



GAP ADVENTURES, CANADA & GLOBAL GLOBAL TOURISM BUSINESS AWARD FINALIST 2009

CASE STUDY

GAP Adventures was founded in 1990 and has grown to become one of the world's largest adventure travel companies, offering over 1,000 small group tours with a focus on sustainable travel. Over 600 employees work for GAP Adventures at its head office and local offices around the world.

Being a sustainable tour operator was one of the founding principles of GAP. It defines sustainable travel as tourism that has minimal impact on the environment, respects local people and cultures, offers economic benefit to local businesses and communities, provides a memorable experience for travellers, and protects destinations for future generations. To maintain a corporate commitment to sustainability, GAP developed a company Code of Conduct that is part of its operating manual to which it holds all its staff, suppliers and partners.



Company employees undergo training as a way to educate staff and set goals for sustainable practices. Included in this Code of Conduct are:

- Using locally owned infrastructure for accommodation and transport
- Ensuring direct social and financial benefits to local people and leadership opportunities for local people employed by GAP
- Providing safe trips for GAP Adventures' staff and travellers
- Educating travellers and local operators about sustainable travel
- Limiting the negative impact of trips in all destination communities – particularly to sensitive natural and cultural environments
- Actively discouraging activities which exploit animals – wild or domestic
- Using local operators that adhere to GAP Adventures' sustainable travel principles.

In 2003, GAP developed its own non-profit organisation, Planeterra (www.planeterra.org) as a way for both travellers and the company to give back to the people and places visited on their tours. Through fundraising efforts and donations from travellers, Planeterra has to date supported 27 community projects, local non-profit organisations and international charities. The projects Planeterra supports focus on the areas of health, education, community development, environmental conservation and employment skills training.

CASE STUDY



These include street children’s projects in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, a schools and nature programme in Cuba, a short-term loan programme in Honduras for women to start their own small business ventures, and a pre-school in South Africa, among others.

GAP Adventures pays all Planeterra administration fees which means that 100% of each individual donation goes directly to Planeterra-supported projects. GAP matches all individual donations. Its Dollar-A-Day programme provides travellers with the opportunity to donate US\$1 per day to Planeterra for the duration of their tour.

While GAP social and cultural sustainability programmes are represented by Planeterra initiatives, its environmental sustainability programmes are represented by its Planet Positive Project. By way of examples, all GAP Adventures-owned marine vessels are carbon offset by calculating the amount of fuel used to offset the emissions; all corporate flights are carbon offset to minimise their environmental impact; GAP partners with Sustainable Travel International which includes independent audits of their carbon offsets; GAP’s head office is powered by 100% green energy with renewable sources, including low-impact wind and water power; and all brochures are 100% PEFC certified.

GAP Adventures also encourages travellers to give back through volunteer travel where they can contribute to conservation and development projects. It runs more than 20 volunteer trips, among which: Project Cambodia, which involves assembling wheelchairs for land-mine victims; Project Kenya, where volunteers assist in a medical clinic working hand-in-hand with doctors and nurses; and Project Costa Rica, where volunteers assist with a sea turtle conservation project.

GAP does not consider sustainable tourism practices as an altruistic activity, but as a fundamental part of its corporate philosophy. For example, in Cuzco, Peru it raised US\$150,000 to buy a house for a local NGO called ‘Children of the House of the Sun’ that provides a safe environment for street children. This type of community engagement and support is as much a part of GAP’s day-to-day business operations as expanding their tours and markets. It puts into practice a corporate vision, in which sustainability is a fundamental part of the quality of experience it offers its guests.

GAP Leader Sustainable Travel Training (Information taken from GAP training module)

Programme Objectives:

- Describe and present Sustainable Travel (ST) perspective
- Describe GAP’s application of ST
- To ensure tour leader understands and can implement GAP sustainable tour guidelines
- Understand and be able to promote Planeterra programmes

Topics/sessions:

- Sustainable tourism principles
- Key principles of operating sustainable trips
- GAP’s sustainable tourism approach
- Practical examples and role-plays
- Planeterra initiatives.
- Evaluation and assessment
- Leave no trace curriculum