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SPECIAL EDITION: **Exclusive article by Hitesh Mehta**

Can ecotourism help to alleviate the difficult living standards found on many of today's Native American reservations? This was the question asked not long ago by world-renowned landscape architect, environmental planner and architect Hitesh Mehta. Through his work with indigenous communities at EDSA, a planning and landscape architecture firm based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Mehta has found the answer: yes. This exclusive article details his recent work in the creation of an Ecolodge, Wellness Center and Cultural Center for the Couer d'Alene Tribe on its reservation near the Idaho-Washington border in the Idaho panhandle. As one of the world's leading authorities and researchers on ecotourism planning and both the architectural and landscape architectural aspects of ecolodges, Mehta shares here a glimpse into how ecotourism can effect positive social and economic change in the lives of those whose land has been theirs for centuries, and who are now faced with the reality that tourism may be the only hope if their culture is to survive.



Ecotourism as a form of cultural preservation in Native American lands

by Hitesh Mehta

Did you know that the world's highest-spending ecotourists live in the United States?

These responsible travelers are acutely aware of the delicate condition of our environment and its indigenous cultures, and are therefore increasingly seeking destinations where the natural environment and well being of the local people is sustained. These conscientious tourists want travel options that are aligned with the values of true ecotourism, which involves responsible development that has positive social, economic, cultural and environmental impact.

But even though the United States has the most high-end ecotourists, it has no authentic ecolodges, which are by far the highest income-generating element of ecotourism and the most high-profile in terms of media attention throughout the world. As an architect and landscape architect who has designed and visited ecolodges in more countries than I can count on my fingers and toes, this disturbing fact has puzzled and haunted me for many years.

Then, a little over year ago, I began to work with a Native American tribe called the Couer d'Alene to see if there might be a physical planning and design solution to the problem of their eroding culture.

A CULTURE AT STAKE

The city of Coeur d'Alene is one of the largest metropolitan areas



View of Lake Coeur d'Alene from the Ecolodge

in the inland Northwest and the most populated city in Idaho north of Boise. The Coeur d'Alene Reservation is located six miles from the Idaho-Washington border in the Idaho panhandle along southern Lake Coeur d'Alene, a 25,100-acre lake known for its scenic beauty. The Coeur d'Alene tribe's way of life is based on a spiritual respect for the natural world; their very lives have depended on the land for centuries. Animals and plants provided food, shelter and a sense of divine grace upon the people.

But, like so many, the Coeur d'Alene Tribe has been victimized by a controversial history regarding land rights. Three hundred years ago, its aboriginal territory spanned more than 5 million acres of today's Washington, Idaho and Montana. But subsequent U.S. presidents, treaties and regulations slowly stripped them of much of the land. Today the reservation is only 345,000 acres — and this includes land owned by non-native Americans. At one time, the tribe

owned all the land surrounding Lake Coeur d'Alene, but currently they own only 387 acres.

The tribe, like most, requires revenue to support the many community services it provides to members. The natural surroundings of the lake and the attraction of the tribe itself have made tourism the primary industry. Current income is generated from various tribal businesses, including the largest gaming facility in the region, the Casino Resort Hotel and Circling Raven Golf Club, a complex that employs approximately 800 people and generated \$30 million in the 2005 fiscal year. Funds from the casino, one of the largest employers in the region, are used to generate economic diversity and development on the reservation.

Yet, given its innate charge to nurture the natural environment, the tribe's means of collecting income must be sensitive to local environmental conditions. Though casinos are the economic mainstay of many

North American tribes, traditional tribal members often worry about the effects of gambling on morals and values, fearing destruction of their nature-based cultures.

This fear and the aforementioned land rights issues were concerns of the Coeur d'Alene's tribal council and elders when I became involved with them in early 2005. The tribal council realized the need for a new revenue source, but wanted to avoid any negative environmental and social impacts such as those currently resulting from conventional tourism. Thus, together with a talented EDSA team, a plan was hatched for the Coeur d'Alene to create the first true Ec lodge and Cultural Village destination in the United States.

PLANNING FOR THE RIGHT MARKET

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local peoples." In the United States, it is estimated to be a \$77 billion dollar market (or roughly five percent of the overall U.S. travel and tourism market) with an annual growth rate of 20-34 percent.

In our modern technological age, where most human beings live complex lives cut off from nature, the simplicity of authentic Native American culture ranks high on tourists' lists of must-do, experiential, cultural and heritage tourism options — and its appeal is growing on an international scale. There is already an established market demand for Native American cultural tourism in Italy, Germany, Great Britain and even Asia.

Thus, we knew that unlike the casino and golf operations at Couer d'Alene, the Native American cultural experience provided by the Ec lodge and Cultural Village had the potential to draw visitors from a greater market radius than the Pacific and inland Northwest. Knowing also that Native American cultural tourists place a much higher value on active and passive outdoor activities than U.S. travelers overall, we realized the need for strong programming efforts for the Couer d'Alene Ec lodge and Cultural Village.



Consultants receive important local wisdom and knowledge.

