



SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP CASE STUDIES

Intrepid Travel: Certified B Corporation



SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP BY INTREPID TRAVEL: CERTIFIED B CORPORATION



In 2018, Intrepid Travel completed the rigorous process to become a Certified B Corporation (B Corp). B Corp is a defined business classification that balances purpose and profit, adopting a set of standards to promote social and sustainability goals. Highlighting the positive impact of its own journey toward B Corp status, Intrepid states, “We believe that our whole business can be a force for good.”

IDEA IN BRIEF

- Identifying as a B Corporation (B Corp) has helped Intrepid Travel guide the business to meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency and legal accountability.
- The ‘B’ standing for ‘beneficial’, a B Corp is a defined business classification that balances purpose and profit. Becoming a certified B Corp is helping the company to be better and do better – integrating the values, culture, processes and high standards put in place by its founders and leaders at all levels.
- Intrepid’s certified B Corp status entailed external, independent assessment of its interactions with its workers, customers, community and the environment. The B Corp status is not specific for the travel sector; rather it brings Intrepid alongside global brands across all sectors.
- In setting out on its own journey towards B Corp status in 2015, Intrepid adopted a set of external pressures and standards that encourage the company to continue working towards its social and sustainability goals.

INTRODUCTION

Since its founding in 1989, the tour operator Intrepid Group Limited (the holding company of Intrepid Travel) has prioritised **responsible tourism**, positioning human rights, wildlife conservation, and environmental sustainability at the core of its business model. In 2018, Intrepid completed the rigorous process to become a Certified B Corporation, making it the largest B Corp travel company in the world.

Interviewed for the case study, **Geoff Manchester, Co-Founder and Director of Intrepid Travel**, explained how his own backpacking days and love of travel inspired him and his partner to create immersive experiences for others. Seeking to capture the adventure of backpacking but supported by a group leader and the camaraderie of a travel group, Intrepid began by offering adventures to backpacker destinations like Southeast Asia. Geoff Manchester described how the philosophy of a B Corp was there from the beginning, recognising that in taking people travelling into developing countries the company also wanted to give something back – embracing the concept of ‘responsible travel’ from the start. Adopting a set of external pressures and standards that would influence the company to continue work towards its social and sustainability goals¹, Intrepid states, “We believe that our whole business can be a force for good.”

Setting out on its own journey towards B Corp status in 2015, Intrepid analysed its entire business and honed in on two key areas. Interviewed for the case study, **Intrepid’s Chief Executive Officer James Thornton** says, “We decided to focus on growing the market for sustainable, experience-rich travel and we wanted to operate a business that balanced purpose and profitability²”. Over the next three years, the company and its 23 worldwide legal entities at that time underwent the rigorous process required to secure certification. This is a clear example of sustainability leadership in action.

ABOUT B CORP

In 2006, **US-based non-profit B Lab**, created a new certification system to help businesses define themselves as socially and environmentally responsible. If successful, a company would become a **certified B Corp**, the 'B' standing for **'beneficial'**. B Corp is a defined business classification that balances purpose and profit³, embracing business as a force for good. A company seeking certified B corps status must complete a detailed process that relies on an **assessment** of its interaction with its workers, customers, community and the environment. The company needs to meet high standards for social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability. It also has to be able to show that it has integrated stakeholder considerations into organisational governance. A verification and assessment process undertaken by the non-profit B Lab, together with an annual fee based on a company's yearly revenue, completes the process. As the assessment uses a sliding scale, there is always room for improvement in any company's score.



In a now famous essay for The New York Times, Milton Friedman introduced "A Friedman Doctrine: The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase Its Profits"⁴, where he argued that a company has no social responsibility to the public or society; its only responsibility is to its shareholders. This ushered in a new era of shareholder primacy that would dominate the way companies were run for almost half a century, often with little regard for the planet or for people. The U.S. Business Roundtable's revised 'Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation' redefined corporate purpose as serving society and all of its stakeholders – a radical departure from shareholder primacy⁵. The World Economic Forum's Davos Manifesto 2020 includes a similar list of goals and stakeholders that business must serve⁶. Society's expectations for business are rising – consumers want to know what the companies they engage with are doing for, with, and to the world⁷. The B Corp process is a consistent and objective **framework** set up as a counterweight to shareholder dominance.

