

GREEN

FOOTPRINTS

By Susan Lahey

Uncovering TAOS THROUGH ecotourism

Some people lead wilderness adventures designed to create a little adrenaline cocktail of nature as part of a tourism experience.

Stuart Wilde and Steve Harris aren't those kinds of guides.

Wilde and Harris are part of a group of Taos-area guides and business owners who've created wilderness experiences with big goals in mind: They want people to fall in love with Northern New Mexico; to be impassioned about protecting wilderness; to be transformed personally.

And they want it to be fun.

They call themselves ecotourism guides — guides whose tourist-leading activities somehow end up benefiting the environment. To a large extent, they hope to benefit the environment by teaching people to become advocates and guardians of it. So when they're taking you on a river-rafting tour, or hiking up a mountain with llamas, or teaching you to rock climb or sailing you silently over the Río Grande in a balloon, they'll be telling you about local American Indian history, regional water usage and identifying edible versus medicinal plants

"I could stand in one place all day and talk about the rocks and the plants and the wildlife in that spot," said Wilde, who owns Wild Earth Llama Adventures.

If that sounds like a day with your third-grade science teacher, be aware that Wilde's llama tours get raves from the people who participate in them. The tours rank number one among Taos attractions on *TripAdvisor.com*. Wilde's knowledge of all things ecological and historical in this area was often cited as one of the best parts of the trip.

What Wilde and Harris and others know that their customers may not (at first), is that a genuine

encounter with nature, coupled with enough information to deepen

that encounter, produces a wonderful transformation in people, especially people whose lives are insulated from the natural world.

"The wilderness is a symbol for that place in us that is still wild and free," Wilde said. "When you get into nature, the outcome is not predetermined. People come on these trips stressed out with work, and by the second time around the campfire, the masks begin to drop away and people become less guarded."

Harris, who's run Far Flung Adventures river-rafting company for more than 30 years, says ecotourism brings many back in touch with a vital, yet often forgotten, component.

"I don't think it's a cognitive process; it's primeval," Harris said. Unlike the American Indians who are so in-tune with the land that they are part of the landscape, he said, most non-Natives seem disconnected from the earth.

"We've really lost that," he said. "Ultimately, we feel something missing in our lives. This is our version of going back to our roots."

As a river guide, Harris said he has watched the degradation of the river over the decades. The resources are depleting and the populace is beginning to grow hungry for what the wilderness has to offer. That combination creates perfect opportunities for ecotourism.

Not every experience has the same level of intensity, either of wilderness exposure or of education. But there are a lot of things to choose from when it comes to ecotourism in Taos. Wilde, for example, has options like "Take a llama to lunch," which is a relatively short trip, as well as family camping outings. With his trips, the llamas only carry the gear; Wilde's found that not having

to carry your own gear enhances your ability to enjoy the hike.

Harris' company has river rafting tours, ranging from relatively peaceful to hair-raising whitewater adventures. For ecofriendly exploration, there's also Mountain Skills Rock Climbing Adventures, advertised as the only professional insured and permitted rock climbing school in Northern New Mexico. The guides teach people at all levels to embrace the cool, sometimes-unyielding and sometimes-overly yielding face of a rock cliff. One trip, called Rock and Raft, teams up with Far Flung Adventures for a pec-challenging day of climbing and rafting. Pueblo Balloon takes customers on dawn trips over the Río Grande, with each trip concluding with champagne.

Others involved in the ecotourism movement with Harris and Wilde include Ed Adams Fly Fishing and Cieneguilla Stables.

But other Taos organizations are thinking along similar lines. Taos Art School offers several classes ranging from "Living Waters" about New Mexico's complex relationship with its water (which ends with a soak in a hot springs) to classes on painting local landscapes. They even have a class that's a hands-on farm encounter between visiting families and local ones.

Many Taoseños moved to this area from other places because of the powerful, personal impact of the landscape. The desert, the mountains, the rivers, the forests — all rule in this area far more than the people. And Taoseños want to share this intense experience with visitors.

"It's a big part of the Taos experience to unplug a little," said Harris. "I think what's really important is an authentic experience."