

Bob Gilbert (00:00):

Welcome to tourism heads and their tales, a podcast series that explores with travel and tourism leaders, their take on key issues of the day. My name is Bob Gilbert, general manager for the tourism and destination marketing practice at the award-winning strategic marketing agency, Eddy Alexander, who are bringing you this podcast series. I've had the privilege to have worked with iconic global brands, including Disney choice, hotels, Yosemite and Shenandoah national parks, Kennedy space center, visitor center, and best Western international plus served on the boards of the us travel association, national tourist association, and an elected commissioner for visit California looking forward. I will be chatting with those that are helping shape the travel and tourism industry, all with unique tales to share that I know you will find both interesting and educational. So without further ado, let's get started.

Bob Gilbert (01:05):

Welcome to another edition of tourism heads and their tales. Today's guest is a very well known influencer. And dare I say, catalyst in travel and tourism circles. I'm talking about Greg Takehara, who has been the CEO of tourism cares for about three over three years. I think from May, 2019. He previously served on its board acting as its chairman before becoming CEO prior to tourism cares. Greg was the president of trip mate, a travel insurance firm, but his career has spanned well over 30 years within the travel industry. And I, I know that Greg has spent some time, a little south of me in Milwaukee with mark travel. Greg serves on the board of the us travel association and has served on the boards of the national tour association. The NTA, the IGLTA foundation. This is the international LGBTQ plus travel association, as well as numerous other industry committees.

Bob Gilbert (02:08):

Now, I first became aware of sustainable tourism, maybe over a little over 20 years ago when a mutual friend of ours, Bruce Beckham, and the us tour operators Association's travelers conservation foundation introduced me to sustainability and volunteerism in travel and tourism. A couple years after that, there was a name change, and tourism cares was born, which was almost 20 years ago. And I believe around about that same time NTA joined. So Greg, welcome to tourism heads and their tales. And I, I guess my first question to you is if you could tell us the mission of tourism cares and the evolution and where it's headed

Greg Takehara (02:52):

Well, it's a great pleasure to be with you, Bob. And we certainly do go back a, a long time and we're just privileged to still have you in our community, supporting us. You've supported us when you were at Delaware north and in other capacities. And it's really followers and supporters like yourself that have continued to, uh, make tourism care as the organization that it is today. As you know, we are what we hope is really the preeminent travel and tourism, nonprofit, trying to unite the travel and tourism industry and use its positive, social, environmental positive impact to really help the people in places of travel. And you made reference to the fact that way back when, and I was fortunate to be there in 2003, there was a call to action by then president Bush asking the American people to participate in, in volunteerism. And really that came about post nine 11.

Greg Takehara (03:52):

And, you know, during a time when people really needed to come together and the travel and tourism industry took heed. And as you mentioned, our founder, Bruce Beckham, very familiar in NTA, U S T a circles brought those two organizations philanthropies together with ASTA and IATs all under one

umbrella, which then ultimately became tourism cares that call to action by then president Bush, uh, resulted in a number of what we used to call, uh, cleanup events. Uh, the first one being in Ellis Island in 2003. So as you mentioned, we are approaching our 20th anniversary and I was there and, um, I drank the Koolaid really fast <laugh>.

Bob Gilbert (04:32):

Um,

Greg Takehara (04:32):

I, I was really excited to be there in part because I looked at it as an opportunity to give back to an industry that had given me my livelihood, um, and really just, uh, for us to evoke change, to bring people together and evoke change and just seeing 300 industry volunteers, all working together to do what would have taken the national park service at that time months to accomplish in terms of cleaning up Elli island was just really eyeopening and, and really something that I really just wanted to be a part of. So I had the opportunity to evolve as a volunteer and then subsequently a team leader. And then as you referenced a board member, join the board in 2012 and then assume some leadership roles within the organization on the board, and then had this opportunity to join the staff in 2019 and become the organization CEO. Um, so really it's just a dream come true in a lot of ways for an industry person like myself, who has spent as you referenced, uh, now over 30 years in the industry to truly give back and, and to truly ensure that we're going to have a firm future for future generations.

