



Small World Productions

From Richard Bangs' *Adventures with Purpose*,
"Assam India: Quest for the One-Horned Rhino."

Travelogues with Conviction

There is more than one way to reach paradise.

I HAVE NEVER gone south in the winter. The closest I came was a three-day, mid-February family getaway in Niagara Falls at a hotel with an indoor waterslide park. The chlorine infusion did wonders for my skin! I actually prefer going to Ottawa to skate on the canal or ski in Gatineau Park. We might as well enjoy winter while we still can, eh? My partner usually goes along with this, but this year she was pressing for some sun, sand and tropical nature.

Scoping out the possibilities in Mexico and the Caribbean, we were quickly dismayed by the typically hermetic resort offerings. They seem designed to insulate travelers from the real world, while offering up an ersatz version of the local culture and cuisine. I'm told this is the norm.

"What about something more akin to ecotourism?" I suggested.

In the past decade there have been efforts by the United Nations, The International Ecotourism Society and others to nail down definitions and principles for ecotourism. And there have been efforts to certify operators for compliance with those principles. But there's still a lot of confusion and fudging going on, and ecotourism, even broadly defined, is a small fraction of the overall tourism sector. Furthermore, there's that carbon-footprint concern about flying.

Reading the brochures and websites for these destinations, you'd think that exotic animals and authentic cultural experiences lay just beyond the airport parking lot. Costa Rica, for example, promises a "paradise where 852 species of birds and thousands of species of orchids live together. A paradise to admire the magnificent scenery, or simply to relax."

A lot of ecotourism publicity presents simplistic consumerist narratives where nature is an exotic destination, a recreational playground or a visual spectacle. To be fair, some include info about how one's visit will actually benefit the locals (wild and domestic). But even when they tout a conservation line, such descriptions of easy-access-nature ignore the intellectual, emotional, experiential and spiritual chasm between so many people and the other-than-human world.

A breath of fresh air from the world of travel that recently caught my attention is Richard Bangs' TV series *Adventures with Purpose*. Broadcast on PBS this year, this ecotourism-oriented show aims to remind viewers that travel should "make a difference" by bringing benefits to local peoples and nature. Sure, the program has its share of thrills and spectacles, but it also foregrounds environmental issues and, most importantly, exudes a refreshing ethos of deep respect for the planet.

Bangs weaves glorious travel narra-

tives that illustrate key ideas that inform cultures of sustainability. These include the sublime, peace, conflict resolution, equality, diversity, care and respect for animals and all of nature, and the unity of existence. He explores the connections between place, history, worldview and nature. And in cultures as diverse as the Maori, the Norwegians and the Assamese of India, he finds hopeful exemplars of social and ecological care. In Assam, a state known for its multi-ethnic fusion of cultures and religions, they minimize caste divisions, and celebrate traditional music, dance and other arts. All living things are honoured equally. There, students and tribal leaders have found ways to support people's livelihoods while protecting habitat for endangered species such as the Indian rhinoceros.

Sure, it would be great to travel to these places, and Bangs reminds us of why it's important. But even if we can't make the trip, there is much to learn from these regions and their people. Shows such as *Adventures with Purpose* have the potential to reach a mainstream audience with these crucial ideas in a thoroughly inviting way. 🐘

Mark Meisner teaches environmental studies at SUNY-ESF and blogs about environmental communication and culture at indications.wordpress.com.