There are now more than 3,585 certified B corps worldwide in 74 countries⁸. Examples of B Corps include global brands such as Patagonia, Natura &Co, Abel & Cole and Eileen Fisher⁹; the number is growing as shareholders, employees and consumers seek out companies with a proven positive impact. The growth of the B Corp movement and its wider influence on business signals a **paradigm shift**, as shareholders, employees and consumers increasingly demand that social and environmental performance are weighted alongside a corporation's bottom line. However, a commitment to social and environmental performance does not mean that businesses should focus on positive impact at the expense of their bottom line. The notion of ethics versus profit is a false dichotomy; companies do not have to choose between the two. This is particularly true as the world faces the profound challenges of the climate emergency, extremes of social injustice, as highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement, and the coronavirus pandemic.

B CORP STATUS

Intrepid's B Impact Report and Impact Scores (see Figure 1) reveal how the company is advancing sustainability, but not at the expense of profits. This 'both/and leadership'¹⁰, reflects the view that businesses can operate in a way that is 'both' sustainable 'and' profitable, rejecting the idea that making money and improving the world are conflicting goals. **Interviewed for the case, CEO James Thornton** said, **"We don't shy away from being commercially successful – it's not about shareholder 'bad' and NGO 'good' – rather it's about purpose and profit in balance."** Instead of thinking of business decisions as trade-offs between corporate gain and public good, these motivational drivers are held in a state of dynamic tension – they are not two opposite sides of an equation, they are integrated. Intrepid knows that a business cannot operate on a dead or dying planet, so its leaders are able to read the planet as well as the balance sheet¹¹.

B Impact Report

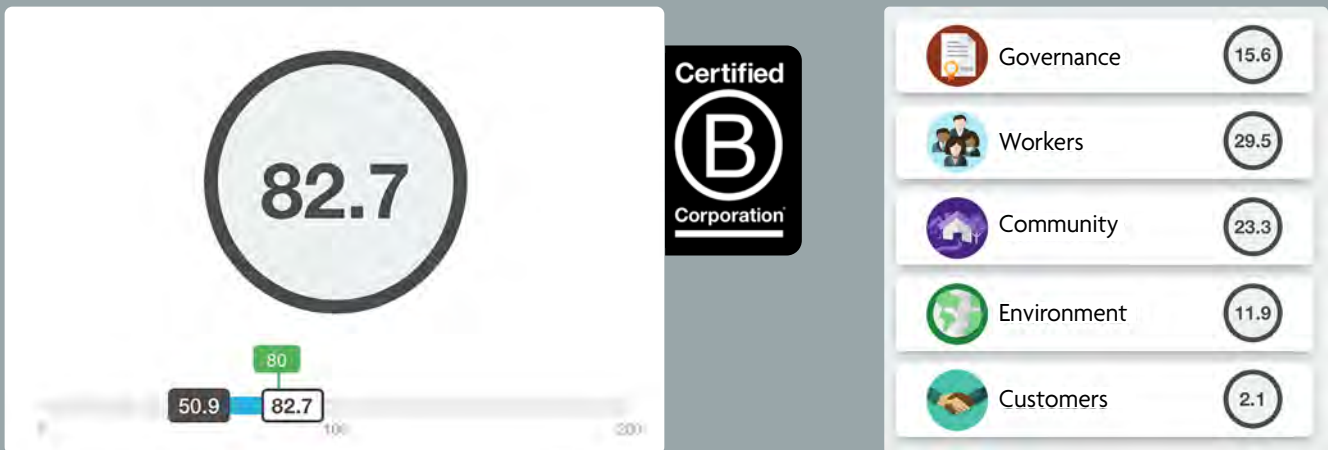


Intrepid Group Ltd
 Global adventure tour operator,
 local destination management
 companies.

Certified Since: June 2018
 Location: Melbourne, Victoria,
 Australia
 Sector: Service with Minor
 Environmental Footprint

WWW.INTREPIDGROUP.TRAVEL

Overall B Impact Score



The B Impact Scores are being compared against all businesses that have completed the B Impact Assessment

Figure 1. B Impact Report: Overall B Impact Score¹

¹To certify as a B Corp, a company must achieve a minimum verified score of 80 points on the B Impact Assessment. The B Impact Assessment asks questions about how the day-to-day operations of a company create positive impact for the company’s workers, community, and environment. Additionally, companies can earn further points if their overall business model can be shown to create positive social and environmental impact as well, qualifying the company for specific Impact Business Model points. The non-profit B Lab. verifies scores for Certified B Corporations.