Bob Gilbert (05:50):

So when you started, um, which was May, 2019 little, did we know what was coming down the pike? So as a nonprofit and as the industry's recognized philanthropic organization, the traveling tourism industry hit skid row and as a nonprofit, you are fueled by donations. How did the pandemic impact your organizations or tourism cares efforts in that time?

Greg Takehara (06:21):

Well, like so many organizations, I, I think you have to pivot to the, the silver linings that come from any crisis. And in our case, it was an opportunity to step back and to reflect upon our journey. Thus far, we actually engaged with the help of MMGY to do a marketing rebrand, uh, in which we presented ourselves with a new look, a new logo, um, and a new story, some new taglines to really represent the, the future tourism cares, um, helping us to kind of evolve from that legacy of volunteerism to a legacy of, as I mentioned before, uh, a greater global positive impact, uh, for the industry with, with a much stronger focus on sustainability, a much stronger focus on local communities and, and how we can impact them. So this really gave us a great opportunity to do that, but it all boils down to relationships, Bob, as you know, and we're so fortunate in the industry to have so many good friends like yourself, who really support tourism cares through thick and thin. And that's was obviously tested during that period of time. And we were so fortunate that there were many who, whether they could contribute at the same level, still continue to contribute to tourism cares. So we managed, it was a struggle, but we managed, but had it not been for the strength of our hundred 60 plus member organization and their fervent loyalty and love for tourism cares. Um, yeah, we might not be looking at our 20th anniversary coming up

Bob Gilbert (07:56):

Right there, there definitely is passion within the industry. Uh, and, and that's displayed with the support that tourism cares has from the industry. And I know we were going to have this conversation a couple of weeks back, but you had a pressing engagement with destinations international, where you won the spirit of hospitality award. And so congratulations on that award, if you could talk a little bit about that and the importance of that recognition, and you mentioned before about community based strategies. And I think it's interesting as we look at di, as we look at destinations international in one of their rallying calls is, Hey, as a DMO, you need to ensure that you are engaging with your community that really aligns with one of your key messages, but, but talk to me about the spirit of hospitality and what that represented.

Greg Takehara (08:58):

Well, let me just say, I mean, it's, it's an absolute thrill, anytime you're recognized by your colleagues and your brethren and for us, it was a complete surprise. And, you know, I, I laed destinations international and its leadership with Don and the, their commitments to what they're doing, uh, for the industry, their recent hire of Sophia Hyder Hawk as their chief diversity officer, somebody that we've worked with as an internal consultant to help us on our own, uh, what we call our EBDI journey, because we feel that belonging is such an important component in all of that. And, uh, so we know that the commitment and alignment is there, but when I stand back and I look at the list of prior recipients of that particular award, it, it really just, um, you know, stunds me that we're in that company right now.

Greg Takehara (09:53):

So we're ever grateful for the recognition, but I, I think you raise a very important point that we're at this crossroads right now, many destination marketing organizations are, are taking on a different vernacular and talking about destination stewardship as versus destination marketing. A lot of very well publicized situations, for instance, uh, in Hawaii, um, in other areas where over tourism has had a detrimental effect, you know, in terms of local sentiment, um, and in terms of how the locals are receiving visitors. And as we know, that has a tremendous impact on the travel experience. If, if the arms aren't going to be open wide by the locals, then that in the case of Hawaii, a place I know very well given my parents are from there, that Aloha spirit is not going to be there. And that is the reason why people go there. So I, I think that all of this is coming to play right now. And as we've talked about, the Genesis of tourism cares being in the tour operator, in the travel advisor community for us to have. Now this intersection with destinations is a really important one, and we're, we're really excited to be, you know, deepening our work with DI going forward as well.

Bob Gilbert (11:13):

And it's interesting, you know, you were raised in Hawaii and, you know, your OB obvious familiarity with it. And, and there have been recent changes there from a DMO VCB perspective. Mm-hmm, <affirmative>, I think we also saw it closer to home where there was maybe a resistance to smaller communities, more rural communities being visited by their big brothers and sisters from some of the big metropolitan areas that the cities and because these were places where those folks, the residents of those cities wanted to get outta Dodge and, and they wanted to go to the wide open spaces, which again, you know, caused and to a degree still it's still there that, that little resentment of people coming into their communities and not leaving it the way that they had found it. Mm-hmm <affirmative>, which again is part of the education that I think is driven, or I won't say force, but driven those particular Domos to engage and educate their local community. But I think that's also part of your educational mandate to, to a degree.

