



12 LESSONS LEARNED FROM NATURAL HABITAT ADVENTURES' ZERO WASTE ADVENTURE

In July 2019, Natural Habitat Adventures ran the World's First Zero Waste Adventure in Yellowstone National Park. Having pioneered other major conservation initiatives and industry firsts, like becoming the world's first carbon-neutral travel company in 2007 and eliminating plastic water bottles from our trips, it was only natural to push the envelope on an ever-increasing environmental problem in our world—waste.

True to our nature, we went “all in,” deciding the best way to research, understand and bring awareness to this issue was to plan and run the world's first zero-waste adventure. We defined our mission to divert 99% of waste produced on the trip from the landfill by recycling, composting, reusing, reducing and refusing. Investing 18 months of meticulous research and planning toward this goal, Nat Hab successfully ran this groundbreaking journey, and we're thrilled at our accomplishment.

Our success can be measured in many ways. Not only did we achieve our goal of going zero waste, we also educated and influenced our travelers to go out into the world and pass on what they learned. We also inspired an entire region, as our Zero Waste Adventure came into contact with four cities, nine restaurants, four hotels, and many other on-the-ground service providers in the Greater Yellowstone area. The media attention we received before, during and after the trip was extraordinary, with coverage in outlets including MSN, Forbes, Outside, Conde Nast Traveler and Lonely Planet. These stories have inspired and instilled an awareness of conservation culture for thousands of readers.

We now wish to share this inspiration with the entire travel industry—to pass along the lessons we've learned from planning and running this adventure—for us, that is the most profound long-term value from pursuing this initiative. It was a real-time case study, research project and investigation into what we as an industry can do to lessen our impact on the planet while inspiring our guests to contribute to a conservation culture that crosses states, countries and oceans.

*We invite you to read on and determine which of these **12 Lessons Learned** you may be able to integrate into your own travel programs. The key to success going forward is not an all-or-nothing mentality, where only those who can achieve perfection opt to participate. Instead, we believe it is infinitely more valuable for 100 companies to adopt one or two of these lessons than for just one or two companies to adopt them all.*

Please join us in taking the lead in our communities around the world toward waste reduction, and help us inspire and influence a worldwide conservation culture.

Sincerely,

Court Whelan, Ph.D.
Director of Sustainability and Conservation Travel
Natural Habitat Adventures

1. MANAGE PRE- AND POST-TRIP WASTE

Waste, of course, is not confined only to the trip itself. What is distributed to guests before and after a trip ought to count, too. To properly minimize a trip's waste, it's essential to look at *everything* given to guests before or after the trip and first consider "did the guest ask for this"? Of course, there is value to providing guests with branded gear they'll love and reuse over and over again. The higher the quality, the more likely the guest is to use and retain it. However, reconsider things that are not essential, nor overly advantageous for marketing purposes, or things that guests just plain didn't ask for.

When providing digital vs. paper documents, systems should be designed to make it very easy to opt out of printed documents so people have no difficulty choosing the minimal waste option.

When gear is provided to guests, even on a small scale (e.g., bandanas for horseback riding, towels for beach landings on cruises, etc.), a system should be established to re-collect and repurpose such items. Sometimes these can be directly reused in the same way on future excursions. But if that is not possible nor appropriate, inventive solutions can find uses for quality items, perhaps distributing them to other parts of one's operations or donating them to local youth programs, for example.

Finally, it's critical to prepare guests to implement practices as travelers to minimize waste. For instance, packing lists could recommend bringing a refillable water bottle and/or personal travel coffee mug. Packing a reusable straw or utensils can facilitate "next level" pre-trip prep for minimizing waste during the trip itself. And with such suggestions, include constant messaging in pre-trip materials about minimizing waste, so it becomes a trip theme that's not shocking or unexpected when the trip begins.

2. MINIMIZE FOOD WASTE AT RESTAURANTS

Food compost, even if minimized diligently, produces a significant portion of on-trip waste. In fact, we learned it is the largest source of "waste" generated while traveling.

Sharing meals is a solution and can actually build camaraderie among the group. "Hey, who wants to share the pasta?" "Me!" "Okay, cool!"

Clean Plate Club is a playful way to remind folks that "you don't get dessert until you finish your lima beans." This of course should be handled judiciously, but generally, humor keeps the directive light, rather than a strict order or expectation. Referencing The World's First Zero Waste Adventure that Nat Hab conducted in July 2019 is a great way to raise this approach, as the Clean Plate Club was actually a vital practice to successfully going zero waste on that trip.

Asking for half portions may seem like an odd thing at first, but it's amazing how much more satisfied people are when they don't a) stuff themselves to the gills downing massive restaurant portions, or b) have to feel bad for leaving a ton of food on their plate. Many restaurants may still not be "ready" to offer half portions, but we noticed that prompting, and asking the question while ordering, actually works most of the time. In the travel industry, we budget for folks to have full meals (with "all-inclusive" pricing) so it's okay to tell the restaurant, "I'll pay full price, I just want a half portion." This works well for minimizing waste, and it saves the restaurant money.



