

Yacutinga Lodge



Sustainable development policy within the tourism industry and beyond - a living document.

Yacutinga Lodge & Nature Reserve

Sustainable tourism has established itself as not only a large and crucial component of a rapidly growing tourism industry, but also an invaluable and increasingly effective weapon in the fight against the destruction and loss of our natural ecosystems and cultural heritage.

Concepts of sustainability itself are relative newcomers to mainstream culture, having evolved from early ideas about ecotourism, adventure tourism and responsible travel. These contemporary forms of traditional tourism gained prevalence in the late 1980s and steadily took root as enthusiasm for conservationism and sustainable practice, or 'green living', grew hand in hand with increasing concerns over the fragility of our environment. In 1987, the 'Brundland Report' to the United Nations General Assembly, alerted the world to the urgency required in making swift progress toward economic development that could be sustained without depleting natural resources or harming the environment. The Brundland Report appealed to, and effectively reached a wide audience and succeeded in popularising the term 'sustainable development', leading to the ideology that is sustainable tourism today.

Sustainable tourism focuses on maintaining the environmental and socio-economic balance required to ensure that future generations will have the same access to natural and cultural heritage that we enjoy today, essentially a future for all.

A vast number of organisations from government, non-governmental (NGOs) and non-profit organisations (NPOs), have been promoting sustainable tourism, and vitally, the development of guidelines and standards to create a global benchmark for sustainability within the tourism sector.

One prominent body is the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), who have moved to define sustainable tourism in these terms: "Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability" (UNWTO 2004)

Taking this definition one step further, we can formulate a set of principles to be followed by travellers, sustainable tourism providers and natural or cultural area administrators alike.

Yacutinga Lodge & Private Nature Reserve has developed the following criteria based on the UNWTO's sustainable tourism principles and as such we aim to:

- **Provide benefit to the environment and encourage biodiversity whilst minimizing negative impacts**

- **Provide social and economic benefits to the local community whilst minimizing negative impacts**
- **Support cultural heritage and minimize negative impacts of tourism**
- **Promote environmental and cultural awareness and respect**
- **Raise sensitivity to political, environmental, and social climate on both a local and international level**

Yacutinga Lodge & Private Nature Reserve has been at the cutting edge of sustainable tourism and conservation for over 10 years now, working constantly in accordance with internationally accepted 'Best Practice' principles from our little corner of the Argentine subtropical rainforest, located close to the world famous Iguazù Falls.

During the intense early years of our development, we learned a great deal about our environment, in both the ecological and social sense, and whilst at the same time strengthening our commitment to the international 'Best Practice' policy, we also learned of it's limitations and need for flexibility in order to adapt to differing social, cultural and environmental conditions.

In direct contrast to the way in which we live, work and plan for the future, the areas surrounding the Yacutinga Reserve is utterly dominated by the agricultural and logging industries to devastating effects, and despite our own efforts over the past decade in providing employment, educational and sustainable development opportunities, concepts of sustainability remain largely unheard of and ignored.

Without increased Government involvement and support of the sustainable development sector, our mission of creating a sustainable culture outside of the Yacutinga Nature Reserve, will remain a difficult challenge but one that we are wholeheartedly committed to.

This isolated and far reaching corner in the extreme northeast of Argentina, with it's wonderfully peculiar characteristics and rich biodiversity, allows us from the Private Sector to realise a number of environmental and social projects through initiatives such as our recently built Biological Station. These research and development projects are as diverse in range as the surrounding ecosystem itself and they not only adhere to modern sustainable concepts, but help us to further develop and evolve these ideologies to implement ourselves, as well as share with the greater community.

A SUSTAINABLE YACUTINGA

We have successfully implemented a long-term sustainability management system that is suitable to our reality and scale, and that considers environmental, socio-cultural, quality, health, and safety issues.

By implementing effective sustainability planning and management in accordance with a progressive set of sustainable criteria, we are focusing on reducing negative impacts and protecting biodiversity, enhancing cultural heritage, providing the local community with social and economic benefits, and through diverse environmental education programs we try to contribute to the adequate use of Natural and Cultural Resources, not only on a Provincial, but National and International level.

We strongly believe that by striving for these goals we are also providing the tourism market with a rewarding and ethical alternative. It is this cycle that defines sustainable tourism as a crucial tool in the preservation of our endangered environments and traditional cultures for present and future generations.

Examples of our sustainable policy can easily be ascertained and through various ways. These type of effort guarantees perpetuity of natural resources and protect local culture from frantic touristic development. All this with true conviction of a responsible business. Our efforts in favour of sustainability cover diverse levels in our organization. From recycling to subvention of scientific investigations in order to amplify information on one of the most threatened eco-systems in Argentina.

