

FORWARD

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Good evening everyone! It's such a special time, when this group of people gathers and old friendships deepen and new ones are forged. We often talk about how we in adventure travel live at the intersection of the 3 Cs: commerce, conservation, and community. But I realized in Montecatini, it's the 6 Cs: commerce, conservation, community, coffee, cuisine, and Chianti!

Tonight I am tasked with talking about the future — about the way forward. In the spirit of being honest, it is intimidating to do this. It's a bit presumptuous. No one in this room is smarter than all of us together. But that is the power of coming together — to uncover that grander wisdom and foresight. To decide how to return to our own wellsprings and then come together to collaborate.

I decided to go back and look at the first Summit while preparing this talk about looking forward, because sometimes looking back is most instructive when thinking about the future. So, back to the wellspring — the original inspired Summit.

The first Summit was 2005 in Seattle. There were no Pre-Summit Adventures. But there was a Day of Adventure and I, along with friends, drove the vans for those adventures. That was when we put the Summit sessions on a CD-ROM and mailed them to everyone after the event. Your membership packages came in the mail (no matter where you were in the world) and were packaged by my kids. Yes, we did pay them.

Something funny happened at that first Summit. Afterward, the venue manager afterward told me: “Your people are really nice and fun and polite, but wow are they messy!” I was surprised and asked more questions, and together we figured out why — there was no recycling offered and the ATTA tribe was stacking all recyclables by the trash cans instead of simply tossing them.

Is there anyone here who was at that first Summit 13 years ago? So great to see! Thank you for being here 13 years later.

It was interesting looking at the agenda because there were many subjects that we are still wrestling with as an industry. The Summit featured sessions on crisis communications, exit strategies, risk management, and SEO. Then it got funnier to see sessions like this one: “TECHNOLOGY: Use Technology to Attract, Convert, and Retain Customers to Improve Your Bottom Line.” The description starts like this: “Don’t be afraid to be sexy! Why is it that most adventure travel-oriented websites are far less exciting than the reruns of old television shows? If you’re in the business of selling adventure, you’re in the business of selling entertainment. And you’d better have a website that is exciting enough to compel people to book trips with you ... ”

It was fun to laugh at parts of it —like this. Who are those wannabes?



It was also gratifying to see that we as an industry have tackled some of the issues we were faced with!

The session on guides was led by the late, great Michael Kaye from Costa Rica (rest in peace, Michael): “Guides are part biologists, part performers, and part mothers ...” This session dealt with guides and guiding needing to be taken more seriously. And now look: Since this time, leaders from this community championed the adoption of adventure travel safety standards at the International Standards Organization. And a working group convened by the ATTA and made up of adventure companies from many countries developed a guide qualification and performance standard.

There was an interactive plenary session called “Challenging the Definition of Adventure Travel: Who are we? Why does it matter?” We debated what was adventure or not adventure — deliberated between hard, soft, and not adventure. After that Summit, we did a study on travelers and found the basic ingredients of an adventure trip were nature, culture, and activity. Recently, we repeated that survey and compared the early results with the latest ones looking more closely at the questions about motivating factors and found a remarkably stable set of motivations: learning, personal growth, and transformation.

Travelers are telling us clearly that overall experience is what makes the “adventure.” It’s not so simple as “hard” or “soft” activities. What matters is how they come together — the overall experience. The magic is in that special alchemy. Perhaps the reason our sector keeps expanding so rapidly despite everything else going on in the world that might influence travel negatively is this: Adventure travel experiences serve deeper human needs. **You serve deeper human needs.**

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Fast forward 13 years. A lot of changes and shifts in that time. Thousands of startups, businesses that have disappeared, technology upheaval, market changes, disruption, distribution changes. At our first Summit, here's what didn't exist: Instagram, Twitter, or Snapchat. Facebook was one year old and seemed silly at the time. Amazon Prime went live that year. No one talked about overtourism. Climate change debates raged.

