

Assisi Nature Council

Sustainable Tourism and the Environment
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Connect

The 7th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development focused on tourism and subsequently work programmes on sustainable tourism are being developed. Also the Convention on Biological Diversity is embarking on tourism programmes and bilateral and multilateral financial institutions placed tourism high on their priority lists. The UN declared 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism and the World Tourism Organisation adopted a Global Code of Ethics for Tourism at its General Assembly, held in Santiago de Chile, from September 27 until October 1, 1999.

The World Tourism Organization forecasts that there will be 702 million international arrivals in the year 2000, that arrivals will top 1 billion in the year 2010 and that by 2020 international arrivals will reach 1.6 billion – nearly three times the number of international trips made in 1996, which was 592 million.

Travellers of the 21st century will go farther and farther. The Tourism 2020 Vision forecast predicts that by 2020 one out of every three trips will be a long-haul journey to another region of the world. It is expected that China will become a major force in international tourism and the WTO predicts that about 100 million Chinese will take international trips by 2020, thus putting them in fourth place in numbers of travellers after Germany, Japan and the United States. By the same time, China will attract 137 million visitors – 63.5 million overseas visitors travelled to China in 1998 – and thus outrank France as the world's top destination. It is

estimated that during 1999 France will receive a record number of tourists of more than 70 million; in 2007 France hopes to attract 90 million visitors. The key resource for the most popular tourist destinations is the natural environment: coastal resorts, tropical rainforests, wildlife in national parks and alpine ski resorts, all rely on a mixture of natural beauty, good weather and safe conditions to attract holiday-makers. Studies reveal that the criteria for European tourists to choose their holiday destination is landscape and natural environment, followed by climate, the cost of the journey and the historical features of the place to visit. Hence, conserving the ecological integrity and environment is imperative if tourism is to be sustained. The pressure from millions of tourists on water and marine resources, on land and landscape, on wildlife and habitat is enormous and often has devastating impact on the environment and the local population who are increasingly deprived of access to clean water and other natural resources. In some regions, particularly in small island countries, tourism is one of the major reasons for wasting and polluting water: on average one tourist consumes at least 6 times more water than a local resident (if 15 million German holidaymakers saved 100 litres of water per day during a vacation of two weeks, a reduction in water consumption of 63 billion litres per year would be achieved!). Major water wasters and polluters are golf courses: on an island off the west coast of the Malayan peninsula, one 18-hole golf course requires 5,000 cubic meters of water per day. The amount needed annually would supply a village of 20,000 for a year. In many countries, golf has brought heavy ecological and social costs: deforestation, the destruction of bio-diversity and erosion; dispossession of peoples' homes and farms; over-consumption and pollution of water and very high use

of pesticides and fertilisers which threaten local residents, workers, wildlife and the golfers themselves. A survey by the Japanese National Doctors Health Insurance Association has revealed that many golfers, caddies and residents living near a golf course suffer from skin inflammation, disorders of the ear, nose and throat and other respiratory illnesses. Medical doctors attribute these illnesses to the inhalation of pesticides because up to 90% of the chemicals sprayed on golf courses end up in the air. In some areas in Thailand, diseases emerged which, prior to the construction of golf courses, had not been known.

In some regions, golf courses have depleted water supply, agricultural production has come to a halt, peasants have become impoverished and forced to migrate to urban areas in search of employment. Golf courses take large amounts of land. It is estimated that each year world wide up to 5,000 hectares of forest are cut to clear land for golf courses.

Very often, the construction of golf courses forms an integral part of a comprehensive tourism project. Adjacent to the golf course, condominiums and/or hotels are built, very often also a marina, an airport and a casino. Studies have shown that such a complex not only has touristic objectives but is often connected to drugtrafficking and money-laundering. Even the US State Department has emphasised the link between tourism, money-laundering and offshore banking.

Cruise ships are a major cause for pollution in the Caribbean, destroying maritime life and coral reefs by releasing waste into the ocean. Recently the Royal Caribbean, the world's second largest cruise line was fined a record sum of US\$ 18 million for dumping waste oil and hazardous chemicals into the sea. The company admitted to routinely dumping waste oil from its fleet and that it deliberately dumped into U.S. harbours and coastal areas many other types of pollutants, including hazardous

chemicals from photo processing equipment, dry cleaning shops and printing presses. Some hazardous materials, including toxic solvents from dry cleaning operations, were illegally placed in the garbage aboard the ships. The material was then either incinerated on the ship or dumped in U.S. or foreign ports mixed with ordinary garbage.

It was announced that the Royal Caribbean Cruise reported a profit of US\$ 338 million in 1997, a 93% increase over the previous year. Carnival Corporation's Holland, the biggest cruise company with a turnover of US\$ 3 billion in 1997 made a net profit of US \$836 million, 25% more than in 1996. Both cruise companies have recently been fined millions of dollars for dumping untreated bilge water, oil and other waste into Alaskan waters.

However, the impact of oil and hazardous waste on water, maritime life and coral reefs is devastating and all fines paid for the damage caused by the cruise ships will not revive dead corals.

A recent Greenpeace study on coral reefs – one of the marine world's great natural treasures – predicts that the coral bleaching which dramatically whitened many of the world's reefs last year will escalate rapidly under accepted global climate models and that the damage would wreak havoc in fisheries and tourism, disrupting the economies of many nations.

A WWF study recently published on "Climate Change and its Impacts on Tourism", warned that droughts, rising seas, flash floods, forest fires and diseases could turn profitable destinations into holiday horror stories. The report urges the tourist industry to persuade western industrialised governments to take more concerted action to reduce their nations' carbon dioxide emissions – the main cause of global warming. According to a German researcher the level of emissions resulting from air traffic that contributes to the "green-house" effect is double the level of emissions resulting from ground based traffic.

Annually air travel increases by 5%, and at least half of the passengers travel for leisure.

The need for action and education

If governments, the international community and the tourism industry want to save the world's major tourist destinations, immediate action is required.

Governments and the tourism industry must abide to the principle that environmental

protection is an integral part of tourism development. In order to protect

the environment and mitigate the damages caused by tourism, some countries have decided to take action: The Spanish Island Minorca and the Seychelles will

introduce an eco-tax on tourism. This tax will be around US \$ 12 per person in

Minorca and its revenues are earmarked for the maintenance of national parks and

the restoration of damaged coastline.

Visitors to the Seychelles will have to buy a so-called "gold-card" at a price of 100 \$

which entitles unlimited access to the country; income from this card will be

used for sewage management and protection of fresh water supply.

Only if tourism investors and developers:

a) consider the natural capacity for the regeneration and future productivity of natural resources;

b) recognise the contribution that people and communities, customs and lifestyles, make to the tourism experience and therefore accept that these people must have an equitable share in the economic benefits of tourism;and

c) listen to local people in the tourist destinations, tourism may become sustainable.

Education and awareness raising campaigns at all levels are therefore imperative.

"Environmental education, like mathematics, should be part of the standard educational curriculum", suggests the recently published UNEP report GEO-2000 (Global Environmental Outlook 2000), and recommends that "we must encourage the media to devote as much attention to environmental issues as they do to crime, politics, sport and finance".

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See also:

www.ethicaltraveler.org/news.php

