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[00:02 - 00:33] Presenter 1: Welcome to Protecting Hope, stories of successful sustainable tourism. Join us as we travel the globe listening to impactful stories about how sustainable tourism to protected areas contributes to environmental conservation, local economies, and human wellbeing. This podcast is brought to you by the Center for Protected Area Management at Colorado State University, in partnership with the US Forest Service International Programs Office, and is supported by funding from the US Agency for International Development.

[00:38 - 00:43] Presenter 2: Episode one. Reconnecting People to Nature with Toby Bloom.

[00:45 - 01:18] Ryan Fincham: Hello everyone. My name is Ryan Fincham. I'm the director of our Center for Protected Area Management at Colorado State University, and I'm going to be one of your hosts on this podcast, Protecting Hope. Today I am here with Toby Bloom, national program manager for travel, tourism, and interpretation for the US Forest Service. And I'm excited to be launching this podcast with Toby, as I have been working with and interacting with Toby for almost two decades now. Hard to believe.

[01:18 - 01:18] Toby Bloom: Wow.

[01:18 - 01:30] Ryan Fincham: And we've worked in different places around the globe, but always with a sustainable tourism focus. And I believe, in fact, we met at an eco tourism conference in Central America, if I'm not mistaken.

[01:30 - 01:37] Toby Bloom: Yeah. Was that the the, um, Mesoamerican society, and I can't remember an English.

[01:37 - 01:39] Ryan Fincham: Mesoamerican eco tourism alliance. I think.

[01:39 - 01:40] Toby Bloom: That's it. Yes.

[01:40 - 01:46] Ryan Fincham: Exactly. So. So anyways, thanks, Toby, for joining us and being a part of our very first podcast.

[01:46 - 01:52] Toby Bloom: Thank you. It's my pleasure. What an honor to be the first guest on your podcast. Thank you.

[01:52 - 02:12] Ryan Fincham: Great. This is great. So, anyways, to jump right in, it seems like you get involved in a whole kind of wide variety of things. Even your title indicates that you're

working across a lot of different aspects of sustainable tourism and recreation. Um, what? You know. What are some of the things that gets you most excited about your work?

[02:13 - 03:16] Toby Bloom: Well, I would say that, you know, I'm kind of my mission in life is to connect people to nature, help them reconnect. I think as human beings, we've always been connected to nature. And it's just been kind of this last blink of an eye in human history that we've been living indoors and kind of working in front of computers and under fluorescent lights and things like that. And I think we can see the impacts of that. And so, you know, being in a job where I get to sort of fulfill my, what I see as my life's work, reconnecting people to nature, it's pretty exciting. And I see the benefits of it. You know, every time that I do all of the work that I do, that's the one thing in common, is that I'm helping connect people to nature, whether it be through providing better financial opportunities or just giving people some space to relax and kind of feel some renewal. Um, all of those really relate back to us as human beings, rediscovering how important nature is for us. And to get to do that for my career is pretty great.

[03:16 - 03:29] Ryan Fincham: I'm kind of curious, throughout your professional journey, if there's some kind of key lessons that, you know, that that you've learned about successful sustainable tourism that you might share with our listeners?

[03:29 - 05:27] Toby Bloom: Yeah. Um, I, uh, a few things, I think. First of all, uh, relationships, relationships, relationships. Um, and and again, you know, this just gets back to how we behave as human beings in general. I think a lot of us have sort of gotten away from getting to know people and trying to put yourself in someone else's shoes, and that also happens to be a great business practice. If you want to have strong businesses, you want to have a strong, sustainable tourism network in your community. It's about communicating with people and getting together and being open to other people's ideas, which we're not great at, and we have to get better at. And so it's a good way to practice that. Being open to other ideas. We all think we know the best way to do something. And the reality is, we don't know the best way; we know our way. And so let's be open to listening to other folks. And, you know, someone who owns a restaurant may think differently than somebody who owns a bike shop. But those two brains together, sort of figuring out how to provide sustainable tourism, are much better than just one perspective. So really acknowledge the richness of having many different opinions in the room and release the need to be right and release your thinking that you know best. Because most of the time, we really don't know best. We do the best work when we're doing it in collaboration with other folks. The other part of it, again, is this emergence of people looking for authenticity and looking for beautiful experiences in nature. And I think people have always done that. But I think it's trending now. And I think with social media, it's so much easier for somebody to see a place, you know, maybe they follow somebody on Instagram or whatever, and they see these amazing places and these amazing things to do, and it inspires folks to get out there and do those things as well.