Today we have social listening, AI, blockchain, digital currencies, robots, big data, drones, virtual and augmented reality, face recognition, physical and digital integrations, augmented commerce. In 13 more years, it's likely all this will seem antiquated. Hard to believe, right?

For how much smarter we're getting, we continue to be absolutely dumb about some things. Dumb or unwilling, which is itself dumb. We're consuming ourselves to seemingly inevitable destruction. Maybe you saw the news from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) last week: We are approaching the point of a possible irreversible change with an outcome that will be disastrous.

What is our role in this story? Individually and collectively?

“We in adventure travel used to think we were the good guys in tourism.”

There will be calls to travel less. Some may choose to do so. But travel has increased at roughly five percent per year, every year, despite war, terrorism, disease, nationalism, and natural disasters. In adventure, we are seeing 21 percent growth for the past six years. We are growing three to four times as fast! Even if there is a movement to reduce travel, I believe we must face the reality that it will still likely continue to grow — almost no matter what.

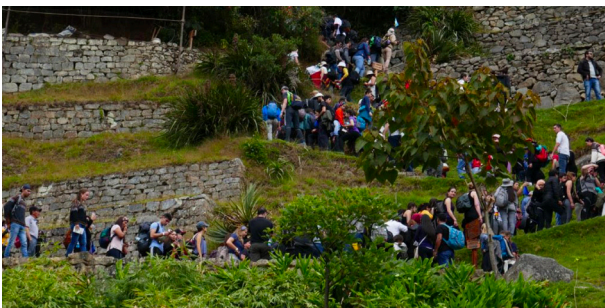
So, again, what is our role? As professionals and ... as humans?

We in adventure travel used to think we were the good guys in tourism. I remember how in 2008, everyone was saying “Adventure travel will save the world!” at our one event — the Adventure Travel World Summit in Brazil.

We even somehow pretend that it’s more virtuous to buy experiences than to buy stuff when, in fact, the environmental footprint might not be much different.

It was so easy to pick on mass tourism — on cruise, massive resorts, etc. We were the misfits of travel. The rebels at the big tourism events, the punk rockers. Mass tourism was easy to pick on because ugly incidents make the news regularly. Anyone remember the incident in a crowded spot in Rome where people fought over a selfie spot?

But our position has become increasingly uncomfortable with adventure travelers also overrunning destinations, loving them to death.



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I grew up in a small mountain town in Colorado in the heart of the Rocky Mountain range. A river runs through it — the Arkansas. Since I was a kid, my brother, friends, and I played in the river — my brother became a raft guide for a while — and this summer, for my 50th birthday, we planned an overnight raft trip.

The officials who manage water upstream are required to keep the Arkansas River running at 700 cubic feet per second (CFS). This is the minimum for commercial rafting. A good level is 2000 CFS. When we got on the river, the water was running below 400. Why? They needed it to fight fires because of the increasingly odd and unpredictable weather patterns causing many fires in the region. Hmmm ... wonder what is causing that?

This drove all the commercial rafting companies to move downstream to the private ramps. We were there. Here is a video with my brother and cousin preparing the raft for launch at the Browns Canyon National Monument, a wilderness area.

<Shannon shows a video showing a seemingly serene, riverside area with his brother and a raft in the frame, joking about the peaceful environment. He pans to the right and viewers see a crowded boat launch area overrun with rafts and patrons preparing for their own raft trips.>

There were two waves of hundreds of customers that morning — with more scheduled in the afternoon. At one point, I had to ask tourists to stop walking over our uninflated raft as though it was just part of the ground. A 20-something guide said to me, “Son, you need to move out of my way!”

So, here we were, next to the wilderness in Colorado experiencing a painful mix of overtourism aggravated by climate change. Overtourism — if it hasn’t hit you yet — there’s a good chance it’s coming to a trail or park or river or beach or mountain near you soon.