<https://bcorporation.net/directory/intrepid-group-ltd>

IMPACT OF B CORP STATUS ON INTREPID

Certified B Corps are businesses that meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose. As a B Corp, Intrepid is part of a global movement of people using businesses as a force for good, committed to benefitting people and the planet. **Geoff Manchester, Co-Founder and Director of Intrepid Travel**, said when interviewed for the case, “The accreditation process was a very positive shared experience. Employees adopted it enthusiastically.” He reflected on a recent hire who had sought them out because of their B Corp status. He was clear that becoming a B Corp was a way of protecting their mission as a company, protecting its values beyond the founders.

Not only did the B Corp certification process acknowledge what Intrepid had done, it also encouraged them to set higher performance standards and drive up the quality of their governance process. **Geoff Manchester** said, “It made us spend efforts in places we may not have done, and we did so in a more determined way to the benefit of the business.” For example, they did not do so well in working with women- and minority-owned businesses, so they made a conscious effort to find out who was behind the businesses they worked with and improved this area of their work. Intrepid reflected on its journey towards B Corp status and identified key areas advanced by certification of the business, notably¹²:

- **Intrepid declared a climate emergency**

In January 2020, Intrepid declared a climate emergency alongside other organisations in the Travel & Tourism sector¹³. Its commitment accompanied a public plan to continue measuring all of its emissions, offsetting 125% in 2020, transitioning to 100% renewable energy, and decarbonising the entire business, including trips and its offices.

- **Intrepid set out to become climate positive**

Carbon neutral since 2010, Intrepid set a new target in 2019 to become climate positive, i.e., removing more carbon from the atmosphere than it creates. Intrepid purchases carbon credits in renewable energy projects, e.g. wind turbine farms in India and Turkey, land-burning projects in Australia’s Northern Territory, and reforestation in Malaysian Borneo.

- **Intrepid committed to plant over 88,000 trees**

In partnership with Ecologi and The Intrepid Foundation, its customers can offset their own carbon emissions¹⁴. Every tree planted is matched through its partner the Eden Reforestation Projects. Travelers who book any Intrepid 18 to 29s adventure have 50 trees planted on their behalf in the ‘Intrepid Forest’ site in Kenya’s Kijabe Forest, a former eucalyptus plantation deforested for over 15 years.

- **Intrepid supported production of a documentary film**

Intrepid supported the production of the documentary film ‘2040’¹⁵ that explores how global warming might be reversed by making changes now to agriculture, education, sustainability and economics.

- **Intrepid champions gender equality**

As part of its journey toward B Corp accreditation, Intrepid set and met its goal to double the number of its female leaders around the world by 2019. It now plans to employ more female porters in trekking destinations like Peru and Nepal and support more female-owned businesses through its on-ground operations teams and via The Intrepid Foundation. It also introduced women-only expeditions, focusing on breaking down cultural barriers, and creating accessible immersive local experiences.

- **Intrepid embraced activism**

On September 20, 2019, Intrepid joined other B Corps supporting the Global Climate Strike¹⁶. It published its second modern slavery statement and became a steering committee member of Rethink Orphanages¹⁷ supporting this group to advocate for an end to ‘voluntourism’ linked to orphanages.

INTREPID TRAVEL'S SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Intrepid's commitment to **balancing profit and purpose**, was made official in 2018 when it became a certified B Corp¹⁸. This status brings with it public accountability of the company's expressed purpose, to use travel as a force for good in the world. The B Corp status is not specific for the travel sector; rather it brings Intrepid alongside **global brands** such as Patagonia and Natura & Co.

Intrepid focus on **responsible tourism** extends beyond environmental sustainability and addresses societal health and wellbeing. For example, its 2019 Reconciliation Action Plan is a commitment to "actively partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities, and organisations...training local guides, sourcing goods from more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander providers, and incorporating more First Nations-owned organisations into...current itineraries."¹⁹ Recognising some orphanages around the world are alleged to use income from tourism and visitors to traffic and enslave at-risk youth, Intrepid stopped orphanage tourism by its company²⁰. In collaboration with the World Animal Protection, the company banned elephant riding on all of its itineraries in 2014^{21,22}; since then, over 200 travel companies have done the same. Intrepid is contributing to fulfilment of the **United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals**^{23, 24}(SDGs), addressing poverty, gender equality, and tackling inequalities.