Environmental protection and biodiversity development

An integral and dynamic development example is the recently founded Yacutinga Biological Station (E-Bio). It has been the key in facilitating further research and sustainability projects such as the Forest Regeneration Program, the Capybara Breeding Program and several ecological inventories such as the researching of diurnal butterflies (Lepidoptera) in which we have uncovered 1 new species for science and 32 new species within Argentina.

The Hummingbird (Colibri) research project and the Yateì (Meliponidae/stingless bee) wild honey production cooperative with the Mbya Guaranì community can be seen as ground breaking initiatives and work to establish Yacutinga as a leader in research and conservation techniques in addition to it's role as a sustainable tourism provider.

The ways in which we monitor environmental stress have become a benchmark for successful sustainable management with our methods having been included in World Travel Organization (WTO) publications as case of studies.

Key components of our environmental management plan in regard to erosion and touristic negative impact in particular, include the implementation of monitored indicators, limiting the number of people using trails as well as the frequency of trails used and rotating them in order to allow for restorative time. Self guided trail visitations are forbidden as are fires and camping in the Reserve Area, along with smoking and the collection of plants, seeds and any biomaterial unless it is intended for use in an approved inventories project

Naturally pure drinking water comes as a blessing in this part of the world, originating from a well that reaches a high volume of second-level groundwater, going through lateritic soil at a depth of 85m. As with all natural resources, great or small, a sustainable approach must be taken in order to provide future generations with the same opportunities as our own. To ensure minimal water usage, guests are encouraged to drink tap water, saving on plastic from bottled water at the same time. In addition, the garden at the Lodge consists almost entirely of native species without the need kind for artificial

watering or irrigation and the few introduced plants we have are spectacularly beautiful, non-invasive species that pose no threat to the ecosystem.

We periodically clean the San Francisco Stream and the Upper Iguazu River as some rubbish has been known to float down from the towns upstream. To bring greater effectiveness to this exercise, we have developed a river cleaning system made from recycled plastic bottles that effectively collects most floating waste which can then be collected when necessary without disrupting the flow or ecosystem. Further, a complete ban on hunting and fishing in the reserve area and a leadership role in conjunction with local authorities to control illegal poaching has been vigorously sought, adopted and maintained. Full cooperation and assistance is given to the Border Patrol, Navy and National Park Rangers.

Sustainable development and energy conservation

As the future of the Reserve is being cared for and managed through E-Bio, several measures to ensure the sustainability of the operation as a whole are also in place.

An extensive waste recycling and resource conservation program means that all waste generated by Yacutinga Lodge, E-Bio and visiting guests while in the Reserve Area, is looked at for possible recycling or treatment. In addition, we have developed our own compost production system in order to eliminate need for the use of natural, nutrient rich soil from the jungle on our Lodge gardens.

Great respect and care towards the natural and cultural heritage surroundings of the area have been made with regard to the design and impact of the buildings of Yacutinga Lodge and E-Bio. The use of locally appropriate principles of sustainable construction and material, combined with organic architecture techniques, allow maximum air convection in buildings, thus saving considerable energy costs in place of air conditioning systems.

Hot water systems in all rooms initially use solar energy before optimizing, when required, a constant water temperature by means of non-contaminant electric heaters.

In terms of sanitary waste, a treatment system has been designed in all bathrooms on the property. This system is known as the 'Engineer Swamp' and uses the plants of saturated soils (like marshlands) whose roots are capable of absorbing the nutrients present in stagnant waters.

A 'rechargeable only' policy is strictly adhered to with all battery operated devices such as short-wave radios and torches, thus reducing waste and further minimizing electricity use.

All staff members are proficiently trained to use and apply these methods of sustainable living and guests are informed of our practices in addition to what we expect of them while they are visiting. We like to encourage staff that sustainable principles are 'brought home' and shared with the surrounding communities where possible to add further value to their function.

Strengthening cultural heritage and benefiting local communities

A good working relationship with surrounding communities is essential in order for sustainable tourism and conservation operations to succeed.

We have over the years established a strong, mutually beneficial relationship with the indigenous Mbya Guaranì community, as we have with the communities of the surrounding towns and countryside.

Mbya Guaranì Community

At the beginning of 2004 we started to relate to the neighboring Guaranì community, Kagui Pora, enhancing constantly a benefit from responsible touristic environment. We have learnt contradictions and unusual situations for our occidental culture, but can affirm that through several years of relations, diverse and productive activities with our Guaranì neighbors have been achieved. The idea to develop a relationship including an economic benefit for the Kagui Pora community, does not only optimize the income, but also helps to value their heritage facing the inevitable impact which without doubt will be increase with massive tourism in our area.

Although we are no protectors of this community, we consider as touristic experts, that it is our moral obligation to inform the Guaranì's adequately about risks and benefits this type of economic activity brings with it.

