FAIR TRADE TOURISM NEWS RELEASE

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Revised volunteering criteria launched with focus on wildlife interactions and vulnerable people

Fair Trade Tourism has finalised an extensive review of criteria for tourism businesses with volunteer offerings, which are effective from June 1 2016.

Since the organisation’s initial review of its standard to include additional criteria on volunteering in 2009 there has been a significant upsurge in both the supply and demand for volunteer products in Africa, many focused on so-called conservation or orphanage programmes.

This upsurge brought with it concerns from various organisations regarding malpractices, which were especially evident in programmes dealing with vulnerable children and captive wildlife.

The launch of the hard-hitting documentary “Blood Lions” earlier this year and its accompanying global campaign against predator-breeding centres and interactions exposed the fraudulent practices around volunteer experiences with captive lions and other predators.

Although not an advocacy organisation, Fair Trade Tourism took the decision to work with prominent NGOs and tourism industry stakeholders to revise and implement new criteria focussed on “voluntourism” involving vulnerable people and wildlife interaction.

These criteria are now available for viewing on our website here (add link)

“Our new criteria were not introduced to advocate for animal welfare or take an ethical position against volunteering with
vulnerable people,” says Fair Trade Tourism MD Nivashnee Naidoo. “However, as an organisation that represents global best-practice in responsible tourism, it is our role and our interest to promote ethical, authentic and transparently marketed volunteer experiences,” she adds.

“Responsible voluntourism programmes should at the very least benefit host communities and have positive social, economic and environmental impacts. Sadly, at present many voluntourism experiences are actually detrimental to the people or animals they proclaim to be helping. Young travellers should strive instead to seek far more meaningful cultural and wildlife engagements than is currently the case.”

Fair Trade Tourism’s new criteria were informed by a range of expert sources including, amongst others, Better Volunteering, Tourism Watch, UNICEF, Endangered Wildlife Trust and Wildlife Act. A number of Southern African volunteer organisations also gave their input.

“We would like to thank all who aided in the consultation process leading up to the formulation of the new criteria,” says Naidoo.

The new Fair Trade Tourism criteria do not allow for any physical interaction by tourists or volunteers with a range of captive animals, including all large and medium sized carnivores, big cats, elephants, rhinos, large apes, hippos, ostrich, crocodiles and venomous snakes.

They also do not allow for tourists or volunteers to interact with any child or vulnerable person unless this takes place under continuous, qualified adult supervision.

“Given the growing body of evidence from orphanages that interaction with casual visitors can be deeply psychologically damaging to these children, Fair Trade Tourism will not certify any volunteer experience based on full-time work inside orphanages,” adds Naidoo.

Volunteer organisations and wildlife sanctuaries who strive for best-practice in their operations are invited to apply for certification from June 1 2016.
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