3. SOURCE RECYCLED CONTENT

We should be more concerned with sourcing recycled goods (e.g., trash bags made from recycled materials) and worry less about the actual material (compostable trash bags vs. traditional ones). If we are to propagate the *acceptance* of recycling in communities around the world, we must help create a market for recycled goods. By deliberately requesting or seeking out products made of recycled materials, we help to create that demand, which ultimately translates to more recycling centers and fewer recyclable materials going to landfill.

4. SWITCH TO BULK SNACKS

Snacks are notorious for excessive packaging, especially in proportion to the volume and weight of the snack itself (just think about a single-serving granola bar wrapper or bag of chips). While these are convenient, we ought to look at other solutions wherever possible. Fortunately, more grocery stores are offering bulk snacks than ever before. And they often offer classic trail-type snacks like trail mixes, nuts, and dried fruit—ideal for healthy travel snacks. It may be important also to offer small individual “stasher” bags as part of this concept. These are reusable Ziploc-type bags that people can put bulk snacks in if they wish to carry them on activities/outings/hikes.

A key consideration for bulk snacks is hygiene. Many people putting their hands into a bulk snack container can spread germs, especially if someone on the trip is ill. The best way we’ve found to abate this is to keep hand sanitizer readily available and use bulk containers with narrow mouths so people must pour the snacks out into their hand or stasher bag, instead of reaching in to grab them.

5. MINIMIZE FOOD WASTE FOR PICNIC/FIELD LUNCHES

A common practice is to place orders for packed lunches on a per-person basis so all travelers get their own sandwich, apple, drink, cookie, chips, etc. Instead, anticipate that people generally will not eat everything in a packed/picnic lunch, and order two-thirds of all items instead. That is, if you have 12 people, order eight apples, one or two large bags of chips, (well, maybe 14 cookies), and so on. Furthermore, when ordering sandwiches, we’ve found it helpful if we order about two-thirds of the total number per person, ask the restaurant to halve each sandwich, then serve them on a single platter instead of in individual boxes. Yes, it may be hard to find a proper “platter,” but some people will want only half a sandwich while others will want a whole one. Both options are covered in this scenario. You can also order a representative sample of whatever the restaurant is offering, e.g., for 12 people, order eight sandwiches total, perhaps three ham and cheese, three turkey and Swiss, and two veggie.

Make decisions based on what you know about your group, company—the number of vegetarians, how many big or light eaters you have, etc. The point is, we can do things differently from perceived norms in order to reduce waste.

6. REUSE PACKED LUNCH CONTAINERS (AND UTENSILS)

There are many options for brands and types of to-go containers, and there are regional preferences around the world. For instance, stacking tiffin pots are commonplace in Asia and parts of Africa. Silicone or rigid plastic containers are typical in the Americas. And as the world becomes more connected, we’re seeing plenty of overlap in these goods and approaches across the world. The main point is that tour operators should consider sourcing and offer reusable containers to their providers to minimize container waste from packed/to-go lunches.



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Utensils are part of this spectrum, too. Providing reusable cutlery is as feasible as using reusable containers, and it can be provided in one of two ways, as we saw on our recent Zero Waste Adventure. Reusable cutlery can be provided to restaurants or caterers to use when they pack to-go meals. Or, and perhaps more effectively, a set of reusable cutlery can be given to guests as part of their trip packet or on-trip gear, to keep with them throughout the trip. This approach presents certain opportunities and challenges. On the opportunity side, this is a great chance to give guests a gift they can use during and after the trip. It's also an effective way to integrate company branding into a perpetually reusable and symbolically sustainable product.

However, the primary challenge is how to wash and store reusable flatware over the course of the trip. Guests on our Zero Waste Adventure were okay with a quick trip to the washroom to wash it in the sink, or saving the cutlery to be washed in their hotel room at the end of the day. But this may be asking a lot of guests on all trips in all countries, from all types of operators the world over.

7. COMPOST WHEN POSSIBLE

Composting is an excellent solution for food waste. Composting will be possible on some trips and entirely impossible on others. Nevertheless, keep the idea of composting front of mind and ask local providers about their composting policies. This lets restaurants, hotels and others know that it's important to you. And when things are important to customers, it will in turn become important to businesses, too.

8. PARTNER WITH PEOPLE WHO CARE, AND PICK SUSTAINABLE PARTNERS

One of the easiest ways to up one's sustainability game quickly is to work with people who are already thinking and doing things sustainably. We found that while we did need to go in and influence various partners and providers, we were able to find some who were already doing things at a high level of sustainability, with waste mitigation a key component. This was true for restaurants, hotels and on daily activities alike. In fact, by partnering with businesses that are already thinking and operating sustainably, we learned things that we were able to integrate, bringing everyone up to a higher level.

9. RECYCLE DURING THE TRIP

Research drop-off facilities. This is a useful website to research where recycling centers are located in the U.S.: <https://search.earth911.com/>.

