

Eco Warrior

Alastair McCracken, Chairman for Ecotourism Australia

Successful people, regardless of their area of expertise, often seem to have an innate ability to effortlessly juggle a range of jobs and roles and achieve in each one of these.

Alastair McCracken is a perfect example of this model. He is the Chairman of Ecotourism Australia, a Director of Interpacific Resorts, owner of Couran Cove Resort, and is also developing an educational eco village and spa retreat at Binna Burra in World-Heritage listed Lamington National Park.



A recent chat with Alastair revealed that he is indeed a very busy, yet accomplished man.

Alastair's role at Ecotourism Australia involves representing operators of sustainable nature based tourism businesses to State and Federal government, and tourism authorities, and helping them to market their products at home and internationally.

The role also involves overseeing the ECO Certification program, which certifies those tours, attractions and accommodation that provide a genuine experience of Australia's wonderful natural environment while leaving minimal footprints behind.

- Alastair says "Accreditation allows tourists to make more sustainable choices when holidaying because they know that operators who are ECO-Certified do have a minimal environmental impact".

"We are justifiably proud that Australia has the only such accreditation system for tourism operators in the world.

"As people have become more informed about the big issues of environment and sustainability, they are making choices about their homes, their cars, their lifestyles and their holidays."

Alastair says one of the major challenges in his role is broadening government recognition of the significance and value of Australia's natural attractions.

"It is important to remember that 54 per cent of visitors to our shores seek out national parks and the natural environment during their stay," he says. "In fact preserving our natural areas is the key to ensuring the future success of our whole tourism industry.

"What is frustrating is that overall government spending reductions now mean there is less spent on the preservation and protection of our natural areas. In our view, there is a real need to take a well-resourced, long-term approach to sustainable planning and management in line with market demand.

Alastair believes his current role with Ecotourism Australia is in many respects his ideal job as it marries his twin passions for protecting the environment and helping regional communities.

"I have the opportunity to develop tourism that is for conservation and communities," he says. "True Ecotourism provides an economic boom to regional areas and local communities, all the while ensuring that our natural treasures are nurtured and protected."

Alastair predicts there will be significant changes to the ecotourism industry in the future.

"I think we will very quickly see mainstream tourism expectations move towards the long held values of ecotourism.

"Operators who simply 'green wash' their 'business as usual' operations will be rejected.

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"High quality operators who realise the value in authentic natural experiences, and encourage their clients to get out and connect with the natural world will go on to reap the rewards in the marketplace."

But this future will not be without its challenges.

"State Government local area planning and protected area access will be vital to ensuring the long term viability of our ecotourism industry," he says. "Without it, we will not see ecotourism success stories like O'Reilly's Rainforest Guesthouse, Couran Cove Island Resort or Kingfisher Bay Resort and Village on Fraser Island being constructed in the coming years.

Ecotourism Australia strongly supports the Natural Tourism Partnerships framework launched by TTF in June 2007. It has the potential to enable government and the ecotourism industry to foster new partnership approaches in natural areas.

The major threat to the tourism industry is, Alastair believes, climate change. Clearly the impacts of climate change will hugely affect the future of our industry.

"Let's hope it forces people to recognise the reality of climate change, to plan for emission reductions, drive governments to act responsibly and influence each of us to act out of conscience."

After 30 years working in the tourism industry in Cairns, Adelaide, Sydney, Hamilton Island, Bali, the Sunshine Coast and south-east Queensland, Alastair says he has met many people who inspire him and has also garnered a few heroes.

"Denis Buchanan, in charge of the Cairns Hilton years ago, was a gentleman hotelier. A thoughtful, kind soul, I admired him because he was a tough business operator but he really cared for the young people who worked for him. I remember him with great affection.

"I am also inspired by the young environmentalists who work on environmental protection. Many of them forgo material wealth to protect our treasures for future generations. This level of commitment is both inspiring and astonishing."

Alastair names Keith Williams, the man behind the development of Hamilton Island, as another hero.

"He was amazing. His simple rule was to never take no for an answer. He told me: 'Never let them tell you it can't be done. It can. Find a way'."

For more inspiration Alastair looks to the wise words of another of his heroes, Theodore Roosevelt:

"It is not the critic who counts. Credit belongs to the man who is in the arena. Whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood. Who errs and comes up short again and again. And who, while daring greatly, spends himself for a worthy cause, so that his place may not be among those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

Stirring words that sum up Alastair's attitude to life and work.

As he puts it: "Just keep going. If you have a dream, keep working for it. If one hundred people tell you it can't be done, ignore them and find a way in which it can."

If you'd like to nominate someone as an Eco-Warrior for a profile in Eco on Q; someone who is an exemplary ambassador for the industry please send your nomination to Eco on Q via email eco.onq@tq.com.au.