

Five people who helped pioneer ecotourism

by **Bradley Cocks**

Financial Review, Australia

The definition of “eco-warrior” can be applied to any person who makes significant gains towards protecting the environment. It was coined in 1962 by the late Canadian environmentalist Robert Hunter after a Cree (Native Canadian) prophecy called the Warriors of the Rainbow. The notion of ecotourism and sustainability has shifted since then, however today’s focal points remain food, water, energy, education, health, commerce and conservation, both of wildlife and culture.

During the explosion of luxury hotels in underdeveloped countries in the 1990s, five individuals have invested their passion, energy and livelihoods into setting up the framework around reducing our environmental footprints by making reasonable (and sometimes unreasonable) approaches towards hotels with a presence or impact on their surrounding communities.

Sonu Shivdasani

Passion: Water, energy and waste

Sonu Shivdasani, founder of the Soneva Group and former chief executive and founder of Six Senses Resorts & Spas, is largely regarded as one of the hospitality industry’s pioneer of sustainable practices. Founded in 1995, today, Six Senses is owned by US private equity group Pegasus Capital but is still setting benchmarks miles ahead of its competition.



Sonu Shivdasani is largely regarded as the hospitality industry's pioneer of sustainable practices.

The British-Indian Oxford graduate and his wife Eva were enraptured by the Maldives while holidaying there. “We fell in love with the geography of the destination, but felt more could be done in terms of quality and sustainability,” he tells Luxury. His vision was to create experiences combining both luxury and sustainability, thus creating and educating a new generation of eco-conscious travellers. His ethos was to “have a purpose beyond profit ... to find opportunities to make small positive changes that do not impact negatively on either profitability or the guests’ perception of the product”.

In 2008, Sonu created the SLOW LIFE, or “Sustainable Local Organic Wellness Learning Inspiring Fun Experiences”, program. Initiatives included bonuses for staff using “waste-to-wealth calculators”, which are aimed at ensuring there is no more than 30 kilograms of waste per 100 kilograms of product brought onto an island. In the same year, imported water was banned from the resorts as replacement filtered mineral water was produced on site.

Continuous improvement was focused over the years across recycling, strict use of local and sustainable building materials, purchasing policies (eco-friendly chemicals), environmental impact (buying and growing local), preservation, reusable packaging wherever possible and eventually a 2 per cent climate levy on room revenue, to offset guests’ carbon footprints. soneva.com

Hitesh Mehta

Passion: Planning and design

Hitesh Mehta is an eco-architect responsible for projects, including Lapa Rios and Nihiwatu, in more than 55 countries. The ethos of his firm HM Design, which he founded in Nairobi in 1990, is “more eco – less ego”. Now based in Florida, he takes a spiritual approach to work, breaking down the fundamentals in his eco-planning and design to respect physical, metaphysical and cultural layers.



Mehta believes his greatest achievement is the “beautiful integration of ‘eco’ and ‘luxury’, creating a truly holistic experience”. He notes a significant problem during the 1980s and '90s was the term “eco-lodge” being synonymous with downscale accommodation and horrible shared facilities.

Some of his work has created what we now enjoy as eco-luxury and considers aspects from alternative technologies such as non-HFC air conditioning, rainwater harvesting, grey-water toilets (even no-water toilets) and environmentally friendly sewage systems.

It is refreshing to hear his point of view on the future of eco-luxury because, after many years, the efforts of influential individuals, including Al Gore and Leonardo DiCaprio, have created a “tipping-point among the main financial decision-makers, where the people who acknowledge the importance of sustainability, and are doing something about it, are outnumbering those who don’t”, he tells Luxury. h-m-design.com

Karen Lewis

Passion: Wildlife and habitat conservation

In 1993, Karen Lewis and her husband John sold all their assets to build a small property in Costa Rica that became a blueprint for sustainable luxury lodges. Lapa Rios Eco Lodge, on a 375-hectare nature reserve, was among the first to offer active guests the opportunity to become truly sustainable tourists. “Education was our hook for eco-tourism as locals were going to be with the guests, interpreting the rainforest with them and serving them, so we had to learn how to bridge those two worlds,” Lewis says.

The lodge committed early to the community by only hiring locals, building and maintaining a primary school and honouring architectural design of the area using sustainable construction and renewable materials. Locals have also learnt how to make bio-gas and compost with organic waste.

This award-winning model of eco-tourism maintains Costa Rica’s highest sustainable tourism certification, complete with full-service luxury dining. laparios.com

Claude Graves

Passion: Health and education

Graves founded Nihiwatu resort on the remote and poverty-stricken Indonesian island of Sumba and mastered the model of running a for-profit boutique hotel alongside a non-profit foundation. Graves and his wife Petra found the site for their hotel after backpacking the perimeter of Sumba in the late 1980s.

The Sumba Foundation was established in 2001 with a focus on creating community development programs for clean water, malaria clinics, education, malnutrition and farming. “The foundation allowed me to no longer rely on profits from the hotel to support community development,” he says. His big-vision projects, funded by guest donations, started generating interest internationally. By 2005, this profit-non-profit model was inspiring new developments across Africa, Asia and the Americas.

“Once a guest donated to a project, they were kept up to date with monthly reports, through to completion,” he says. “This kept our donor guests linked to the Sumbanese community and many of them have been returning for the past 10 to 15 years.”

Before the resort was purchased by American entrepreneur Christopher Burch in 2013, it received more than \$6 million in donations from guests; 23,000 people in hundreds of villages within a 285 square kilometre radius of Nihiwatu benefited.

Graves doesn't like to be linked to the "eco" category, however: "It's far too vague to be impressive any more; it's much more than light bulbs and water-saving devices," he says. "To be truly a sustainable and responsible hotel requires a lot of effort and commitment on the hotelier's behalf.

"It needs financial and human resources many find too much to commit to – however I feel confident sophisticated travellers will continue to be ahead of the curve and seek out properties where they feel their travel dollars are not only helping the environment but also local communities." sumbafoundation.org

Mayah Brandon

Passion: Sustainable cuisine

Some may think Mayah Brandon's measures are towards the extreme end of the sustainability spectrum but she's proved it's possible to create unique luxury experiences without sacrificing comfort.

At Laguna Lodge, Brandon and her husband Jeffro do not offer guests fish or meat. In an effort to reduce carbon emissions, their menu is 100 per cent vegetarian and they are looking at becoming vegan (they already have vegan wines on the menu).

Laguna Lodge Eco-Resort & Nature Reserve is nestled on the shore of Lake Atitlan in the Mayan Highlands, Guatemala. It takes local traditions very seriously and Kevin Tuerff, chief executive of Green Canary Sustainability Consulting, says it "may be one of the most authentic green hotels in the world". Even the power, website server, Wi-Fi and clocks are carbon-neutral, powered by either solar or water.

Zotz is Laguna's distinctively designed restaurant, complete with a riverstone and jasper fireplace and antique candelabra. All ingredients are organic and picked fresh from the hotel's gardens or from local farmers. Other fruits or vegetables come from home-grown suppliers on the Pacific coast a short distance away. thelagunalodge.com

Follow us: [@FinancialReview on Twitter](https://twitter.com/FinancialReview) | [financialreview on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/financialreview)

<http://www.afr.com/lifestyle/travel/five-people-who-helped-pioneer-eco-tourism-20150702-ghlojx>