

## Earth River Expeditions

by Josh Karzen  
Spring 2001

Thirty years ago, on a bike trip through Idaho, a 16-year-old boy named Eric Hertz met a river runner who invited him to run the Rogue River in Oregon. Hertz gladly accepted. The trip hooked Hertz on river running for life. He continued to return to Idaho during the summers, working on the Middle Fork of the Salmon. A steady career of river running followed and in 1990 Hertz' commitment culminated in the creation of Earth River Expeditions. Soon after starting Earth River Expeditions, Hertz brought on Robert Currie, a native Chilean, as his partner. The two made a handshake deal that endures to this day, combining their talents to tackle the daunting challenges of international expeditions.

As a global outfitter, with trips offered on some of the world's most wild and remote rivers, Earth River Expeditions was a natural pursuit for Hertz. The list of trips offered reads like a whitewater wish list: the Bio Bio (Chile), Upper Yangtze/ Great Bend of the Yangtze (China), Primrose (Yukon), Magpie and Great Whale (Quebec), Talkeetna (Alaska), Colca (Peru), Po Tsangpo (China), and Futaleufu (Chile). The inspiration behind Earth River Expeditions was fueled in large part by a desire to protect rivers of the world. Hertz wanted to facilitate "on the ground conservation." Early on, Earth River Expeditions established a relationship with the Audubon Society, and created the Earth River Fund. The fund was designed, says Hertz, "to increase awareness of the danger to the world's rivers", and monies raised have gone to protect the Great Whale, Bio Bio, and Futaleufu, to name a few. Good intentions notwithstanding, Earth River Expeditions is a commercial outfitter, and thus Hertz needed a business model which lived up to its aspirations. Setting out to commercially run the world's most remote and wild rivers, Hertz focused on some core themes to guide Earth River Expeditions; experience, safety, and trust. Guided by these principals, Earth River Expeditions has enjoyed steady growth throughout the past ten years. "About 30 percent per year," says Hertz.

The first year they took only three clients down one river, the Futaleufu. Last year 250 clients, and this year 300 will partake in the Earth River experience.

The key to any successful business is its employees, and Earth River Expeditions is no different. The stakes of the game are raised on rivers like the Colca, so the skill of the players must be raised accordingly. Calm heads, tamed egos, and a team mentality are what Earth River Expeditions looks for in a guide. A quality resume and solid references are standard also,

but the quality most sought is a respectful, professional attitude. With this in mind, Earth River Expeditions will train prospective guides first on one of their runs. Over time, as the guide learns the river, Earth River Expeditions will make the call whether the chemistry is right to bring him on as an employee. According to Hertz. "The lowest ego will make for the best guide for Earth River Expeditions."

The importance of good chemistry is accentuated by the fact that Earth River Expeditions relies heavily on return clients and word-of-mouth marketing. A negative experience can directly impact future sales. Further, Hertz prefers guide/client relationships to evolve with mutual respect, keeping over-the-top schmoozing to a minimum. As a result of these criteria, Earth River Expeditions brings a slightly older and wiser crew of guides, averaging nearly twenty years of experience on the worlds most respected rivers.

The pursuit of quality goes beyond personnel. Hertz also emphasizes innovative equipment and client preparation. By teaming up with Sotar to create custom boats for big water, Hertz feels they've hedged their bet. Another innovation has been the design of a safety cataraft with a front deck, the preferred rescue vehicle of Earth River Expeditions. On all their runs, except the narrow Colca, Earth River relies exclusively on catarafts for rescues, using their agility and capacity to maximize effectiveness. "Kayakers too often end up as cheerleaders," says Hertz. On the client side, there is a physical standard expected of all potential rafters. Further, for some rivers, there is a state-of-mind waiver. When presented with such a waiver many clients change their minds, which Hertz considers sound preventative medicine. For those who make it to the put in, a one-day guide school is performed. Here clients go over rescue techniques, swimming, flipping, and other scenarios they may encounter on the river. Having selected the most qualified guides, customized both passenger and rafts and rescue catarafts, and educated the clients, Earth River Expeditions puts on the river with confidence that all assurances for safety have been taken.

Offering international trips on remote whitewater often means dealing with layers of foreign government bureaucracy. Each country, each region and community in that country, has its own red tape to go through. "The key", says Hertz, "is to take things in stride." A good attitude in a time of adversity is often all you have going your way. Further, a negative approach can alienate the powers that be and make things more difficult. Establishing respectful and trusting relationships has been the key to Earth River Expeditions ability to operate in so many countries. Hertz tells of the time when a large sum of money, money for user fees for the Yangtze, was lost in the wire transfer. With thousands of dollars missing, and delicate relations with their Chinese partners at stake, Hertz waited for the situation to play out. In the end, the money was found, and the trust invested in his partners validated. The value of picking quality, trustworthy people as his oversees associates proved vital towards achieving the goal of incredible trips on incredible rivers.