WORLD TOURISM CONFERENCE
- Tourism Success Stories and Shooting Stars-

Shangri-La Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 4-6 June 2007

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION ON

"SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN DEVELOPING THE TOURISM INDUSTRY"

by

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THE WORLD TOURISM ORGANIZATION (UNWTO)

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It is no exaggeration to say that the sustainable development of tourism is about the long-term survival of our industry.

On the positive side, as we all know, tourism can enrich people's lives in many different ways – economically, socially, and environmentally. It can support culture, heritage and conservation, and be a major force for international understanding and peace.

However, tourism can also:

➢ Damage fragile ecosystems
➢ Compete for the use of scarce resources, especially land and water.
➢ Exert pressure on host communities and undermine traditional societies.
➢ Contribute to local and global pollution.

Developed without concern for sustainability, tourism arguably contain the seeds of its own destruction. Those who like us are lucky enough to be involved in this exciting industry thus have a major responsibility to recognise the importance of its sustainable development and to act accordingly.

I have been working in the tourism industry for nearly 40 years. I can't claim to be a child of the sixties, but, perhaps more importantly, I was a teenager in that era when, according to folk mythology, concern for the well-being of our planet really took hold. When I joined the British Tourist Authority in 1968, we still had a pioneering certitude that all tourism is beneficial. However we were already being faced with questions about who actually benefits, how to measure such benefits and how to sustain them. In 1971 Sir George Young published his remarkable book "Tourism: Blessing or Blight" – an important early warning shot. But tourism continued to develop at an ever-increasing pace: in 1968 world arrivals numbered under 150 million, today they have surpassed 800 million. Examples of attractions being loved to death steadily multiplied, and Governments and Tourist Boards were obliged to react.

They started with rather vague green exhortations, but by the beginning of the nineties this was already evolving into more modern notions of sustainability. In 1990 the English Tourist Board produced a publication entitled "The Green Light – a Guide to Sustainable Tourism." Encouraging, but after an initial flurry, public interest in such matters seemed to wane, and the travel trade, on which Government Tourist Boards were coming to depend more and more, showed very little interest. Inexorably the original idea started to evolve in more commercial directions – we published a Green Audit Kit which concentrated on trying to persuade hoteliers that they would make more money if they brought in specific environmental improvements. Sustainability shifted from a conservation and preservation focus, to sustainable development, to managed

economic improvement, until some in the industry started to say that its real meaning is quite simply as much continuing profit as possible!

If it had been left entirely to the commercial tourism industry, we would probably not be much further forward today. But we are, thanks to Agenda 21, the remarkable programme which 180 Governments adopted in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit. Agenda 21 provided the first widely supported blueprint for securing the sustainable future of the planet.

To their credit, the World Tourism Organization and the World Travel and Tourism Council saw the opportunity and produced in 1995 a version of Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry. This was linked to Green Globe certification and a new momentum began to develop.

The UN World Tourism Organisation has been actively promoting sustainability ever since the Rio Earth Summit. Awareness creation policy documents, methodological guidelines, planning and management principles and techniques, monitoring instruments and other country-specific activities have been regularly delivered by the Organisation to its Member States and to the international tourism community.

A very interesting recent initiative is the selection of Guilin, in China, one of the world's most spectacular scenic destinations, as the location for UNWTO's first observatory to monitor the sustainable development of tourism. The methodology will gather and analyse information from the "triple bottom line" – social, environmental and economic. A network of similar centres around the world is planned.

Most countries of course declare that they are pursuing, or wish to pursue, policies for 'sustainable tourism'. Nevertheless, there remains a degree of uncertainty over how to put this into practice. Some tourism professionals are still struggling with the concept, while many consumers react to the terminology utilised with a degree of cynicism.

So what is sustainable tourism?

UNWTO's definition is:

'Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.'

Making tourism more sustainable means taking these impacts and needs into account in the planning, development and operation of tourism. It applies equally to tourism in cities, resorts, rural and coastal areas, mountains, and protected areas. It applies to all forms of business and leisure tourism. Sustainability is not just about the green agenda – a majority of hotels for example depend on the business traveller to sustain their futures.