Greg Takehara ([12:32](#)):

It very much is, um, we conducted our meaningful travel summit in north lake Tahoe in may putting a, a really strong emphasis on exactly what you just referenced, the whole aspect of leave. No trace. We worked with an organization, a lake conservation organization that pulled over 28,000 pieces of trash out of Lake Tahoe, um, and is taking the time to inventory all of those pieces to get a really better understanding of why the situation became what it, what it had gotten to, and, you know, how we can create some really strong action to ensure that that doesn't become the case going forward. But a lot of it is you mentioned, is driven by local sentiment and, and driven by the fact that there is a bit of resentment. Um, you're, you're talking about a community where the eco balance is very fragile right now. Um, you're talking about wildfires in that particular area.

Greg Takehara ([13:28](#)):

You're talking about, you know, animals coming in and, you know, obviously feeding in the urban areas and in all different types of situations that, that are escalating in which those things need to be addressed. So to your point, we use this as an educational platform, as an opportunity to be able to put a spotlight on a local community and talk about what those local change makers are doing to address their sustainability challenges. And that's all done in hopes that we can send everybody back from a meaningful travel summit with some inspiration that they can take back to their homes, to their, their own respective organizations and their communities.

Bob Gilbert ([14:10](#)):

And I think that we can also include your relationship with the UN with the United nations and, and some of their policies, but from a global perspective. And I, I know that, um, you from a tourism cares perspective have had programs that have gone overseas, but, you know, if we look at say from a global perspective and we see climate change, it does affect everybody, regardless of your political leaning. I look at the UK for obvious reasons, and look, look at the, um, you know, the drought that they're experiencing, which is, you know, the, the, the worst summer from a heat perspective, uh, they've had for, I, I think since they started counting, you know, we're seeing wildfires in different states over here and other natural disasters, but then that is an opportunity to tell the story. I think that we're all in this together at the end of the day, but can you talk a little bit about some of the work that you are doing with the UN with the United nations, at least some of the adopting and checking the box of some of their programs?

Greg Takehara ([15:20](#)):

Sure. I mean, first of all, I mean, just to comment on what you said, Bob, I, I think, you know, well, enough tourism cares is, is not a political organization. So we don't outline ourselves on any political agenda. I, I think that to your point, you'd really have to be having your blinders on, if you are going to disregard what we're seeing literally on a weekly basis. Now, another place that I'm quite fond of is Las Vegas because my parents, uh, ultimately retired there and resided there since 1995. And, uh, I was just there in between two monsoons that literally flooded the strip over the course of just the last three weeks. That's unprecedented. And again, to not create a nexus and, and take a deeper look at it and say, there's a reason why these things are happening that have to do with climate change.

Greg Takehara ([16:12](#)):

We, as an industry need to turn our focus on, uh, how we are gonna preserve the people and places of travel to help, to ensure that they're going to be there for future generations. With regards to what you

were saying about the United nations. I, I guess you could say our primary work with the United nations. We don't do a lot of what I would call direct work with the United nations, as much as we use the United nations, 17 sustainable development goals as guideposts for the work that we do. Mm-hmm <affirmative> even when we educate on sustainability and we talk about sustainability, we fully understand that sustainability is, is a very broad term encompassing, you know, 17 such goals can be very overwhelming and as such, it's really important for us to really help everybody to kind of pinpoint where their passion is. I think of it no different than, you know, my own personal evolution or organizations evolution is that if you go to a personal place, that's how things get done.

Greg Takehara ([17:14](#)):

It's where people have passion. You talked about the passion that people have for tourism cares. We try to get people to identify with their passion, taking a look at the 17 United nations, sustainable development goals. There's a, a small little video that we love to show, which is the good life goals. And it's a bunch of cartoon characters that, uh, represent those 17 goals. And it's done in a very quick fashion so that you immediately gravitate to what resonates with you. It helps you to kind of find your, your passion points, and that really allows you to then be able to, to start to operationalize sustainability again, be it in your home or at work or within your community. And it's just a great starting point with regards to some of the bigger United nations missions. Certainly the N WTOs work most recently, uh, with regards to, you know, their pronouncements and support of the Glasgow declaration.