With 21st-century leaders operating in an environment defined by complexity and change²⁵, rather than seeking to minimise or ignore complexity, Intrepid is using sustainability to help navigate uncertainty. Unlike the old Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) model that views social good as an add-on that is positive but separate from business strategy²⁶, Intrepid's B Corp status is helping shape a new social contract, driving value creation for the business and for the betterment of society at its destinations and more widely. Sustainability is therefore a multiplier, capturing the value of synergies among committed people and helping drive top-line growth and bottom-line profit.

As demands for social accountability rise, so too do demands on leaders. The new leadership imperative includes a focus on boosting transparency, displaying empathy and creating meaning²⁷. These leadership features fit well with the B Corp movement. CEO James Thornton explains that, "As a company, you are incredibly open and transparent. That means talking about the good things, but it also means highlighting what you don't do so well and the plan you're going to put in place to improve."²⁸ Connecting people around the B Corp agenda empowers people, and never more so than in situations characterised by high degrees of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity – so-called VUCA conditions. Intrepid understands that value is held in the emergent outcomes of a complex system²⁹ and this aligns with a global shared purpose³⁰. Some examples of Intrepid's **sustainability leadership** in action include:

- Intrepid's active focus on **child protection**³¹, namely helping to prevent violence, exploitation and abuse against children including commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking, child labor and harmful traditional practices. Some children are more vulnerable to harm, including those living in poverty, in areas of high tourism volume and those without parental care. The Intrepid Group recognises that exposure to tourism has the capacity to increase the risk of harm to children and understands its responsibility and obligation to do no harm in the places where it operates.
- Intrepid's emphasis on **equality, diversity, and inclusion**. Intrepid Group, which includes Intrepid Travel, works with more than 2,000 staff and leaders from about 80 nationalities based in more than 40 offices all over the world³². It recognises that strength comes through differences and that the most diverse teams create the best results. Seeking to be a place where everyone has the freedom to be themselves – locals, leaders and travellers alike – the company strives to view each stakeholder as a complex individual with many different values and attributes. Around 65% of Intrepid's travellers are female, mirroring the fact that 60% of its global staff are women. When it set a goal in 2017 to increase the number of women leaders two-fold, it had 154 female leaders around the world. It reached its goal in 2019, and by the start of 2020 had 342 female leaders, globally.
- **The Intrepid Foundation**, established in 2002, is the not-for-profit arm of Intrepid Group helping travellers give back to the places they visit³³. It has raised more than AU\$7.5 million for over 125 organisations around the world with Intrepid

Travel matching dollar for dollar customer donations and covering all administration fees. From empowering vulnerable youth to helping refugees get back on their feet, the Foundation supports life-changing projects that make places better to travel to and live in. B Corp status forces companies to look deeply at their operations, asking the hard questions, examining the resiliency of their supply chain, with credits for localisation.

CONCLUSIONS

Societal interests and anxiety about the future of the planet and human systems has been increasing exponentially, moving from the domain of niche interest groups to mainstream consciousness and the newsworthy. Rather than a sole focus on increasing shareholder value, this is now coupled with social and environmental concerns – creating a more ethical business sector. The Certified B Corporation, the B Corp, focuses on for-profit businesses and leaders and how they can be a force for good.

Identifying as a B Corp has helped Intrepid Travel guide the business to meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency and legal accountability. It is moving the company to be better and do better – integrating the values, culture, processes and high standards put in place by the founders and leaders at every level.

There is a palpable sense of community among B Corp companies as value-aligned businesses. A movement, where people know there is a better way to conduct business – better for the world and her people³⁴. Certification is a stamp of approval that the business is benefitting customers, employees, environment and shareholders. CEO James Thornton believes, “All of those things can work together in unison and not be at the expense of each other. That’s going to be the way forward for businesses.”³⁵

Business plays a major role in society and can help guide us towards a better, more equitable future. B Corps commit to putting social benefits, the rights of workers, community impact, and environmental stewardship on an equal footing with financial shareholders. Doing good and doing well by doing good is possible – with B Corps a blueprint for how business can be both successful and a force for good. B Corps are redefining the corporate purpose and the B Corp movement is leading the way to a more resilient economy and society. Leadership of B Corps can drive meaningful business action to help achieve the SDGs. Adopting a mindset of sustainability is a way to connect economic and social activities with sustainable development, with the B Corp movement a powerful means to this end.