Both overtourism and climate change seem to be the twin threats. When I look to the future of adventure travel, or travel at all, these are key problems we need to mitigate, reduce, and eradicate.

Compare our industry to football for a moment — real football, not American football. It seems like since I've been in the tourism industry, our industry-wide strategy seems to be playing exclusively offense: Score more points! Or, in our context, get more tourists! Grow arrivals! Heads in beds! But now, we're seeing some destinations playing defense — blocking what they previously would have counted as a score. Blocking tourists. Barcelona, Venice, the beach in Thailand the Leonardo DiCaprio movie made famous.

It is time to play strategically — a game that requires both offense and defense. Australia is doing it with “Undiscover Australia” to move travelers away from the top attractions. Peru is doing it to move travelers to attractions other than Machu Picchu. Barcelona is working to reduce the quantity and increase the quality of visitors. Iceland offers a responsible tourism pledge for customers visiting, and Jackson Hole, Wyoming, distributes responsible tourist behavior information to visitors.

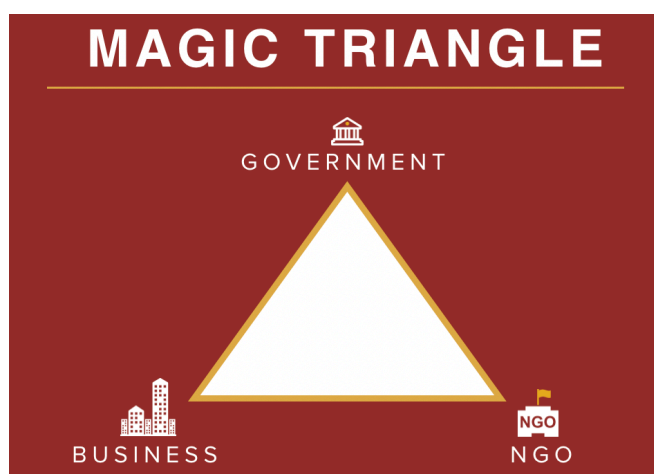
Overtourism, climate change, plastic waste, cultural erosion, and habitat loss are not on the horizon. They are here. Now. Some iconic species, which we used to say we wanted to save for our kids and grandkids? They will disappear in our lifetimes. Overtourism expedites all these issues.

We need healthy tourism to be the standard and for exploitative, destructive tourism to end.



At our Summit in 2015 in Puerto Varas, Chile, Canadian Ambassador and friend to the adventure travel industry, Tim Martin, described the “Kimberley Process” in which he was involved, where the goal was to eliminate conflict or “blood” diamonds from the supply chain.

As a group of concerned leaders, they realized during and after the process, that an organized approach was required to address complicated, multi-layered problems. He called it the “magic triangle.” Their position was that thorny multi-layered issues required businesses, NGOs, and governments to cooperate.



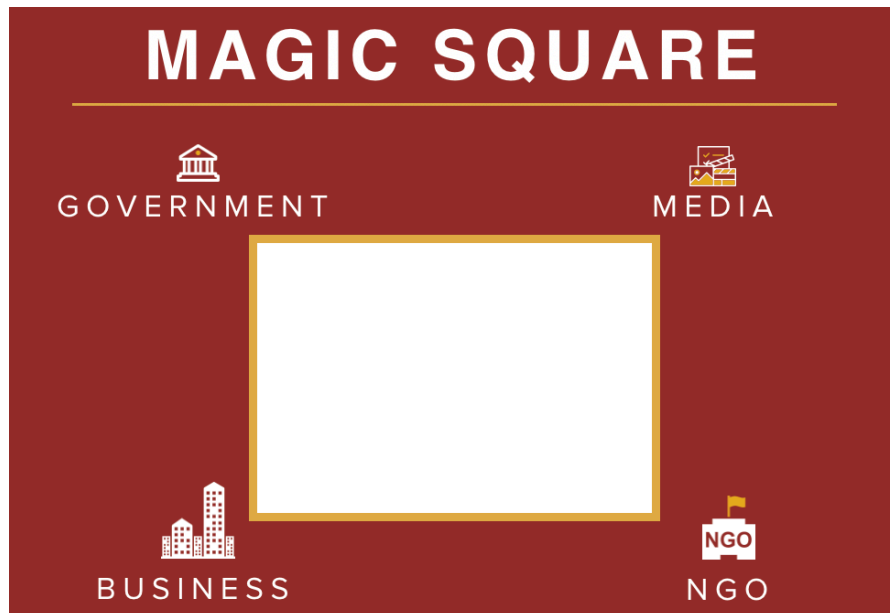
Overtourism, climate change, cultural erosion, habitat loss — these are those kind of problems.

