

Dennis Pinto on education and sustainability

Family-run safari outfitter Micato has been leading journeys through Africa for more than 50 years. Here, Dennis Pinto shares how the company is helping local communities through one of the most powerful tools for sustainable change: education

For good reason, sustainability has become a buzzword over the last few years. Through sustainability, we will indeed one day change the world. While we all grapple with how best to be sustainable in our personal and professional lives, the tourism industry in eastern and southern Africa has been refining its sustainable and environmental posture for several decades.

Solar power, for example, is not only a sensible form of energy, but it also makes good business sense, especially in an environment where the alternative is operating diesel-guzzling generators in the middle of the bush. The same can be said for the organic gardens at many camps and lodges – a source of fresh-picked fruits and vegetables long before farm-to-table was even a concept. And farmers have used bees to keep stray elephants away from their fields long before beekeeping became popular in New York City.

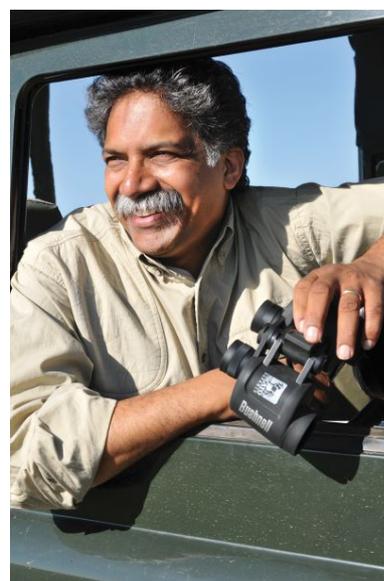
My parents founded Micato in Kenya over 50 years ago. For us, being anything less than environmentally conscious and sustainable would be self-defeating, as well as detrimental to Africa's wildlife – the very thing our travelers come to see. We're careful to share Africa's most pristine wildlife areas with our guests without negatively impacting the land. Gorilla trekking in Rwanda is one such experience – only nearly a dozen habituated gorilla families live in the vast Volcanoes National Park, and no more than eight guests are allowed to visit any one of the gorilla families each day. Or at Ol Jogi Wildlife Conservancy, a mere 20 guests have 60,000 acres of wildlife preserve

to themselves, and their visits indirectly fund substantial community development projects nearby.

We also recognize that without tourism, the pressure to convert game lands into farmland would be overwhelming. This is why we believe firmly that conservation is not sustainable without education. Education not only gives Africa's youth a path to employment, it provides an understanding of the personal and national benefits of having the greatest wildlife population on the planet.

Micato formalized its commitment to education over 30 years ago when one of our employees, Lorna Macleod, had a chance encounter with a little boy who was going from person to person in a Nairobi shopping center with a note from his school headmaster. The note said that he was an orphan and needed to raise 700 shillings for a school uniform before he could come to class. He had only collected 100 shillings. The boy approached Lorna. She read the note and handed him the 600 shillings, the equivalent of around \$15. Tears running down his face, the boy stood there for a moment, said "God bless you," then dashed away.

At that moment, Lorna realized that Micato was an ideal bridge between some of the poorest people on the planet, and some of the wealthiest, our travelers. So we gave that bridge a name: AmericaShare. Micato-AmericaShare focuses on extreme poverty, because poverty and environmental relief do not exist separately; they are inextricably intertwined. Our focus on education benefits the environment and wildlife just as much as it serves the people,



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their health and the preservation of their many cultures.

Through the program, our travelers have the unique opportunity to visit Harambee Community Centre, which makes a lending library and computers available to the community. It was built with the support of Micato guests in the heart of Mukuru, one of the largest slums in Kenya.

While working in this community we've come to realize that providing children with a small item – a pen, a pair of eyeglasses, a hearing aid – can make all the difference in their worlds. In the case of many thousands of girls in Africa, the small thing that has been truly life-changing is a reusable sanitary pad.

Girls in Africa who can't afford sanitary pads often miss school during their periods, losing as much as an entire month each school year, which leads them to fall behind or quit school altogether. So nearly 15 years ago, Lorna founded Huru International, whose headquarters our travelers can also visit while in Mukuru. Huru manufactures reusable sanitary pads that have been distributed in Huru Kits to more than 170,000 girls in Africa, saving them 4.5 million school days that otherwise would have been lost.

You really can't have conservation without education. It's the most powerful tool for sustainable change there is. This was no doubt better put by my late countryman, Nelson Mandela, who said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."