

Learning-based tourism an opportunity for industry expansion

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A guide on Sparks Lake in the Oregon Cascade Range explains the geologic history and ecology of the area to tourists, in the shadow of the South Sister volcano. (Photo courtesy of Oregon State University)

New research suggests that major growth in the travel, leisure and tourism industry in the coming century may be possible as more people begin to define recreation as a learning and educational opportunity – a way to explore new ideas and cultures, art, science and history.

Some of this is already happening, although the expansion of [tourism](#) in much of the 20th century was often focused on amusement parks and tropical resorts – not that there's anything wrong with them.

But in a recent study published in the *Annals of Tourism Research*, experts say that increasingly affluent and educated people around the

world are ready to see [travel](#) in less conventional ways, and that lifelong [learning](#) and personal enrichment can compete favorably with sandy beaches or thrill rides.

"The idea of travel as a learning experience isn't new, it's been around a long time," said John Falk, a professor of science education at Oregon State University and international leader in the "free-choice learning" movement, which taps into personal interests to help boost intellectual growth beyond what's taught in schools and through formal education.

In the 1700s and 1800s, a "Grand Tour" of Europe was considered an educational rite of passage for upper-class citizens of the gentry or nobility, in which months of travel throughout the continent offered education about art, culture, language, everything from history to science, fencing and dancing.

There may not be as much demand today to perfect one's skills with a sword, but the concept is the same.

"For a long time the travel industry has been focused on hedonistic escapism," Falk said. "That's okay, but as more and more people have the time, means and opportunity to travel, a lot of them are ready to go beyond that. There are many other interesting things to do, and people are voting with their feet.

"You're already seeing many tour operators and travel agencies offer educational opportunities, things like whale watching, ecotourism," Falk said. "The National Park Service does a great job with its resources, teaching people about science, geology and history. The push for more international travel experiences as a part of formal education for students is an outgrowth of this concept.

"We're convinced this is just the beginning of a major shift in how

people want to spend their leisure time, and one that could have important implications for intellectual and cultural growth around the world," he said.

Among the observations the researchers make in their study:

- More leisure time and lower relative cost of travel near the end of the 20th century has opened the door for people to consider different types of recreation focused on intellectual engagement.
- A growing appetite for lifelong learning is being underserved by the existing tourism industry.
- A major expansion of learning-based tourism will require both participants and the [tourism industry](#) to overcome a long-standing bias that recreation and education are opposite ends of the spectrum – to accept that learning can be fun.
- The cultural impact of "being there" makes for a memorable learning experience of great personal value to participants, and is often just the beginning of a continued interest in a topic.
- People seek experiences that are sensation-rich, alter their view of the world, or instill a sense of wonder, beauty and appreciation.
- A down side to travel and learning can occur if tourists use the experience to reinforce colonialist, racial or cultural stereotypes.
- Tourism activities are most successful if the participant feels active and engaged, rather than just receiving a recitation of facts to correct a "knowledge deficit."

Collaborators on this research were from the University of Queensland in Australia.

"It is expected that tourism will become ever more centered upon a quest for something larger, something more personally fulfilling," the

researchers wrote in their report. "It is argued that the quest for knowledge and understanding, enacted through travel, will continue to be a dominant theme of the new century."

Provided by Oregon State University

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