Greg Takehara ([18:11](#)):

We're proud to be one of six NGOs that help to form the future of tourism coalition. I look at this again, going back to what I said previously as another one of the great silver linings of the pandemic, but we probably wouldn't had the, had the time to foster the kind of relationships that we did with the other NGOs to be able to form this coalition and to be able to come together in the manner that we have, if not for the pandemic. So we put together 13 guiding principles. One of our NGO, founding members, partners, a travel foundation really took a lead role in authoring, the Glasgow declaration, and were certainly, you know, strong components and supporters of it.

Bob Gilbert ([18:57](#)):

So in terms of the partnerships that, that you've established, um, you announced not too long ago, the partnership to, uh, and you, you spoke to it before about, uh, diversity equity and inclusion and the announcement to partner in guided tours and the experiences market. Can you talk a little bit about that relationship and that partnership?

Greg Takehara ([19:28](#)):

Yeah, I, I think you might be referencing, uh, what we call the pathways. Yes. Project pathways program. That was really the brain child of a particular tour operator who, um, kind of surfaced the concept of helping to create pathways within underrepresented communities, essentially to the travel and tourism industry and in particular to opportunities as tour directors or tour guides. And I think some of that, you know, was really as a result of what we had seen in the aftermath of George Floyd and increased interest in black cultural heritage tours and a full understanding and acknowledgement that the right people should be leading those tours. It should be the black persons who endured that history to tell that story mm-hmm <affirmative>, but how do they find their way to our industry and be able to understand, uh, the viability of those types of opportunities, if we don't open up pathways and, and create a pathway for them.

Greg Takehara (20:37):

And that's where the Genesis of this program came about. There was subsequent partnership now with a number of different tour operators in including the travel corporation and Globes and EF and world strides all coming together to support this particular project where the curriculum is being done by Mitch Bock at the trip school. And we have the support of Leon Burnett. Who's a, a really well known tour director and entrepreneur down in Alabama who helps to do the recruiting, going into those underrepresented communities, kind of spreading the word we had our first ever kind of call it boot camp or tour school for about a dozen individuals. And subsequently many were hired by the, by the tour operators that I just mentioned. And we're excited to expand this into other different communities and just continue to expand awareness to the fact that, uh, there are great opportunities in our industry. And I think that couldn't be more timely given the fact that there's such a workforce challenge that our industry is facing right now, but also because, and you, and I know this, but there's so many people that we know people in C-suite positions who started off as tour directors and tour guides. It's a great way to enter into our industry,

Bob Gilbert (22:00):

You know, and <laugh>, I go back to my, my first job, I was working with a travel agency in London. Um, Thomas Cook that no longer exists <laugh> mm-hmm <affirmative>. And I won't even tell you what my salary was, but I think I own in a day, what I owned in a year back then, but, you know, that was a different era, but I got the travel bug and it was interesting because looking at my journey, I speak a few European languages. I, I loved traveling throughout Europe, whether it was backpacking or whichever way, because it opened my eyes and my mind to what was, uh, what was there in the rest of the world. And I never really intended to come to the us. And then serendipity, I was asked to come out here for a period of time and fell in love with the us because I traveled and it was the places.

Bob Gilbert (22:55):

And it was the people which is part of your mantra. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. And if, if I hadn't have opened up the, the possibilities, then I would never would've come out to the us. I, I would probably still be living in London, but it was that quest to go explore, but it was the people that really made the difference for me. And it was very a word. I know you use a lot, but very meaningful for me because, you know, that was it. That was my baptism. And, you know, have been here ever since, but it was that sense of exploration and discovery and thinking that you are the first person who has walked down this road, or, you know, walked on this trail, but tell me in terms of the education, and that was an education for me, but the educational programs that you put on, because clearly you do webinars and you have your meaningful travel event. I think the next one's coming up in the fall in, uh, in Canada. But if you could talk a little bit about educational webinars and what one would expect, what would be my takeaways from coming to, uh, meaningful travel in, in Canada?

