

Experiencing the Verde Valley As an Ecotourism Destination

e·co·tour·ism (ē'kō-tor'iz'əm, ěk'ō-) : *Environmentally responsible travel to areas of natural or ecological interest, typically under the guidance of a local naturalist, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature and related cultural and historic features without damaging the environment.*

According to The Nature Conservancy, ecotourism can be distinguished from nature tourism by its emphasis on conservation, education, traveler responsibility and active community participation.

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On a nature hike in Red Rock State Park, Jim Parsons, a Clarkdale, Arizona, resident and volunteer, frequently stopped along the way to do a little teaching and sharing. Parsons enjoys leading interpretive hikes and pointing out the environmental features of the park's pristine 286-acre nature preserve, which doubles as an environmental education center. On this particular day hikers learned about lichen; the botanical uses of several types of yucca (from food to fasteners); water flow patterns in Oak Creek, the characteristics of various trees, such as cottonwoods, junipers, mesquite, manzanita and scrub oak; and some nesting habits of the animals that call the park home.

As they walked and listened, hikers stayed on the trails, asked questions and shared comments and impressions. Many said they were inspired to take more interpretive hikes and to learn about the wildlife, plants and indigenous people of the area.

The interpretive programs at Red Rock State Park are part of a new trend in travel called ecotourism, where the primary focus of a trip is to experience the natural beauty of the environment and its restorative qualities—not only for immediate enjoyment but also as a legacy to protect and conserve for future generations.

Naturalists believe that land stewardship is a natural outgrowth of ecotourism. Babia Dioum, a Senegalese ecologist, explained this eloquently: "In the end, we will conserve only what we love. We only love what we understand. We only understand what we are taught."

In the Verde Valley there are many opportunities to learn the lessons of nature. For example, the Northern Audubon Society holds regular walks and scouting expeditions in area parks and on trails to introduce and deepen people's appreciation of the hundreds of bird species that live in the area or touch down during their migrations north and south.

Indeed, birders flock to the Verde Valley all year long to observe and admire species they may not see at home. Each April, during the Verde Valley Birding & Nature Festival, they can immerse themselves in the study of birding and become acquainted with the area's history, archeology and geology. Held at Dead Horse Ranch State Park in

Cottonwood, the festival has numerous field trips throughout Sedona and the Verde Valley.

Statistics indicate that birding is the number-one passion of ecotourists, with hiking a close second. Equestrian trail rides can also be part of an ecotourism vacation in the Verde Valley. When travelers sign up for horseback rides at M Diamond Ranch, a 100-year-old working cattle ranch in Beaver Creek, they always get more than a trail ride. They get an experience of what it means to be a Western cowboy on a working ranch, where many of the old ways still survive. They also learn about the land, Western history, cowboy traditions and ranchland management.

The M Diamond is one of the oldest continuously operating working cattle ranches in the Verde Valley and the only one in the area open to guests. The ranch owners want to share the joy of riding on the open range and the satisfaction that comes from living a rural lifestyle. They believe it's important to experience the cowboy life firsthand so that when it comes time to protect this heritage through legislative initiatives, people will remember their experiences and vote in favor of preserving habitat and maintaining biodiversity.

As naturalist writer and educator Terry Tempest Williams has said, "The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time."

--Sylvia Somerville