Similar to composting, recycling may or may not be feasible on a given trip. As you might imagine, trips in the continental U.S. and Europe tend to have this option most frequently. However, as with composting, one of the most important and powerful things we can do in cases where we *cannot* recycle is to show our local partners that it is important to us. Asking about where one can find recycling facilities, what the recycling policy is, etc. is the best way to create a "market trend" and show other people, cultures and countries that recycling is the "new normal."

Have a central collection bin with you at all times, and provide guests with easy access. For instance, on a van or bus trip, keep a single large storage bin in the luggage area or back of the van. It's an easy way to store a large quantity of recyclables when drop-off areas are few and far between. In fact, on Nat Hab's Zero Waste Adventure,



9. CONTINUED

we knew that in the worst-case scenario, we could store such recyclables over the course of the tour in our trip vans and recycle them in our home office community of Boulder, Colorado at the end of the season. It's a less than ideal example but still worth considering based on your own operations.

10. USE DRY BAGS (AKA DIRT BAGS) FOR IN-ROOM RECYCLING AND/OR ON-TRIP CLEAN-UP

These "dirt bags" are branded, lightweight 8-liter dry bags that function as a reusable trash/recycling bag when you're on the go. These are easily washable, highly multi-purpose items that function in a few different ways. Here are several uses we found on our Zero Waste Adventure:

- A bag to use when finding trash on trails...leaving places better than we found them. How about a Waste Negative trip?!
 - A bag to use for in-room recycling or composting. If someone generates trash that can be diverted, they have this bag in their room to store it until rejoining the vehicles the next morning (or wherever the group may next have access to recycling or composting).
 - A bag for personal use during the day to store individual recyclables/compostables before the next opportunity to dispose.
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11. ELIMINATE SINGLE-USE SOAP AND SHAMPOO

Complimentary soap and shampoo are ubiquitous in the hotel industry. To date, most properties provide small, single-use versions of the basics—soap, shampoo, conditioner and lotion. While well-intentioned, these items, when used only once and then discarded, create a substantial amount of waste. Fortunately, a simple and perhaps even more cost-effective solution is providing shower dispensers that hold refillable bulk stores of liquid soap, shampoo, etc.

While involving a larger up-front cost, this system has proven to be significantly more cost-effective in the long run for hotel operations. As you can imagine, it's much more sustainable for the environment, too. Asking about such sustainable systems at the outset, during the trip-planning process, not only helps determine and gauge a hotel's sustainability commitment, but it shows them that it's important to you as a travel company and consumer. Creating a conservation culture is one of the most important things we can do today, and this sort of inquiry helps tremendously.

Alternately, one can put the power in the hands of the guests, instead of relying on hotels to change their operations (although, like many other things, constant reminders and questioning can work wonders with creating demand and market trends). By simply bringing one's own soap and shampoo from home, in reusable containers like Go Tubes, you can bypass waste creation by avoiding single-use soap and shampoo containers.

12. INTEGRATE A SUSTAINABILITY FACILITATOR

Not every trip and not every company has the luxury of having a conservation facilitator on the trip itself. This means that someone in addition to the tour leader joins the group and helps with day-to-day sustainability concerns and practices. But in cases where such a team member exists, or someone's existing role on the trip (such as field or operations staff) can be expanded to include this niche job, a zero waste facilitator is extremely helpful.



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The primary role of this person is to:

- a) Go ahead of the group to restaurants and brief staff on the zero waste nature of the trip. Often, just a simple check-in will prevent “single-use” items from making it to the table or being offered to the group. These include disposable utensils, individual condiment packets, plastic straws or extra food not ordered (like gratuitous amounts of bread, butter or other appetizers that, while nice, are often not finished and become waste/compost). The facilitator can also be “the keeper of the compost bucket,” should you wish to go to that level of perfection.
- b) Arrange picnic or box lunches to minimize waste creation. While it may be easier to give all travelers their own full sack lunch filled with extra food to make sure everyone gets plenty, people often leave food uneaten. We’ve found it best to be more calculated regarding what is ordered and provided for the group, as outlined in the previous picnic section.
- c) When possible, the facilitator can have boxes, containers and gear they are responsible for. For instance, if travelers have items to recycle, it is the facilitator’s role to keep track of where the recycling bins are on the bus or in the vehicles, making them readily available to guests.
- d) The facilitator can also help with the waste measurement component, discussed next.

A BONUS LESSON: MEASURE YOUR IMPACT

Analyzing actual numbers in accord with waste reduction efforts is a powerful way to assess your impact. Not only does quantifying give us data on which to base decisions, it enhances the credibility of our explanations as we explain sustainable processes. This goes for internal communication and client-facing messaging as well as media contact. Yes, measuring how much trash a group has created over the course of a day or during an entire trip is an extra step in an already complex work flow, but it is essential to both internal understanding and external communication to facilitate a broader understanding of how to mitigate the waste stream.

Adhering to the scientific method, it’s advisable to measure a control situation where you measure your “normal” waste creation on the trip—that is, without any waste mitigation tactics. The more repetitions possible, the better, but some are better than none. Then, measure again after you implement any waste mitigation tactics. And while you’re at it, measure the amount of diverted waste, too: measure not just the now-minimal landfill waste, but also the amount you diverted by weighing your recycling and composting, too.

