complex and expensive work, not only connected to the preservation but also too often to the requalification and discarding of any intolerable abuse.

We hope that the agendas of governments are aimed to increase the space dedicated to the protection of private land with private partners before the natural resources are exhausted and cause further damage. We trust that this will occur as environmental consciousness is increasing globally. The increase of protected areas, will require more resources and this may increase the risks of political changes. It will be crucial to join forces between the private and government sectors. The selected and qualified private partnerships should guarantee in time, that vast areas will be protected for the common good and interests of the community and in accordance with new policies current with the times. Private partners should be involved in following precise standards in order to develop an alliance for the protection of the environment so that everyone can appreciate our world and leave it in a better condition for future generations.

I do not know to what measure but I am sure that Eco Luxury can contribute positively to all those citizens, companies and clients that consider the environmental protection a common and not-partisan interest.

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