

ecotourism: A Way for New Mexico's Second Biggest Industry to Thrive, not just Survive

By Jen Hobson
Deputy Secretary, New Mexico
Tourism Department
Ecotourism Director

When I was a teenager, my dad finally broke down and bought what he needed in order to keep track of me. His interest, like that of any father, was in making sure I was safe and well-fed, and that I paid enough attention to my studies. So, naturally, he bought a triangle dinner bell.

Just out the back door of our Hailey, Idaho, home was an artesian well fed creek about three feet wide and half that in depth—and it was full of brook trout. I spent countless hours stalking live grasshoppers, fly rod in hand, then the fish themselves, marveling at their lavender and orange spots and the males' big, hooked jaws as they fed in clear, cold water lined by basin rye and willow. The dinner bell was the only thing I could hear at a distance—and just in time to jog home for dinner and lights out.

My interest in wild animals and places is something innate, and it continues to grow because of my job and location

here in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In January 2009 I worked with Governor Richardson to initiate an ecotourism program—the first statewide program of its kind in the country. With support from the governor and from legislators, the New Mexico Tourism Department began the development of a decades-old tradition in this brand of niche travel marketing (the fastest-growing of its kind in the industry—at over 30 percent per year worldwide).

Basing our program on the International Ecotourism Society's definition of this type of travel—"responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of the local people"—we are working to develop qualifying criteria for ecotourism outfitters and are becoming a portal of information on this type of travel via our Web site, www.newmexico.org/ecotourism, offering thoughtful, experiential travel opportunities for people interested in the wild animals and places here in the Land of Enchantment. The worldwide trend is less pool time, more hands-on time in rural communities with local people.

Imagine a Western-style safari, where you are guided by Native Americans as you star-gaze, spot a Mexican gray lobo, or observe the ancient pronghorn on some of the country's widest, most expansive vistas. This is the West at its best—and in order to preserve it, we must promote it, though carefully and with great respect for the variety of people and topographies in this state. With its Natives and cowboys, its alpine peaks and Chihuahuan Desert, New Mexico is primed to become a world-class ecotourism destination.

While oil and gas prices dwindle and state

government faces great changes in the near future, tourism continues to employ over 100,000 New Mexicans and enjoys an annual economic impact of \$5.7 billion. It's time to be visionary, and, from the grassroots up, show that tourism in quality, not quantity, will be the future of the economy in one of the world's most fascinating destinations.

