

# Before It Disappears

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QUITO, Ecuador

DENNIS and STACIE WOODS, a married couple from Seattle, choose their vacation destinations based on what they fear is fated to destruction.

This month it was a camping and [kayaking](#) trip around the Galápagos Islands. Last year, it was a stay at a remote lodge in the [Amazon](#), and before that, an ascent of Mount Kilimanjaro.

“We wanted to see the islands this year,” Mr. Woods, a lawyer, said last week in a hotel lobby here, “because we figured they’re only going to get worse.”

The visit to the Amazon was “to try to see it in its natural state before it was turned into a cattle ranch or logged or burned to the ground,” Mr. Woods said. Kilimanjaro was about seeing the sunrise on the highest peak in Africa before the ice cap melts, as some forecasters say it will within the next dozen years.

Next on their list: the Arctic before the ice is gone.

The Woodses are part of a travel trend that Ken Shapiro, the editor in chief of TravelAge West, a magazine for travel agents, calls “the Tourism of Doom.”

“It’s not just about going to an exotic place,” Mr. Shapiro said. “It’s about going someplace they expect will be gone in a generation.”

From the tropics to the ice fields, doom is big business. Quark Expeditions, a leader in arctic travel, doubled capacity for its 2008 season of trips to the northern and southernmost reaches of the planet. Travel agents report clients are increasingly requesting trips to see the melting glaciers of Patagonia, the threatened coral of the Great Barrier Reef, and the eroding atolls of the Maldives, Mr. Shapiro said.

Even the sinking of the Antarctic [cruise](#) ship Explorer, which hit an iceberg last month, has not cooled interest. Other Antarctic tour operators say they have received frantic calls asking for last-minute berths from those who had been scheduled to take future Explorer voyages. Since most trips are already full, would-be paying customers are being turned away.

What these travelers are chasing may be a modern-day version of an old human impulse — to behold an untrammled frontier. Except this time around, instead of being the first to climb a mountain or behold a glacier-fed lake, voyagers like the Woodses are eager to be the ones to see things last.

Almost all these trips are marketed as environmentally aware and eco-sensitive — they are, after all, a grand tour of the devastating effects of [global warming](#). But the travel

industry, some environmentalists say, is preying on the frenzy. This kind of travel, they argue, is hardly green. It's greedy, requiring airplanes and boats as well as new hotels.

However well intentioned, these trip takers may hasten the destruction of the very places they are trying to see. But the environmental debate is hardly settled. What is clear is that appealing to the human ego remains a terrific sales tool for almost any product.

"Doom tourism has been with us for a long time indeed," [Jonathan Raban](#), the travel writer, said by phone from Seattle, his home. "It's about the world being spoiled and the impulse of the tourist industry to sell us on getting there before it is too late, before other people spoil it.

"I'm thinking of the opening up of the West by the railroads aided by unforgivable painters like Albert Bierstadt, who sold that idyllic version of the pristine West populated only by deer and their fauns and picturesque Indians. There was a rush from the East to get there one step before the miners, who were going to spoil it, and before other tourists started trampling it."

Back then, the images were of geysers and antelope-dotted Rocky Mountain sunsets. Now the worried traveler, motivated by promotional Web sites showing images of smiling natives in face paint and flocks of colorful exotic [birds](#), hastens to the vulnerable Amazon. Not that this tourist will be roughing it: bamboo-floored lodges await, where hot showers come courtesy of [solar power](#) and squawking toucans can be viewed from laddered observation towers.

At hundreds of dollars or more a night, people do want hot water and other comforts.

In November, Travel + Leisure magazine came out with a "responsible travel" issue and listed on its cover "13 guilt-free travel deals," No. 5 being an Inkaterra Rain Forest package. For \$497 a person, it included a three-night stay in a cabana on stilts, an excursion to the hotel's private ecological reserve, a boat trip to a native farm and a 30-minute massage at the hotel [spa](#).

