

Respect the Saharan Environment; A Code of Practise for Overland Travellers

(extract from *Sahara Overland*, p..289)

In 2003, section 5.3.1 of a 78-page UNESCO report titled: *The Sahara of cultures and people. Towards a strategy for the sustainable development of tourism in the Sahara in the context of combating poverty*” categorised Saharan tourists as “excursionists”, “discoverers”, and “initiates”.

The final category “independents” were described as follows: “These are essentially travellers who move around in complete autonomy, with their own “super-equipped” vehicles, and make very little use of local personnel (sometimes a guide, on the understanding that the use of GPS provides access to all places, particularly neolithic sites). They consume lots of water and wood without necessarily realising what the consequences could be and make only minimal purchases in the countries they visit (food, fuel and craft products). As they are unsupervised, they often cause, through ignorance, irreparable damage to the environment and to neolithic sites. It would seem that their presence causes more damage than it might bring additional resources to those regions and their population. They are to be found in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Niger, and less so in the Libya and Mauritania.”

Some of the errors and exaggerations in the above are obvious; all that is missing are allegations of Satanic rituals and dolphin mutilation. Regrettably this is how overland travellers in the Sahara are being presented by individuals with their own agendas.

The ability to travel freely while hopefully responsibly is now being restricted in many Saharan countries. As so often happens, the actions of a few are ruining it for the majority. There is little doubt that poorly-trained local guides (see below) and other locals are as much to blame for the perceived environmental degradation, but it is now necessary to spell out a code of practice for responsible tourism in the Sahara.

- Respect local laws and religious customs (see p.294).
- Always ask people first if you may take their photograph or film them. This is a typical area of tourist insensitivity. Consider the rudeness of being photographed or filmed while walking down your own High Street.

- Most local wood resources are not regenerating and are needed by nomads. In areas where there is no nomadism, dead wood may also be part of the local ecology.

Cook on gas and for camp fires bring easily found waste timber from home. Camp fires are nice but there is no need for huge bonfires. If you’re cold put on a hat!

- It should go without saying, but get into the habit of using water conservatively, both in town and on the piste

- Most travellers bring way too much food from home. Plan to buy food and other provisions locally. there’s more there than you might expect

- Leave no garbage in the desert, even buried and including biodegradable matter. Burn what waste you can in a campfire or better still dispose of it all in a town dumps.

- Avoid the use of detergents in the desert, especially near water sources. Their scent can repel animals which rely on waterholes or well troughs.

- If you need to drain motor oils in the middle of desert, try your best to collect the waste and dispose of it responsibly. better still do it in a town.

- Think twice about making radical excursions off piste that will leave clear and permanent traces of your passing.

- Bury all toilet waste at least a foot deep and make an effort to burn toilet paper after use and bury it in the same hole.

- Travel in small groups of less than a dozen people that have a limited impact on local resources

In the end it all boils down to respect of the environment and the people that live there, as well as a desire to preserve the wilderness as you would wish to find it. As mentioned elsewhere, this may mean tidying up after you guides, but it is the responsibility of all users of desert users to preserve the wilderness for others to enjoy.

There are further guidelines on specific conduct in Moslem countries on p.294 and on appreciating the Sahara’s cultural heritage on p.399.