Confusion over the meaning of sustainable tourism has been compounded in some countries by use of the term 'ecotourism' to mean almost the same thing. Indeed, some definitions of Ecotourism make it sound remarkably similar: "Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people."

But eco-tourism is not sustainable tourism.

Ecotourism is just a segment, or product niche, which concentrates on undisturbed natural areas. Nature tourism, rural tourism and cultural tourism can all focus on an eco element, but beach tourism and business travel for example also need to be sustainable. Adventure tourism can feature similar destinations, but if not handled responsibly, it can cause severe ecological damage.

Sustainable tourism is not a discrete or special form of tourism. Rather, all forms of tourism should strive to be more sustainable.

According to UNWTO, sustainable tourism should:

1) Make optimal use of environmental resources, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural resources and biodiversity.
2) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
3) Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

In short:

Sustainable tourism

- ➤ Should not adversely affect the environment
- ➤ Should be acceptable to the community
- ➤ Should be profitable for businesses
- ➤ Should satisfy the visitor

So why do some cynics still believe that sustainable tourism is almost a contradiction in terms?

The most commonly used definition of sustainable **development** is still that given in the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: it is '*a process to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*'

In other words, sustainable development is based on principles of sound husbandry of the world's resources, and on equity in the way those resources are used and in the way in which the benefits obtained from them are distributed.

The movement around the world of 800 million relatively affluent tourists cannot be described as sustainable by these strict standards of global equity. But the need to generate employment and income must be counterbalanced against the impacts which such large numbers of visitors inevitably have.

All visitors are by definition invasive. Inevitably any type of tourism will have some impact on the environment, culture and social structures of the area involved. This can be positive or negative, though the media tends to concentrate on the latter. In any event, the impact can normally be managed through good planning, administration, and training.

It is a mistake to view sustainable tourism as an absolute or finite state. In the same way that complete perfection is unattainable, tourism can never be totally sustainable Our realistic aim must be to move towards more sustainable tourism, ensuring that all forms of tourism activities, operations, establishments, and projects are striving to achieve a higher level of sustainability.

There is clearly considerable scope for this, by reducing tourism's negative impacts and enhancing its positive ones. Tourism, unlike other industries, is able to enhance the cultural and physical environment, as well as to use it for profit. Tourism revenue can help protect and renew a destination's assets.

The sustainable development of tourism should thus be seen as a continuous process of improvement.

And this process is necessarily a complex one, reflecting the nature of our industry, with its myriad of micro-operators and disparate range of consumers, all making individual decisions and buying largely unseen and non essential products.

Some people in the industry believe that these consumers are not yet ready for sustainability and, more importantly, that they are unwilling to pay more for it. Clearly these doubters have not studied the rapidly evolving market for expensive organic food. If people are convinced of the benefits, they are willing to pay. They just need to understand the arguments, and to feel that they are receiving good value for money.

The post-industrial age is continuing to produce ever-increasing numbers of retired, wealthy and sophisticated travellers who are seeking lifestyle experiences and who are much more receptive to sustainable tourism messages.

Research from Europe shows that, the more individuals travel, the more value they place not only on the environmental quality of the destinations they visit but also on the individuality.

There are many positive signs, for example:

➢ 53 per cent of British tourists say they would be prepared to pay more for their holiday in order that workers in the destination could be guaranteed good wages and working conditions. 45 per cent would be prepared to do so to support preservation of the local environment and reverse the negative environmental effects of tourism.
➢ 69 per cent of Danish tourists staying in eco-labelled hotels are willing to pay more for such hotels owing to their environmental designation.
➢ Three-quarters of US travellers feel that it is important that their visits do not damage the environment.

Although there is less evidence that tourists have actually taken action to change their travel and consumption patterns, it is nevertheless clear that levels of public concern about sustainability are increasing.

In response the industry has launched a wide range of initiatives. Examples include a rapidly growing number of ecolabel schemes, the International Hotels Environment Initiative (IHEI), and the Travel Foundation in the UK.