Given Intrepid Travel is privately held, while subject to market pressures, it is ultimately free to make business decisions it deems responsible and worthwhile over the longer term. Its decision in 2013 to explore becoming a B Corp, the launch of its plan in 2015 and ultimate certification in 2018 is a journey toward external accountability and fellowship with the global B Corp community. Turning words into action, Intrepid has engaged its staff, suppliers and customers to be part of its sustainability agenda and pursuit of responsible travel, catalysing change on the ground. Going forward, CEO James Thornton is now considering how the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic will influence how we travel, and believes, “Travel can be clean and sustainable, and it can build stronger, kinder, more resilient communities and environments. Travel can – and should – be regenerative, to give back more than it takes.”³⁶

Intrepid Travel has come a long way from humble beginnings in 1989, when the company’s founders created a style of travel that could benefit both travelers and the places and people they visit. In fact, they began donating to communities before Intrepid was making any money. Now the world’s largest adventure travel company, the Intrepid Group is a collection of brands that together offers more than 3,000 trips in more than 120 countries and on every continent³⁷. Independently owned by the original founders of Intrepid Travel, the Intrepid Group is united by that same vision to change the way people see the world.

The Intrepid Group matches donations to The Intrepid Foundation dollar-for-dollar, providing a way for brands and travelers to support the places and people they visit. From the decision to pursue B Corp status, the journey towards it, certification and its maintenance have all exerted positive impacts on Intrepid. It has helped embed founder values into the business for the long-term and enabled Intrepid to articulate its purpose in a global community of businesses benefitting all stakeholders.

Highlighting Intrepid's sustainability leadership as a Harvard case study is not about making the case for exceptionalism – rather it seeks to identify key strategic actions by leaders at all levels that enable sustainability relevant to the global Travel & Tourism sector. Intrepid wants its businesses to serve the health of the natural and social systems on which we all depend³⁸.



In 2018, Intrepid Travel completed the rigorous process to become a Certified B Corporation (B Corp), adopting a set of external pressures and standards that would influence the company to continue work towards its social and sustainability goals. Highlighting the positive impact of its own journey toward B Corp status, intrepid states, “We believe that our whole business can be a force for good.”

Intrepid Travel has come a long way from humble beginnings in 1989, when the company's founders created a style of travel that could benefit both travellers and the places and people they visit. In fact, their first business plan included donations to communities before Intrepid was making any money. Now the world's largest adventure travel company, the Intrepid Group is a collection of brands that together, offer more than 3,000 trips in more than 120 countries and on every continent. Intrepid Group Limited has always prioritised responsible tourism, positioning human rights, wildlife conservation, and environmental sustainability at the core of their business model. In 2018, Intrepid completed the rigorous process to become a Certified B Corporation (B Corp), making it the largest Certified B Corp travel company in the world.

In highlighting Intrepid's sustainability leadership as a Harvard case study, it is not about making the case for exceptionalism – rather it focuses on identifying key strategic actions by leaders at all levels to enable adoption across the Travel & Tourism sector.

Endnotes

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NOTE: Interviews were conducted between December 2019 and June 2020



The World Travel & Tourism Council is the global authority on the economic and social contribution of Travel & Tourism. WTTC promotes sustainable growth for the Travel & Tourism sector, working with governments and international institutions to create jobs, to drive exports and to generate prosperity. Council Members are the Chairs, Presidents and Chief Executives of the world's leading private sector Travel & Tourism businesses.

Together with Oxford Economics, WTTC produces annual research that shows Travel & Tourism to be one of the world's largest sectors, supporting 330 million jobs and generating 10.3% of global GDP in 2019. Comprehensive reports quantify, compare and forecast the economic impact of Travel & Tourism on 185 economies around the world. In addition to individual country fact sheets, and fuller country reports, WTTC produces a world report highlighting global trends and 25 further reports that focus on regions, sub-regions and economic and geographic groups.

To download reports or data, please visit **www.wttc.org**



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