

Armchair ecotourism: A tribute to Edward Abbey

Ecotourism. Can you feel something happening to your neck? No? I'll try again. *Eco – tourism*. Anything now? Well, for me at least, the awkward juxtaposition of our sacred three-letter shorthand and a mega-industry rarely fails to trigger a nervous throbbing above the right shoulder. As the immediate sensation wanes, hyper-critical resolve slowly fills my mind. What about the emissions from the long-haul flights? What about the large financial cut taken by wealthy facilitators? What about the negative ecological impacts of the requisite infrastructure? And are there any measures in place to prevent the introduction of alien organisms – lurking, for instance, in the treads of shoes? Finally, how much benefit is really being delivered to the conservation cause?¹

For any tourist looking for false reassurances that they are doing the right thing without actually restricting their holiday habits, 'ecotourism' is a convenient term. Call it a 'silent conspiracy' or a 'cowardly collusion' – greenwash abounds, and with it emerge wilful recipients. Conversely, those tourists looking for help in tracking down a holiday that is genuinely eco-friendly – from the perspective of all life – will be rightly riled by such obfuscation.

I have no problem with a flow of financial aid from rich to poor countries as a stopgap means of incentivizing conservation activities, but, ultimately, a bright future for the Earth must surely depend on love of nearby nature. In other words, the future of conservation is local. By this I mean people, wherever they are in the world and at whatever stage of 'development', living in harmony with their own ecosystems and challenging

anyone who is causing local ecological harm. In the same vein, I firmly believe that the future of ecotourism, too, must be local.

Peak-oil commentators (*e.g.* Greer, 2009) predict a future with a dramatic decline in global transport of both people and goods. I find their arguments compelling and, in this way, see an obvious temporal limit on the effectiveness of long-distance ecotourism, even if it can be made to run with net ecological benefit.² Thus, as the predictions of these commentators start to become reality, we will find our 'travel fixes' granted not by an airport but in an armchair.

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For no reason that I can describe, I have a deep yearning to visit the desert south of Arizona. However, this would involve an eleven-hour flight each way – bypassing so many other places *en route* – and then lots of driving, and I'd be exerting ecological pressure on an ecosystem from which it would be unfair to expect support for large numbers of non-desert humans. So I've opted, instead, for an armchair surrogate in the form of a second-hand copy of the Time-Life natural history book *Cactus Country*.

The book arrives in the post and, as the words are by Edward Abbey, I must make coffee. Despite the bean-miles,³ this is essential for my immersion in any work by this great writer. The beans are dark-roasted: black, smoking, rich and murderous, as Abbey might have said – indeed, did (1982: 14). I grind them at the last possible moment (it seems sinful to do otherwise). And I do it not with a fancy machine but by hand. Why let a computer chip come between me and the roast, just

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as the entrancing first-sip approaches? Do I sound obsessed with the black stuff? Well so was Abbey.⁴ In *Desert Solitaire* – a series of recollections on his time as a ranger in Arches National Park – he writes (Abbey, 1971: 17–18):

Before beginning the morning chores, I like to sit on the sill of my doorway, bare feet planted on the bare ground and a mug of hot coffee in hand, facing the sunrise.

What more earthly connection could there be?

With the coffee stimulating me in more than a simple chemical sense, I find my consciousness being consumed by the words and photos of *Cactus Country*. While I cannot physically smell the fragrance of burning mesquite or hear the song of the canyon wren, such is the skill of the writer that it hardly matters.

I learn about Gila monsters, javelinas, teddy bear chollas and giant saguaros (education that, incidentally, will enhance my re-reading of other Abbey books, such as his post-collapse *Good News*). On the surface, *Cactus Country* is simply a natural history book, but it effuses Abbey's philosophy. Describing the elephant tree, for instance, he writes (Abbey, 1973: 73):

Another useless plant, no doubt [...] without anything of economic value for man or beast. It looks like a monstrous turnip trying to struggle up out of the ground. What good is it? You can't eat it, use it or sell it. True—but there it is.

I am so moved by what I read that I make a donation to the Arizona Wilderness Coalition. This act, and the sense of awe that has inspired it, creates a real connection between me in the UK and the wildlands of Arizona and completes an experience that I proudly label 'armchair ecotourism'.

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Abbey travelled far and wide but was in love with the US's desert south-west – his nearby nature. Like other 'desert rats', as Abbey remarks in *Cactus Country*, he

could not properly describe his captivation with this landscape, but then this is part of its attraction. And, in a similar way, I find myself unable to fully unpick my captivation with Abbey. He was far from perfect,⁵ but he was capable of true ecological humility – of knowing his place in the grand order. In support of this, I cite an anecdote from a trip Abbey made to the Pinacate region – “the final test of desert rathood” – which he describes in *Cactus Country*'s closing chapter (Abbey, 1973: 152–65). Returning from a climb of a volcanic peak in the “awful heat of May,” Abbey and a companion pass La Tinaja Alta, the arid region's highest natural water tank. They are out of water with two hours' walking still to go, and so they fill a canteen, almost draining what is left in the basin. From this, a dilemma emerges:

La Tinaja Alta is a very small *tinaja* to begin with and this was the dry season. The bees crawled over the damp rim of the basin, bedraggled and puzzled. Now the bird cries seemed forlorn.

Out in the rocks and brush somewhere crouched other small animals waiting for us to leave, waiting their turn for a drink. We didn't see them, we didn't hear them, but we felt them [...]

All the water we had was in the one canteen. We emptied it back into the little stony basin. Not in charity but out of caution. It seemed, after all, no more than a prudent sacrifice to the spirit of the desert.

In ecotourism of the non-armchair variety, we should be striving to emulate this humility. ■

Notes

- 1 For some examples of the conflicts and controversies that exist in ecotourism, see Higham (2007). The text is primarily focused on the development agenda but also presents insight into the ecological predicament, with the chapter on biosecurity being a good example of this.
- 2 Even more significantly, the predictions of peak-oil analysts call into question conservation strategies that are pinned on development. Put

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simply, ecological limits make it impossible to get everyone in the world (even assuming that there is no more population growth) anywhere close to the current average standard of living of westerners. Yet, ecotourism, for some at least, goes hand-in-hand with development (see Higham, 2007).

- 3 This has parallels with Abbey's character Doc Jarvis, who – as we learn in *Hayduke Lives!*, a sequel to *The Monkey Wrench Gang* – has been boycotting bananas, beef and even some beer for years, but would not give up coffee, no matter how noble the cause.
- 4 In *The Brave Cowboy*, a relatively short novel, Abbey mentions “coffee” 54 times, frequently pivoting entire sentences around the word.
- 5 Eric Schlosser notes, in his introduction to the 2004 Penguin edition of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, that Abbey “was a deeply complex, often contradictory person [...] An outspoken opponent of gas-guzzling, air-polluting automobiles, he drove a red Cadillac convertible and enjoyed tossing empty beer cans out of the car.” In his preface to the same book, Robert Redford reflects on an experience on horseback he had with Abbey: “Riding a narrow part of the trail that would overlook a gorge, he would suddenly dismount and pry loose some giant boulder with his feet and send it arching into the deep space below.”

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“Abbey was far from perfect, but he was capable of true ecological humility – of knowing his place in the grand order.”

Shortly after writing this article, the author was thrilled to spend time in a landscape in northern Spain (much more local to his home) with certain 'Abbey country' qualities, including ancient rock faces and hidden, seasonally dry *barrancos*. Pictured is the canyon carved out over millions of years by the Rio Vero in the Parque Natural de la Sierra y Cañones de Guara (photo: Joe Gray).

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