A highly productive and cooperative relationship exists between Yacutinga and the Mbya Guaranì indigenous community, native inhabitants of Northeast Argentina.

In addition a number of projects currently in place are providing not only immediate benefits but effectively work to ensure future prosperity in a social, economic and environmental sense.

The implementation of the **Yatei Project** focuses on the production of a special wild honey with homeopathic characteristics. The honey, comparable with New Zealand's Manuka honey, is produced by the Meliponidae (native stingless bee) or in Guaranì language, the Yatei. The Guaranì community has provided invaluable ancestral knowhow and we have in turn offered partnership in a cooperative system producing income through the harvesting of artificial honey nests that we have jointly created and maintained.

Visits by our guests to the Guaranì owned **art and handicrafts market** is a part of each stay, providing a valuable source of income for the community as well an opportunity to exercise and pass down artisanal aspects of their culture to the younger generations.

The staging of regular performances by the 'Guaranì Choir' for the visitors to Yacutinga Lodge creates again another highly beneficial exchange as traditional music values are taught to the children of the community and enjoyed by all, while non-monetary donations are made by guests and by our organisation itself.

Cross cultural exchange between Guaranì nature guides and the other staff and guides employed by Yacutinga, provides not only a vital source of further education on both sides, but an opportunity for the Guaranì community itself to reinforce invaluable expertise of their native ecosystem, rekindle and pass down knowledge that has been lost through their own westernisation.

Training programs cover the areas of biology, ecology, language and sustainable practice and as our university educated nature guides offer a different perspective from a biological science and nature interpretation background, we strongly believe that a fusion of traditional and modern perspectives is highly beneficial for guides, communities, researchers and guests alike, not to mention for the natural ecosystem itself when this broad knowledge is applied through conservation efforts.

Benefits to the local community as a whole

Employment is an obvious benefit to both our operation and to the wider local community with 90% of staff members at all levels coming from the Guaraní community, the town of Andresito and surrounding areas.

Locally manufactured goods as well fair trade and organic food is sourced locally as a first priority in an attempt not only to stimulate the local economy but also as a way of encouraging businesses to offer products made following sustainable practice principles. The vast majority of food used by our Lodge restaurant is bought on these terms - from local organic farms providing a good living for local farmers and an incentive to stay herbicide and pesticide free, as well as top quality produce for our guests.

Promoting environmental and cultural awareness and respect

One of the conservation objectives of Yacutinga Lodge & Private Natural Reserve is to establish an Environmental Education programme aimed mainly at the community of Comandante Andrés Guaicurari locality.

In a survey carried out in 2002, as part of the Tri-national Programme for the Conservation of the Paranaense Forest, the inhabitants of this community, young people among them, expressed their concern about the different environmental issues affecting the region, such as soil and water pollution caused by agrochemicals, deforestation and waste accumulation in unsuitable places.

As a result the Yacutinga's educational project '*La Gurisada y el Monte*' (The Children and the Forest), runs during the low season and involves children from neighbouring rural schools being invited to enjoy a free day of environmental education with the idea of passing on to their families and friends the enthusiasm and ideas of sustainability gained during the program.

On a broader note, we are extremely eager to assist the County and State Governments on environmental, social and responsible travel issues, always working to improve a relationship that is critical to the success of a number of our sustainable projects.

Raising sensitivity to political, environmental and social climate on a local and international level

A philosophical cornerstone of ours is the importance of education in bringing about positive change. A comprehensive education program aimed at all staff upon commencement at Yacutinga Lodge, Reserve and E-Bio, and ongoing training on all aspects of social and environmental sustainability ensures that progressive ideas and actions emanate from each and every part of our organisation.

We welcome our guests with a detailed spoken presentation using audio-visuals to support and reinforce information concerning the geological and social history of the region, issues relating to the degradation of ecosystems both locally and internationally, and of course not only what we are doing to help as an organisation, but importantly what we all as individuals can do to help bring about a sustainable future for our children and grandchildren.

These messages are intended for each and every sector of the community that we encounter; from guests and travel agencies to employees, local businessmen, community leaders and Government Authorities alike.

A living document - the evolution of sustainability and the problems it faces

Some developed countries, particularly within the European Union, have in recent years steadily worked concepts of sustainability into the very fabric of their societies - from the way in which people consciously contribute to such things as energy saving schemes and recycling programs, to Government itself placing a high priority on values of

sustainability while drafting new policy. This change can of course in part be attributed to political will, there is no doubt that many governments worldwide are now waking up to the reality that growth and progress must be circumscribed by environmental and responsible limits, but another huge factor in this movement towards a sustainable society is a nation's capacity to implement such change.

