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#### ASK THE EXPERT

## Ted Eubanks

You don't need to fly thousands of miles for a phenomenal eco-trip. Ted Eubanks suggests checking out the overlooked gems in your own backyard, whether you're spotting black bears and rare birds at the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia or star-gazing at Cherry Springs State Park in Pennsylvania, which has the darkest skies in the east. Eubanks is the president of Fermata, Inc., a consulting firm that develops nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation projects in partnership with communities, non-profits, and state agencies. In the early 90s, he helped create the popular Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail (a self-guided driving route linking spots like wildlife refuges and state parks). Since then, Eubanks has worked on establishing wildlife trails in about twenty states including Virginia, Oklahoma, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Healthy hikes for everyone, please!—*Jen Uscher*



a tip or fact to take away

#### Take Some Heat Off:

For every 10 degrees you turn down on your water heater, you save six percent of the energy used. The recommended setting is 120° F or 140° F if you have a dishwasher.



Your company specializes in developing "experiential tourism" projects—can you explain what that is?

It's tourism focused on the nature, culture and history of an area. It's authentic, non-fabricated attractions. It can be hiking in the Grand Canyon or visiting a Civil War site. The common thread of all the resources we work with is that they're inherent. We don't do golf courses or cruise ships. And more and more we've been blending those different types of attractions in one project. For example, the Alabama Black Belt Nature and Heritage Trail includes natural areas and also places like Gee's Bend with its famous quilts, and sites related to the Civil Rights era like the Safe House Black History Museum. The ethic that underlies all our work is: Conservation and sustainability are never negotiable.

Can you give an example of a community that benefited from promoting nature-based tourism?

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Canadian, Texas. Population: 1500. It's a spectacularly scenic place, but it was economically depressed. They asked me to help them with a nature tourism program, called the Texas Prairie Rivers Initiative, and we opened up private land to the public and created travel packages for tourists to see the rare Lesser Prairie-Chickens. Soon a sandwich shop opened up, a new motel moved in, and they were restoring the local theater. It really just rejuvenated that community and gave them a vision and purpose. Outdoor recreation and tourism can be a catalyst for change.

**How does something like a wildlife-viewing trail contribute to conservation—is it because it shows state officials and local communities that by preserving natural areas they can bring in tourist dollars?**

Yes. We have developed trails where the communities bought land in order to put it on the trail. And the trails bring recognition to sites that may have been undervalued and suddenly they become a special place and people tend to want to protect them. I believe the people who don't care about conservation were never given an opportunity to care. I want to create those opportunities. There's a sort of epiphany that happens when someone says, "Now I understand the connection between that bird and that plant and this landscape." I want to give everyone the opportunity to have that light bulb come on.

**What's your advice on planning a great trip?**

A lot of people travel at a sort of "macro scale" level, which is to go to Las Vegas. It's an icon of hyperbole. But there's another kind of travel, which birders are good at, which is "micro scale." It's noticing everything and uncovering remarkable experiences. I'll give you an example of micro level tourism: I was in North Dakota and drove through a little town and saw The American Fur Trading Museum. I didn't know anything about fur trading, but I went in and it was absolutely fascinating. One of the best museums I've ever seen is a farm implement museum in Stuttgart, Arkansas and that's close to the area where there were recently reports of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, so you could take a look at those farm implements and then go look for the woodpeckers. My recommendation is: Don't get stuck in some kind of pre-digested form of tourism. Juxtapose what seem to be ridiculously unrelated experiences. Go to the peanut festival in Suffolk, Virginia and it's literally next door to the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, one of the great birding spots. Go whitewater kayaking and then go to an opera in the evening in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Provoke yourself and your perspective of this planet we live on. Travel to me is transformative and life-changing if you allow it to be.

**How can consumers tell if a tour company or resort is truly eco-friendly, since we don't have a widely-recognized certification program, like the travel equivalent of the USDA Certified Organic seal?**

I personally think greenwashing is a significant problem in our country, period. In the U.S., we're at a disadvantage. In Australia, their ecotourism society has a wonderful certification program that is strongly supported by public policy. I think you're right, we need a certification program for travel and tourism that really has some teeth in it. That tells you "This is a company that has gone the extra mile." We can never eliminate the impacts of tourism, but we can minimize them.

**Do you feel guilty about all the fossil fuel use and carbon emissions associated with travel?**

Yes, I feel guilty but I know there are solutions. One value of developing trails in every state is that you can tell people: Look at what's in your own backyard. Maybe we can reduce mileage driven or flown—but not reduce outdoor experiences. For example, you don't have to go to Costa Rica to have a phenomenal tropical experience. Go to South Texas or Florida. There are undiscovered treasures hidden within arm's reach of every American. What about the Cuyahoga Valley National Park near Cleveland? Or the Great Swamp refuge near Manhattan? Or the Laurel Highlands near Pittsburgh? Or the Big Thicket National Preserve near Houston? Or Great Falls Park near D.C.? My point is that we do not have to travel around the world to experience authentic—and, at times, life changing—nature, culture, and history. I want to turn over enough rocks that ultimately people realize there's so much right here. Also, we've been working on a project with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources in Pennsylvania's Laurel Highlands. We're looking at things like: When people arrive at a state park, can we move them in a shuttle that uses compressed natural gas? Can we use small-scale hydro energy to keep the park completely off the grid? Can we estimate how many people drive to a state park each year and figure out their total mileage and then offset it with a replanting project somewhere else in the state?

**What are your plans for your new "Great American Trails"?**

We're going to be developing content that can be delivered to portable devices, like a GPS-enabled cell phone. The idea is someone could go to a visitors center and get interpretive information about a place they're visiting with audio and video on a handheld device, so when you get to site number one, it triggers the interpretation. It can be connected to the web, so if a rare bird was reported in the area that morning, you could receive that information on the device. It could be used for something like a walking jazz and blues trail in downtown Houston, Texas.

**What inspires your work in outdoor recreation and tourism?**

It comes from an interest in conservation and from being a birder and thinking of all

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the life-changing experiences I've had in the outdoors. I recognize that we can either legislate and mandate conservation—and we see how difficult that is—or we can help develop and nurture a culture of conservation. It's the constant nagging idea that with my remaining years, my crusade needs to be: How many people can I connect with these wonderful resources? If people never connect with the resource, they're never going to value it and it'll never be conserved.

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