A "Green Serengeti package" in Tanzania started at \$836 a night per person, with all drinks "excluding Champagne."

This is all a ruse, said John Stetson, a spokesman for the Will Steger Foundation, an environmental education organization in Minnesota. "[Eco-tourism](#) is more of a term for the marketer," he said. "Many people want to do what's right, so when something is marketed as the right thing, they tend to do that."

But, he says, traveling by jet to see the icebergs contributes to global warming, which makes the icebergs melt faster. "It's hard to fault somebody who wants to see something before it disappears, but it's unfortunate that in their pursuit of doing that, they contribute to the problem," he said.

Advocates of green tourism counter that even carbon-consuming travel can help preserve destinations, as local people learn that there is more economic value in preserving nature for tourists than in farming or timber harvesting, said Lene

Oestergaard, the executive director of the Rainforest Foundation. The organization was founded by [Sting](#) and Trudie Styler in 1989 to help the indigenous people of the world's rain forests protect their environments.

“There are environmentally friendly resorts,” she said. “This is possible.”

Some travel companies have tried to reconcile the conflicting ideas of seeing the planet while also somehow saving it.

Abercrombie & Kent, a luxury travel company, is offering “mission trips” to environmentally sensitive locales. For the Antarctica mission under way now, the 22 participants, who paid \$6,190 each for a 13-day tour, gave an additional \$500 each to Friends of Conservation.

Some of that money helped buy a high-definition video camera, which the tourists will deliver to Palmer Station, an American ecological research center on the Antarctic peninsula, said Pamela Lassers, a spokeswoman for the tour operator. The camera will be used to film the behavior of krill, she said.

Each tourist receives a certificate of participation and a Climate Change Challenge Mission patch.

“For their expedition parka,” publicity materials instruct.

Another mission in October delivered a weather-monitoring station to researchers on Mount Kilimanjaro, Ms. Lassers said.

In a way, these earnest expeditions say much about how the very idea of adventure has changed. Once naturalists like Darwin made sense of a wild world. Explorers like Lewis and Clark sought to map what seemed limitless wilderness. Adventurers like Livingstone and Scott sought to conquer the earth's natural challenges and sometimes died trying.

Over the last half-century, backpackers and other adventurers took a gentler route, beating new paths across Asia, South America and other locales — only to realize years later that some paths had been clear-cut into highways fit for Holiday Inns. There is a Baskin-Robbins in Katmandu, and a strip of five-star hotels in Goa, India.

Those who fancy themselves world travelers are scrambling for something untouched. But what is left to brag about at post-voyage cocktail parties? Traveling to India was common by the late 1990s. By 2003, everyone had to rush to dance the tango in Buenos Aires. Moon shots are not yet bookable on Orbitz.

“From where I sit,” said Nancy Novogrod, the editor of Travel + Leisure, “traveling to Mongolia now is almost cliché. Last summer, it seemed like everybody was going to Mongolia. The bar keeps getting higher.”

But are there any thrills left?

No one is yet offering an Antarctic trip in which tourists will be allowed to kill and eat sled dogs, as [Ernest Shackleton](#) did in desperation on his 1914-16 expedition. For now, travelers to the icy reaches must satisfy themselves with smaller diversions.

Everen T. Brown, a photographer from Salt Lake City, paid Quark Expeditions about \$22,000 to be one of the 300 people it leads to the North Pole annually on icebreakers.

“You hear so much about global warming, you almost expect that when you get to the North Pole, there will be nothing there,” Mr. Brown said. “But there still is ice there.”

At the pole, tour leaders plant a sign and have a ceremony with colorful flags, followed by a picnic lunch on the ice and, for the truly intrepid, a tethered plunge into the freezing deep.

“We have this romanticized view of what the North Pole is,” said Mr. Brown, who posted a panoramic photo of the pole on his Web site [360atlas.com](#). “And then there’s the reality. It’s cold. It’s stark. Santa Claus wasn’t waiting to greet us.”