

Another Important Step in Patagonia's Ecotourism Efforts

DAVID TEEL

Ecotourism? What's that? Consider the definition articulated by the World Conservation Union (IUCN): "Environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples".

Ancient tribes and modern peoples have been gathering around the Patagonia mountains for at least 12,000 years, drawn by the water and the good growing climate. Incorporated in 1948, the Town of Patagonia has roots deep in its history as a mining and cattle community, once of sufficient magnitude to merit its own rail station. For over half a century those were the engines that drove its economy.

Now the mines are gone, at least for the moment. Ranching is a shadow of its former self, and the only remaining vestiges of the railroad are the mile-long park through the heart of town and the handsome town hall, restored and relocated from its former role as the rail station. Scenic Route 82 and the Arizona Trail have replaced the rails as the pathways of choice for Patagonia visitors. Struggling back from near extinction, the Town now has two new economic engines: art and ecotourism.

How important an economic engine is eco-tourism? A 2011 study by the Arizona Game and Fish Department projected direct and indirect economic benefit for Patagonia's home county, Santa Cruz, at 21.2 million dollars, including 6.7 million dollars in salaries and wages. Although Patagonia has only a small share of the county population, it has a large share of its eco-tourism.

The community has always been blessed with natural attributes in climate, location, elevation, vegetation and topography that made it a suitable habitat for an incredible diversity of wildlife. Patagonia is considered by many to have



(Left) Paton Center Resident Caretaker, Larry Morgan, with his bike in downtown Patagonia. (Upper right) Southeast Arizona specialty, the Gray Hawk nests in the Cottonwoods around town and can be seen soaring over on any given day. (Lower right, from left) Paul Green, Executive Director of Tucson Audubon; David Teel, Town Manager of Patagonia; Marcia Grand, major donor to the Paton project. All are standing in front of the Patagonia Town Hall, which was historically the Patagonia Train Depot.

possibly the greatest diversity of species in the United States.

In recent decades, Americans have become increasingly interested in seeing and sharing their outdoor environment. Patagonia and its residents have reaped the benefits. One of the pioneering efforts grew out of the desire of residents Wally and Marion Paton to watch and enjoy the myriad of hummingbirds that passed by their home on the banks of the Sonoita Creek and next to the Nature Conservancy's Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve. Enhancing the habitat that their property provided for hummingbirds with planting and feeders, they created a place that soon was attracting both birds and bird watchers in increasing numbers. Over the years it became a favorite attraction for the town, expanding those already provided by the birding opportunities around the Patagonia Mountains and southern Arizona's sky islands. Over 200 bird species have been identified on the Paton property.

After the Patons passed on, their children were not able to maintain the property as a birding hotspot. Patagonians were very concerned about the possible loss of this important asset. Fortunately a solution was found. The Tucson Audubon Society, in partnership with the American Bird Conservancy and



GRAY HAWK AXEL ELLNER



Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, stepped in, raising the \$300,000 necessary to acquire the property and committing to preserve it for the benefit and enjoyment of birds and birders in perpetuity. Now Tucson Audubon Society is moving forward with its program to further enhance the bird-watching experience the property affords.

It takes only a brief visit to the town's business association website <http://www.patagoniaaz.com/> or a stroll up its main street to see the importance of ecotourism in Patagonia. Tour busses for birders, bikers and other nature enthusiasts are regularly visible in front of hotels and restaurants, while hikers coming off the Arizona Trail set their packs outside the Gathering Grounds coffee shop as they refuel for the next leg of their journey. Guides for nature tours outnumber medical practitioners on the roster of town businesses. Humans and hummingbirds have found a truly symbiotic relationship in Patagonia's ecotourism. ■

David Teel is currently the town manager of Patagonia. He has previously been engaged as the professional city manager for 7 other cities in 5 states—including Cape May, New Jersey, another birding hotspot. Tourism and local ecology have played an important role in all of the cities he has managed.