Some tour operators have also been active in embracing sustainability principles. The Tour Operators' Initiative, supported by UNEP, UNESCO and the UNWTO, has members from a number of different countries and has pioneered good sustainability practice, both by tour operators and within the destinations in which they operate.

Clearly concern about sustainability in tourism has been mounting for many years. But now there is a new urgency.

Further massive growth is predicted for tourism between now and 2020, providing excellent opportunities for spreading prosperity but also presenting considerable challenges for the environment and local communities if not well managed.

But the issue which has really ignited the debate and raised the stakes is climate change – now at last recognized as a major global issue, with significant implications for tourism.

Climate change can transform the natural environment that attracts tourists to a destination - eroding coastlines, damaging coral reefs and other sensitive eco-systems, or limiting snowfall in mountain regions, as well as affecting basic services like water supplies.

While physical damage to the environment currently seems limited to certain very obvious and fragile areas, tourism is also of course itself a contributor to global warming, and that is the issue which is now spreading the sustainability imperative to a much wider audience.

Sustainability is the responsibility of all those involved in tourism. Most of the impacts of tourism are the result of actions taken by private sector enterprises and by tourists themselves. However, there is a clear need for governments to take a leading role if truly significant progress is to be achieved.

This is because:

• The tourism industry, as we have seen, is very fragmented. Central co-ordination is required.
• Sustainability relates to areas of public concern—air, water, natural and cultural heritage and the quality of life. Many of the relevant resources are managed by governments.
• Governments have many of the tools that can be used to make a difference—such as the power to make regulations and offer economic incentives, and the resources and institutions to promote good practice.

To illustrate this, I would like to include an example from Egypt, the extraordinary destination in which I am fortunate to be living and working at present.

In the early explosive years of Red Sea growth, the programme of tourism development was driven by visitor numbers and accommodation capacity. However, the Tourism Development Authority or TDA has now radically rethought its approach to support sustainability as it relates to key environments and sensitive resources, including ecology, culture and people.

This transformation has been achieved largely thanks to the Red Sea Sustainable Tourism Initiative, which is based on a bi-lateral agreement between the USA and Egypt.

An important component of this initiative was the preparation of a detailed plan for one of the coastal sectors. This was followed by a Land Use Management Plan, including a Sensitivity Map which rates resources in terms of their resilience to the impacts of use.

The resulting new regulations govern both development and conservation activities. For the first time in Egypt, planning regulations are now based on strict sustainability criteria, while the environmental monitoring capabilities of the TDA have been significantly enhanced.

The TDA's policy in dealing with developers is to encourage rather than discourage, provide incentives rather than penalise, and guide rather than command. To this end, a set of economic instruments has been developed, including:

• Use of environmental criteria in the competitive land award process.
• Customs duty exemption and preferential financing for clean technologies.
• Promotion of environmental certification and awards of excellence.
• TDA criteria, standards and incentives for solid waste management.

This type of comprehensive approach to the planning and management of sensitive coastal areas, involving zoning and the introduction of a range of instruments to encourage developers and operators to embrace sustainability, provides an excellent model which will helpfully help avoid repeating some of the mistakes perpetrated on many costas in the past.

Governments and official agencies do have the means and the responsibility to make that crucial difference on which the long-term future of our industry depends. They must provide the environment that enables and encourages the private sector, tourists and other stakeholders to respond.

But Governments of course also have many other stakeholders, which tend to pull them in conflicting directions. We cannot assume that Governments will always take the side of tourism. The industry must make itself heard and play a very active role in the sustainability process.

It is not too late – the damage is not irreversible and the desire to succeed is strong.

Sir Richard Branson, CEO of Virgin Atlantic Airways, recently pledged to invest all his income from Virgin transport companies over the next few years, estimated to be some

$3 billion, in renewable energy. He does not believe that the curtailment of travel will be necessary to address global warming. He thinks we have the technology, ingenuity and resources to produce technical solutions.

However he does warn that we need to address the sustainability issues urgently, both those created by travel and those generated at the destinations themselves, "before others do it for us".

If we don't, to use a quaint old English expression, we risk "killing the goose which lays the golden eggs".

Thank you for your attention.