Most countries, and especially developing countries, do not have the luxury of simply allocating more human and financial resources to each new environmental issue or problem that is identified. As is the case throughout most of Latin America, the capacity to address social and environmental issues in a sustainable way, however severe they may be, is often simply not there on a number of levels. Traditional industries like logging, agriculture and oil continue to influence policy direction, a severe shortfall in both funding and training for alternative energy programs as a result, and a general lack of awareness of socio-economic and environmental issues is common throughout society.

The political and social climate in Argentina can be fairly described along these lines, with Local, State and Federal politics largely geared towards increasing economic capacity at the cost of further environmental degradation, a repeat of practices that have already proven wrong.

As mentioned earlier, local attitudes towards sustainability in the areas neighbouring Yacutinga Nature Reserve could not be further from the values fostered within. Rampant deforestation, both legal and illegal, takes place just on our doorstep, poaching remains a problem and agricultural interests seek to continue their expansion into the sub-tropical forest. The inherent culture is not one concerned with sustainable practice, it is concerned with continuing with the economic practices of the past in order to alleviate poverty.

On an international level, we feel that attitudes toward our region also lack awareness as international perception of Argentina as not having a large biodiversity that is in need of help continues to be felt.

Despite the amazing biodiversity spanning the length of the country, from abundant marine and *andean* wildlife in Patagonia, to our rich sub-tropical rainforests of the north, adequate project funding remains difficult to obtain when compared with other biodiversity hotspots in Latin America.

To eliminate reliance on outside funding or 'project grants' only available to NGOs, we decided to adopt private ownership, making Yacutinga essentially a private enterprise with an NGO soul. Although enabling us to pursue our philosophical aims and implement our ideas with our own destiny in our hands, this approach increases the need for effective sustainability management across all levels.

The purpose of this document is to highlight not only the natural ecological wonders we have to work with and the various methods we have in place to ensure future sustainability, but also the evolving nature of our approach to the problems we encounter.

The internationally accepted 'Best Practice' principles, although generally very effective in guiding sustainability practitioners worldwide, needs to adopt a flexible approach, as do we when applying it in the developing world.

A prime example in our experience is the implementation of renewable energy programs such as solar and wind power. Many European based sustainable tourism travel agencies require, for a high 'sustainability rating', that these systems are in place, often at the expense of recognition of vital conservation efforts and overall environmental impact.

The climate and fito-geographical reality of conditions in this kind of sub-tropical environment means that wind technology is simply not viable as a low air flow exists at the inside of the forest.

The canopy structure of the Jungle also highly restricts the use of solar panels due to the lack of sunlight making it through the top layers of the trees.

We have a relatively small solar energy system consisting in a couple of panels at the Yacutinga Biological Station but even on this scale it has confronted us with a number of logistic problems that would usually not be encountered in the developed world. The solar industry in Argentina is not given suitable Government assistance, such as the provision of purchase rebates, and solar technology remains extremely expensive.

Solar energy production is not only something we aspire to harnessing further, but believe that in future this will be possible with advances in solar technology efficiency, reduced costs and improved Government assistance.

A solution to this obstacle is the use of traditional fireplaces in guest rooms when very low temperatures are experienced during winter. We know that in terms of environmental sustainability this is not ideal as coal is used as fuel, but the local town which supplies our electricity does not in fact have the capacity to provide a sufficient amount of power, even for a small number of rooms. To encourage the expansion of local electricity output would require the conversion of more rainforest or farmland for electricity production facilities, resulting in further urbanisation.

Another pitfall is the lack of suitably trained technicians; we once suffered a malfunction in our satellite internet system and we had to wait a couple of days for a technician to fly in from Buenos Aires to repair it. This is the equivalent of having to wait for a repairman to travel halfway across Europe to rectify a problem.

Limited capacity is a factor that defines many of our struggles as we seek to expand the influence of sustainability in the region and the adaptation and evolution of sustainable tourism and development criteria is the key to our success.

Society in rural Argentina remains traditionally structured in that towns are small, distances are vast and a strong community atmosphere exists. Along with its many charms, this structure poses problems for sustainability projects in the area such as ours.

It is clear that many things need to change in Argentina and much of the developing world in order for sustainable development movements such as sustainable tourism to successfully pass on their countless benefits in full to the local, national and global community. Internationally, political will is beginning to shift, albeit in patches, towards a system where sustainability principles are at the forefront of all development decisions, and only time will tell if early signs of an ideological shift will evolve into a truly global movement ensuring the sustainability of our future.

We strongly believe that as a responsible sustainable tourism provider and passionate member of the conservation movement, we need to display an inherent flexibility - to be able to alter priorities and change direction; to be able to move resources from efficiencies in an established program to a developing one; and to be able to effectively identify and address sustainability issues as they emerge.

This is a living document in that it is intended as a launch pad to further discussion and development within the sustainable tourism sector and beyond, further reconciling the positions of all involved with the aim of creating a future for all of us, for many generations to come.