[05:27 - 07:37] Now I will sort of put a caveat on that. A lot of times, people will just want, you know, the ultimate picture. And I really do advocate for people being responsible about, you know, making sure that what they're doing is right for the environment, right for the community that they're visiting. And you know, that they are contributing to the good in that community and not being part of the bad. And there are, you know, some some tourism opportunities that are not great for communities or, you know, swimming with the dolphin in a cage. Not great for the dolphin. So you do have to pick and choose. And you, you know, as a consumer of sustainable tourism, uh, really kind of doing your homework about, you know, are these folks aligned with the community? Are the animals and the ecosystems being treated right by these companies? Does a portion of their money go back to protecting the places that they visit with their visitors? There's so much to it. And so it's really about, like I said, you know, on the provider side, developing a really strong network and on the tourist side, really doing your homework and trying to be as responsible as possible. And, you know, sometimes we make missteps, and a lot of

people, you know, that are providing visitor opportunities are working really hard to make theirs look like the best. And sometimes you make a mistake, but when you know better, you do better. And so just being very intentional about creating, um, a sustainable community of tourism and also about being a sustainable visitor as well, and making sure that you have those tools with you. And I mean, you can Google it and there's a million different sorts of lists of, you know, how to be a responsible visitor and things like that. But in terms of developing sustainable tourism, like I said, it's about relationships and whatever you can do to sort of reach out to other folks in your community that you don't normally cross paths with, or maybe people that you've intentionally not crossed paths with. You will really, really have a more robust, um, you know, tourism destination and, and opportunity. If you cross paths with those people, and you try and get all those opinions in the room.

[07:37 - 08:10] Ryan Fincham: That's amazing. Well, and I know so this idea of of creating connections between people and nature, um, there's a lot that's been coming out lately about the human wellbeing benefits of spending time outdoors. And I know you're in addition to your day job, you also happen to be a nature and forest therapy guide? Uh, tell us a little bit what is that all about? And, um, you know, how how does, uh, providing therapy, um, in nature kind of help lead to human well-being or human renewal?