We put together an experienced multi-disciplinary team that consisted of environmental planners, landscape architects, market and financial analysts, ecologists, sustainable technology experts and community-based ecotourism specialists. This team held a kick-off meeting with the tribal members, relevant government departments, organizations, and other important stakeholders to gather insight on the background, culture and natural systems of the site and surrounding regions. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with business owners, respected tribal elders and tribal council members to further understand the local people and their land.

Working with the tribe, the team conducted a detailed site analysis in order to fully recognize the uniqueness and potential profitability of the area, being sensitive to community usage patterns, spiritual connections and the historic relationship between the tribe and the land. Beliefs and traditions sacred to the tribe have historically been passed along verbally, with no written documents. Thus the tribal elders were best able to clarify and elaborate on messages from past generations. They helped the design team gain

a better insight into their needs and desires, which were eventually incorporated into the final master plan.

BIRTH OF AN ECOLOGE

The revenue-generating concept of the Coeur d'Alene Ecolodge was born from a desire to educate tourists and tribal members on an ancient way of life, while still respecting the earth. The Ecolodge contains 68 lake-view units, a 5,000-square-foot conference facility and a Wellness Center. Native American customs are incorporated wherever possible, from the recipes in the restaurants to the materials in the guest rooms. All of the implementation and operation practices of the Ecolodge are environmentally sound in reference to materials, construction methods, site planning, energy consumption and waste management. This high-quality level of service will enable the tribe to charge a premium for the rooms, villas and suites.

Program elements include a Welcome Center, which contains cultural and historic exhibits as well as information on the guided ethnobotanical tours for visitors; a Public Dock for lake cruises, river tours and ferry boat transportation to nearby attractions; the Cultural Village, where summer and winter lodges display traditional architecture and indigenous materials, dancing and drum circles for tribal performances take place and traditional cultural activities such as hide tanning, canoe making and bead work are demonstrated; a Village Dock within the Cultural Village that offers canoe and kayak rental and tours; and a Sweat Lodge (for tribal members only) adjacent to an existing freshwater spring, which provides water for the sweat ceremony and sacred connection to the earth.

In addition, a Mind Body Spirit Wellness Center offers guests a holistic retreat where ancient Native American practices are intertwined with modern luxuries. The Environmental Utility Center educates visitors on sustainable energy use and consumption. This functioning back-of-house service facility for the project also demonstrates to visitors the methods of solar power and natural wastewater treatment.

In order for visitors to understand true tribal life, dynamic interpretation of all the program elements is part of the

Hitesh Mehta



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Hitesh Mehta is a landscape architect, environmental planner and architect for EDSA and one of the world's leading authorities and researchers on ecotourism planning and both the architectural and landscape architectural aspects of ecolodges. EDSA is the largest ecotourism planning and ecolodge design

office in the world and has a portfolio of projects in Madagascar, Egypt, China, Saudi Arabia, India, Kenya, Mexico, Dominica, Uganda, Rwanda, DR Congo, Turks and Caicos, Galapagos, Gabon, Fiji, Bahamas, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Puerto Rico and the United States.

Mehta is an adjunct professor at several universities in southern Florida, regularly conducts research on international trends in ecolodges and is currently writing a book on *Best Practice Ecolodges*. He sits on the board of The International Ecotourism Society, is a member of the advisory board of BIOSFERA (Brazilian Environmental Society), is a founding member of The Ecotourism Society of Kenya, and is the international advisor for the Japan Ecolodge Association. He also is a judge and on-site inspector for the Tourism for Tomorrow awards (not to be confused with Tourism Cares for Tomorrow) World Legacy Awards on Heritage Tourism and Ecotourism (National Geographic/Conservation International) and Ecotourism Awards (*Condé Nast Traveler*).

A professional photographer and Hall of Fame cricket player from Kenya, Mehta was named one of the "25 Most Powerful People in Adventure" by *Men's Journal*.

About EDSA

EDSA is an internationally renowned, full-service planning, landscape architectural, urban design and graphic design firm with more than 200 employees. Established in 1960, the firm has extensive experience in attractions and entertainment, campus and cultural planning, community planning, environmental planning, ecotourism, and hotels and resorts as well as urban design. Headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., EDSA has offices in Orlando, Fla.; Los Angeles, Calif.; Beijing, China and Baltimore, Md.



The Ecolodge



The Welcome Center

guest experience. Visitors see and hear the elder community passing down ancient traditions and practices to the younger generation. Wildlife biologists, naturalists and adventure guides illuminate the tribal experience as well. The Cultural Village educates visitors on traditional tribal practices, while the Ecolodge and Wellness Center provide luxury hospitality to guests and much needed revenue to the Coeur d'Alene Tribe.

A MODEL FOR CULTURAL PRESERVATION

It cannot be denied that there is an urgent need for alternative tourism developments in Native American reservations in North America. Revenue sources that incorporate respect for the environment and natural

resources ultimately provide the most viable economic support to the reservation community in the long run.

My work with the Coeur d'Alene Tribe has demonstrated, at least to me, that there is major potential for ecotourism in reservations. In a culture where traditional building techniques still exist and natural beauty is already respected, a project that operates under sustainable guidelines could not only be highly successful, but also set an example for other reservations to recognize prosperity in currency and culture. ■

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