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Tourism is complicated beyond measure. It is the connective tissue between many different human activities: business, marketing, manufacturing, artistry, sport, transportation, outdoor recreation, fashion, food, music, nature, culture. It is a contributor both to so many successes in our world, and, as well, some very significant problems. We can't ignore the carbon emissions our industry is putting into the atmosphere; just the planes alone are thought to contribute eight percent of global emissions.

Ambassador Martin noted we need businesses, NGOs, and governments, but I believe there is a fourth key point for us in travel — media: journalists, writers, influencers, storytellers — to realize our full positive potential.

So we're talking about a magic square.



Then someone clever on our team said, “Why don’t you rotate it and make it a magic diamond? That will be much cooler.” So we have a magic diamond!



Media: You change how people think and influence decision-making. The power you carry to affect destinations for good or ill is significant.

Businesses: You have always been pioneers. You keep solving problem after problem, and you will continue to do so.

Governments: Some of you create and enforce policies that provide an environment for healthy tourism, that protect the environment and recognize capacities, and, perhaps most importantly, support private enterprises with legislation and financing. They are passion-driven, often very fragile companies that need your help! Keep doing this. Do it more. Start doing it, if you're not already. These will be the companies that take travelers beyond your gateways to spend money that stays. They will be the ones that protect your wildlife and environment because it's in their best interests to do so!

NGOs: We are counting on you to be keepers of the light! Keep shining it not only on the failures of tourism but also on the successes! We need you to be the flag bearers of truth!

There's one more powerful piece that we all touch: the travelers themselves. Everyone in this space can change the thinking and, more importantly, the behavior of travelers.



Adventure travel is often transformative. Or, at least deeply impacting and inspiring. These moments are windows for you all — as you design your experiences and products and develop your destinations — to touch people and send them home differently.

Recently, I was picking up plastic litter with a tour operator friend on a long hike. We talked about this as a possible activity for some of the guests. Obviously not all guests want to pick up litter while on a scenic hike, but some do. And we talked about the power of this small action. Not just the power of those guests picking up litter in that one moment, but how could this be an experience that inspires someone to see the benefits of using less plastic when they get back home? To sign up for a trail clean up? To consider an electric car? To vote for the politicians who are supporting renewable energy measures? To buy less stuff?

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Not only do we have that opportunity to “touch” the customer when they are inspired, but we can help change how they view themselves when they travel.

Many people view their vacations and travels as a right. This is partly because people, well, are people. When we go on a trip, it’s all about us. But, we as an industry bear some responsibility. How long have we, through advertising, told people implicitly or explicitly that they deserve that trip, spa experience, etc.? And, even more subtly, how have we allowed travelers to behave as though they, the customer, are always right?

A story of my own: In Bhutan, I traveled with a group of wonderful industry professionals a few years back. Everyone on the trip was a veteran of the adventure travel space. And something uncomfortable started happening. Every time we saw someone or something interesting, our bus would stop, we would all jump out, and start shooting photos. After a negative reaction from someone, we talked about it on the bus and agreed that we as a group were not being respectful. We argued with one of our group who didn't see it as a problem but came to an agreement that we'd have our guide ask the person if it was okay to take a photo and, more importantly, only one person would take the shot and agree to share it. It was a good learning moment around respect and sensitivity. If we behave this way as professionals, how do we expect our customers to show respect?