Greg Takehara (24:02):

Sure. And indeed travel is transformative, as we all know. And it's certainly something where, you know, I referenced drinking the Kool-Aid of tourism cares, but I think we all drink the Kool-Aid of, of our industry. And it's very infectious. It's very difficult to, to break away from an industry that really opens our eyes to so much. And you know, now a lot of the focus is on meaningful and responsible travel and that's, that's where we're really trying to create a greater consciousness. And we do that in a number of different ways. We do that through our meaningful travel platform. And again, I, without sounding like a broken record, I think these are the types of things where I can only look at the pandemic and say there

was a silver lining to it in that it allowed us to develop the content for our meaningful travel platform to really set us up, to be able to have a training tool like this.

Greg Takehara ([24:58](#)):

We're extremely thankful to trav pro for providing that platform for us. And we've subsequently have built out new chapters. All of those chapters surround responsible, meaningful travel, call it content. You know, whether that be, uh, a focus on animal welfare or a focus on human trafficking, all aspects of really how we can be much more responsible when we travel, how we can be much more mindful when we travel, going into whole aspects of just being better visitors and being better stewards that goes back to that whole aspect of leaving no trace. And so we talk about, you know, these aspects of over tourism and you know, how we can travel in shoulder seasons and how we can do things that aren't gonna create a burden on the places that we go to. We also talk a little bit more about the types of things that maybe some people when they're traveling, it's not conscious, but they're just, unfortunately not really thinking the whole issue through and that's interactions with animals, for instance, while, while you're traveling or orphanage tourism, that type of thing, which we highly discourage.

Greg Takehara ([26:13](#)):

We have that platform, which is available, um, on our meaningful travel platform on, on our website. And then as you mentioned, we have our summits, which I referenced to summit that we had in may in north lake Tahoe. And we are going to be in Victoria, British Columbia for our next summit, September 28th through 30th. And there we are going to be talking to local change makers, uh, local community sustainability leaders who are going to help and educate and inspire. We are going to, to be talking about how they are meeting their sustainability challenges. And in particular, the intersection also with the indigenous peoples in that area, how they are showing that travel can be a force for good, for those peoples, which often comes with an element of distrust or an element of just simply not having access to the main street marketplace as, as we've all become so accustomed to having very easy access to, mm. So helping social enterprises to become tourism ready and really bringing them into the spotlight. Uh, so those are some of the things that we're gonna do over the course of a couple days in Victoria, British Columbia.

Bob Gilbert ([27:26](#)):

I read that your next meaningful travel summit after that is in Norway in April of next year.

Greg Takehara ([27:34](#)):

That is correct. You have done your homework.

Bob Gilbert ([27:36](#)):

Now. I, I try, you know, Norway, it's a small country. It has a degree of over tourism, not as much as Amsterdam, but certainly they have been trying to be at the forefront or at least put themselves in the frame for regenerative tourism. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. Is that something I, I don't think it is as I won't say popular, but as well, known as sustainable tourism, but regenerative tourism. Is that something that you touch on as an organization?

Greg Takehara ([28:08](#)):

We do. I think we have such a, a large swath within our industry that we cover that we like to keep to sustainability. It isn't that we don't adopt the term regenerative travel, because I think that principle

stands for a, a lot of really strong principles. But I, I think we talk about, as, as I mentioned before, we talk about how we use the United nations 17 sustainable development goals as our guideposts. We're trying to bring people along, but when people talk about regenerative travel, I think that's really indicative of something that's much more circular, something that you give back, um, and you bring it back to the land. And I think there's a lot that we speak to that very much embraces regenerative travel.

Bob Gilbert ([28:57](#)):

Yeah. And that's probably the next step, I guess, but I want to close in, well, number one, encourage people who are listening today to go to [tourism.cares.org](#). If you are not one of the 160 plus members, now's a good time to, to join. And I know that you've opened the program up to the travel agency community. And if you're an individual travel agent, you can join up for under a hundred bucks. And you know, there's some great benefits in doing that. But from a sustainability standpoint, I'm gonna quote your new rebranded site and it's, let's go somewhere good. And we all may be on, on different journeys to sustainable travel, but we're all headed toward the same place. And I, I just wanna thank you, Greg, for taking us on this journey today. Thank you for your time. And I wanna wish you continued success. Thank you very much, Greg.

Greg Takehara ([29:53](#)):

Thank you, Bob.

Bob Gilbert ([29:57](#)):

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