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New Kind of Guest Visiting

State May Create Ecotourism Division

By POLLY SUMMAR
Journal Staff Writer

In a roomful of people who make their living from tourism, the possibility of having a New Mexico Ecotourism Division was clearly exciting.

"Ecotourism is one of fastest-growing segments of the tourism industry," said Mike Cerletti, secretary of the state Tourism Department, at a

Monday night cocktail party to introduce the idea.

"Right now, it's a concept," he added, saying that he is asking the Legislature to allocate \$500,000 to make it reality. Cerletti said he believes an Ecotourism Division could benefit the state's rural communities located next to popular wilderness areas.

So how is this different from camping, hiking or going to Indian dances, activities already popular among tourists? The department presented its definition of ecotourism: "A

nature-based form of specialty travel defined as 'responsible travel' to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local community."

Jennifer Hoffman, deputy Tourism secretary, said two of New Mexico's most popular aspects with tourists are its scenic beauty and rich cultural heritage. "Our mission is to promote and preserve New Mexico," said Hoffman. "We want to bring tourists who want a hands-on experi-

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EDDIE MOORE/JOURNAL

Peshawn Bread, 12, with the Legend's Native Dancers, performs Thursday evening at the Inn and Spa at Loretto.



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A potential attraction for ecotourists could be the ancient cave dwellings at Bandelier National Monument, being explored earlier this month by David Rice, top, and Louise Bennett of North Carolina.

New Kind of Visitor

Ecotourist Enjoys Nature-Based Traveling, Giving Back to Areas

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ence and then want to come back."

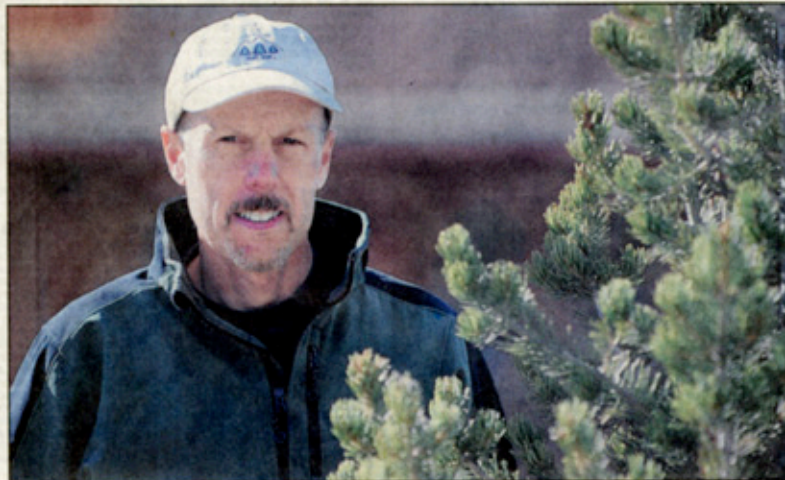
Establishing an Ecotourism Division would allow small businesses offering ecotourism experiences to fall under a larger banner, said Hoffman, and be part of a bigger "P.R. machine."

In a presentation by Hoffman, images of an upscale lodge nestled at the base of mountains brought a number of questions afterward: "Is that here in New Mexico?" "Could we have something like that in New Mexico?"

The photographs were actually taken in Namibia, in Africa, but Hoffman said studies show that if people are driving into the wilderness, "you can't then ask them to drive 400 miles back to a hotel room."

Hoffman said tourism research also shows that "ecotourists stay longer, spend more money and want to give back" to communities they visit. Ecotourists, she said, "don't want to go in and snap some photos, buy a \$5 curio and leave."

Some concerns were raised about being sensitive to indig-



Owen Perillo, chief adventure officer for Santa Fe Mountain Adventures, says more efforts should be made to promote New Mexico's natural beauty.

enous people, and Hoffman said that, if the funding comes through, the Tourism Department plans to hire an ecotourism consultant who will be sensitive to those issues.

"New Mexico was one of the first tourism departments to start an Indian tourism office" in the early '90s, said Cerletti.

Owen Perillo, "chief adven-

ture officer" of Santa Fe Mountain Adventures, a company that puts together outdoor adventures, said he's optimistic about the new division. "We really don't have any galvanizing efforts to promote New Mexico's natural beauty," Perillo said. "This is a way to distinguish New Mexico as a leader."

In the face of a difficult economy, ecotourism maintains customers, Perillo said. "People re-evaluate how to spend their vacation time What are we really going to remember and pass on?" he said, adding that the conclusion they usually come to is something experiential and hands-on.