“Travel is a privilege, not a right.”

We need to help travelers see that travel is a gift, that they are welcome guests in the places they travel to, and that this is an incredible opportunity of our modern age. Travel is a privilege, not a right.

Travel can't change us so much, but we can always change the nature of our travel. No destination is as important as the spirit we bring to it.

- Pico Iyer

We need a sea change. We need to help spark that.

An evolution in traveler behavior — from approaching travel as right to a privilege, and taking what they learn about nature, communities, and consumption on their adventures — to take home with them in a way that translates into meaningful local action: That's one sea change we want to bring about in the future. Of course, this means we must carry this attitude first and clearly help transmit this attitude.

So, here we are, in a radically growing industry while simultaneously watching trouble developing. Only a mass movement can shift the game. Our community can be the tip of the spear, bringing the future now. Not only committing our own businesses, destinations, and storytelling to change but committing to helping travelers change. To make it an important message in every trip taken.

Can you imagine a different future together?

George Bernard Shaw said, "Reasonable people adapt themselves to the world. Unreasonable people attempt to adapt the world to themselves. All progress, therefore, depends on unreasonable people!"

Some of you in the audience are already doing very innovative things, solving problems! These don't have to be imagined — they are happening now: zero-waste trips, carbon-neutral trips, a 5-star lodge that has eliminated all plastic from its operations, measuring economic impact of your trips in your destinations and reporting it, interviewing customers in person before they travel with you to make sure they will treat local people in a way that is respectful.

This could be the start of a wave.

Speaking of radical, Patagonia, the clothing company, took out a full-page ad in the New York Times a couple years back that said, “Don’t buy this jacket.”



The founder, Yvon Chouinard, has passionately worked for and argued for the environment no matter what impact it has on his business. They changed to organic cotton though it was much more expensive because they always put the environment first. And, by the way, they are estimated to be a \$200 million USD company now. It’s working out for them.

“The more you know, the less you need,” said Yvon Chouinard.

How can we help travelers do better? By showing how we’re designing the traveler experience better. Design life better.

“A world where mass tourism becomes less acceptable and good, healthy tourism becomes the norm. Where tourism is healing, not destructive. Where tourism creates peace.”

What if we encouraged that adventurous couple that travels three times a year to travel once ... for three times as long? Two flights instead of six? Fewer flights, less footprint, more economic impact. Better trip. Who likes flying anyway? Longer ... slower ... travel.

Imagine if we in the industry all committed to passing on carbon offsets to customers? Or, if governments collected a “fun tax” on every trip (adventure or not) for a carbon-removal fund? Who wants to be the leader?

Imagine the power of the [Adventure Travel Conservation Fund](#) and the good it could do and the stories it could tell if everyone in the room simply joined?

Imagine more stories written with this design thinking in mind: Maybe fewer top 10 lists. Maybe no more stories about the “best beach in Thailand.” Stories that make travelers want to be more responsible, that create positive peer pressure to do the right thing.

A world where mass tourism becomes less acceptable and good, healthy tourism becomes the norm. Where tourism is healing, not destructive. Where tourism creates peace.



We will all — all four points of this magic diamond — need to work together. We will need to think big, bigger than we’re used to, which — for a room of pioneers, entrepreneurs, and never-say-die group like this — I realize is asking a lot. Or, possibly, not asking a lot. Possibly no better group of people exists on Earth right now to be able to drive a sea change.

Mary Oliver famously asked, “Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Knowing full well that, in this space, life and work blur together, and knowing that we are in a unique place to help bring about change, let me ask on behalf of Mary Oliver, “Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious opportunity to change the world?”

**“Tell me, what do you plan to do
with your one wild and precious
opportunity to change the world?”**