[08:10 - 11:31] Toby Bloom: Our motto is, uh, the guide is just the guide. The therapy really comes from the forest. And so the guide opens the door to the therapy that the forest provides. So I don't really see myself as a therapist. I'm basically a guide that gives people opportunities and invitations to connect with nature, and nature gives you whatever you need, whatever that is. We're all kind of dealing with different stressors in our lives, and the ability to spend time outside, uh, you know, even just the physical presence of being in nature and not, you know, it's not about counting steps on a Fitbit or, uh, you know, knowing the names of every single plant. If it feels good when you're outside, and it does for a lot of people, and you can't really put your finger on it. That's because it really is good for you. And if it doesn't feel good for you to be outside, there's a lot of, you know, history in our culture and in other people's cultures that that have changed their connection to nature. And so being able to help folks connect to nature when it's not really part of their, you know, their upbringing or their culture, that's just as important as providing spaces for folks that are naturally gravitating to nature as well. Um, and so as a forest therapy guide, I lead walks, you know, for businesses. Um, but I also, uh, through the Forest Service, we had a really neat opportunity, uh, in 2019, in the fall of 2019, to actually train Spanish language nature guides, uh, in Puerto Rico. We held the training there, but we had some folks from as far away as Nicaragua. Um, and the course was taught mostly in Spanish. So that's a big part of it is really kind of, um, opening up this practice of of having space to be in nature, not just for kind of traditional recreation. It's in the United States. And we have a history of developing, developing recreation for white nuclear families. And so providing forest therapy in a different setting and in a different language is just one more way to kind of open up those doors for folks that may not otherwise have those opportunities. And so that's why it appealed to me. Um, I was lucky enough I didn't know it at the time, but I became the first certified forest therapy guide that works for the Forest Service. Uh, but not the last. We've had probably about 4 or 5 of our staff members, um, get certified. So there is this thing where when you put a name to it and you, uh, sort of provide these opportunities and you give something a label, people say, oh, yeah, you know, I do that already. I already sometimes, you know, when I'm having a rough day, I go for a walk out in nature, and it calms me down. Or if I'm, you know, ruminating on something and I can't get it out of my mind, if I just go sit in the yard and relax, you know, sitting under a tree, it really helps me get rid of those, those things that just keep repeating in my mind. And so to show people that there is actual science behind that, and that, you know, it's not just kind of a crazy thing that's really validating. And I think that when people find that connection to connection to nature, it doesn't go away. It's not like a one shot deal.

[11:31 - 11:47] Ryan Fincham: Before we wrap up, I'd like to ask you a kind of a final question, a kind of a big question. Um, this this podcast is called Protecting Hope. And I wonder, what is it about sustainable tourism that gives you hope for the future?

[11:48 - 14:08] Toby Bloom: Wow, so much about sustainable tourism gives me hope. The fact that it is actually kind of a recognized term now gives me a lot of hope. Like I said, when I was seeking this stuff out in my mid-20s, that term didn't exist. Ecotourism was kind of on the fringe. And, you know, you would see like eco laundromats. And so it really wasn't well defined at the time. And so seeing that people are specifically seeking out ecotourism, are specifically seeking out opportunities that protect the environment and add, you know, support local cultures and highlight those cultures as they are, and highlighting authenticity. The fact that that's what people are looking for now gives me a lot of hope. I just heard the other day, when I was up in Alaska, that now the cruise industry is figuring out how to be more green. And my goodness, if that's an industry that's trying to be green because they're trying to, you know, capture the market, that is a major shift. And so when I see those shifts and I see more people opening to, uh, you know, protecting the environment and having that be an important part of their vacation. That gives me a lot of hope, and the fact that we are paying attention to that in terms of, uh, I would say a global community, we're a lot more attuned to it. And I think it takes a lot of work. And, uh, you know, we make mistakes, and it's not a straight line to progress. But the fact that as a global community, we're talking about this, and it's something that everyone is talking about. I have a lot of hope, and I think that sustainable tourism really can be a tool for helping us with those goals of protecting the environment and being more integrated, uh, you know, as a global community and kind of accepting other folks. So I have a lot of hope. Uh, I think it's an industry where you have to be hopeful. And it's a wonderful thing to be hopeful about. It gives us really, um, great things to focus on. Uh, Hawaii just shut down their last power plant. Uh, and that was, you know, it's part of protecting their tourism, uh, inventory and assets. And so when I see things like that happening to promote tourism, that gives me a lot of hope. And so, yeah, I'm really hopeful about a lot of stuff. And it's what keeps me going when things get tough sometimes.

[14:08 - 14:29] Ryan Fincham: Yeah. For sure. Well, thanks, Toby, for your time today. Congratulations on all the great and inspiring work. It's really been a fun conversation. Um, to all of our listeners, thanks for being a part of this podcast and participating in our sustainable tourism community of learning and practice. Until next time.

[14:34 - 14:44] Presenter 1: Thank you for listening to Protecting Hope. To find links and resources from today's episode, visit the Center for Protected Area Management's website or follow us on Instagram and Facebook.

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