



## A Statement for World Tourism Day

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**By the Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism, Equations, Acció per un Turisme Responsable – ATR, Echoway, CVESMP, Kabani, Peace for Life, Mouvement Chrétien pour la Paix (Christian Movement for Peace)**

*'Tourism - celebrating diversity'* is the theme chosen by the UN World Tourism Organisation for the 2009 World Tourism Day. It raises many questions despite its superficial truth. Obviously, to thrive tourism needs diversity but the short and long term costs arising from its commercial exploitation have to be faced seriously and honestly.

The world is indeed a diverse place when one considers its peoples, cultures and food, flora and fauna, and the vast variety in natural settings. Tourism is a vehicle that enables visitors to be exposed to these riches, and on the surface, this can be seen as 'celebrating diversity'.

However, ECOT believes that the 2009 World Tourism Day, which this year marks its 30th anniversary, draws attention to the more positive (and utopian?) side of tourism, while choosing to ignore some troubling dimensions of modern tourism. Economically, the tourism industry has benefitted from diversity having marketed it to promote travel and tourism products. Do host communities in tourism destinations have reason to celebrate as well after 30 years of World Tourism Day's?

### *Globalisation or 'Clonalisation'*

Some researchers have documented how dying traditions have been staged to entertain tourists and attract their dollars, or how sacred or religious ceremonies are being performed, like wedding ceremonies for instance, to please the curious in seeking 'authenticity'. Some indigenous peoples have acknowledged that some of their 'representations' have been fake. In such situations one can wonder if tourism is actually celebrating diversity or simply being an agent for the commodification and folklorisation of cultures.

Tourism is supposed to widen our understanding and appreciation of other cultures and ways of life. But nowadays the tourism experience can be very similar whether one is travelling to India, Thailand or Latin America. Differences in language, in people's appearance and in local architecture provide the illusion of a change of scene, but many aspects have become universal: the cell phones, the branded clothing, fast-food restaurants, the shopping malls, the 'muzak', and so on. The hotels have become standardized, and some tourists demand this: to be surrounded by known systems of reference in the comfort zone of a hotel cocoon in a foreign place, which presumably is being visited for a widening of one's education!

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The 'demonstration effect' of tourism – the yearning of host communities, especially younger generations, for the gadgetry, clothing and other items displayed by tourists so as to look like them, and the efforts made to afford these items – which impacts on the community is another factor to consider. Is such 'diversity' to be celebrated?

Therefore tourism, as one of the manifestations of globalisation, offers an interesting paradox. While globalised tourism can be seen as contributing to the homogenisation of cultures, it offers tourists experiences of 'authenticity' witnessed in tourism destinations. Some indigenous traditions now forgotten are sometimes revived and performed for the sake of tourists in the quest for a good photograph.

### Tourism and biodiversity

Consider again the fragile nature of sites like Machu Pichu or the Great Barrier Reef which are now threatened through high volume tourist traffic. It seems legitimate to wonder whether tourism really contributes to preserving biodiversity. While climate change is already taking its toll on the most touristic destinations on the planet, the industry sells 'last visits before disappearance' packages to those doomed places. We are advised that it is now high time to climb on glaciers, to observe polar bears or enjoy the paradise beaches threatened with rises in sea water levels in the next few years. This 'before it is too late' tourism would actually appear to precipitate such a catastrophic situation. There must certainly be a better solution in view of climate change than sending hordes of tourists to witness its effects.

In this regard we refer to a very recent joint press release (04/09/09) between the UNWTO and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), broadly described in its guidelines as 'an international treaty to sustain the *diversity* of life on Earth'. The press release announced the signing of a memorandum of cooperation by which 'both parties will work towards maximising tourism's positive contribution to conserving biodiversity and enhancing the quality of life of local people.' The press release states that 'because tourism and biodiversity are natural allies, the sustainable planning and management of tourism can play a critical role in the conservation of biodiversity.' Such views seem to belong to an utopian world of tourism, as it can also be asserted that tourism can play a critical role in threatening ecologically fragile sites - a plethora of examples are available to illustrate this point. Furthermore, how well are the affected communities such as indigenous peoples represented at high level conversations designed to find solutions and protection for them?

### Eco-tourism

So-called 'ecotourism' has also become extremely fashionable within the tourism industry for promoting certain types of tourism. As more and more people become aware of the need to take care of and protect our planet, the tourism industry has seen the potential of the 'ecotourism' trend to earn more income. But the paradox once again lies in that many 'eco' tourism spots encroach upon indigenous peoples' territories and impinge on their rights.

These projects appear to be 'eco' on paper and on their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports, but examples of abuse have been documented: how can a resort boast its respect for the environment and provide 'ecotourism' activities when its very construction has often implied displacement of local communities who have owned the land for generations and used its resources in a much less harmful way than the tourism industry?

### Community-based tourism (CBT)

The counter to mass tourism is provided by community-based tourism, where local communities manage the projects, keep them on a small scale and share the profits on an equitable basis. While we should be wary of CBT too being subsumed in the jargon of tourism industry advertising, let us keep in mind that its ethos is best suited to developing a tourism respecting and celebrating diversity.

While 'diversity' may provide a basis for a catchy slogan, tourism would be best ensured as a long term, sustainable activity if all stakeholders looked at its issues rigorously.

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(Please also refer to the August-September 2009 issue of Contours which focuses on 'Tourism and Diversity' and is available as printed material and as a PDF file at [office@ecotonline.org](mailto:office@ecotonline.org) Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism, 9/1 Ratanakosin Road, T Watget, Amphur Muang, Chiang Mai 50000, Thailand)

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