



World Tourism Day 2008: A South Perspective

A Statement from the Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism and endorsing agencies for World Tourism Day, September 27 2008

It is commendable that, mindful of the seriousness of the climate change phenomenon, the UNWTO has declared its theme for World Tourism Day in 2008 and 2009 as 'Tourism responding to the challenge of climate change'. Its *Davos Declaration Framework* is a call to action from the UNWTO to the tourism industry to set directions for change in line with concrete plans coherent with the commitments to the Millennium Development Goals. But till now, a response from the industry appears to be minimal.

Climate change is affecting us all - the Global North and the Global South – but the injustice is quite apparent. Carbon emissions of the North are far higher per person than from the Global South. Furthermore, the 'Western' high-energy way of life, including air travel, is considered as a key ingredient in tourism and deeply linked to what is called 'development'.

Unfortunately, the impact of Northern- induced climate change due to 'luxury emissions' from global trade and tourism is far more tangible and visible in the South. Here, people live in more vulnerable settings, and experience greater devastation from the effects of global warming through rising sea levels, drying rivers, more intense storms, droughts, floods, extinction of biodiversity, and in other ways.

Growth is not the answer

It is estimated that global tourism contributes 9% to the GHG emissions worldwide, while the air travel industry remains the major polluter with a contribution of 4 -7%. Other tourism products such as accommodation, entertainment and activities make up the rest.

While its logic appears to be dubious from a South perspective, no carbon emission compensation scheme can ever cope with the impact of the projected volumes of air traffic. But for the tourism industry, driven by free market economics, economic growth and fast returns on (unsustainable) investment are the main approach! It publicly claims that all GHG emissions can be compensated by single renewable energy projects.

The focus on bio fuels for air travel opens up other serious concerns when the use of arable lands is diverted from food to fuel.

The current economic system's attachment to the growth model hurts the poor, the environment and world climate.

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Could growth, based on principles of sustainability and responsible stewardship help to both alleviate poverty and protect the planet? We are living in a finite world and have to realise that the need is not so much one of redefining growth but changing the paradigm towards reduction and self-sufficiency. Fair and ethical models of trade, transportation, and production, will enable more people to participate in the benefits of 'development'. Tourism as a mosaic of the service and production industries can reflect this.

But can we expect the tourism industry to respond to such a vision? It structures its advertising around psychological self-image factors – being seen as 'cool', glamorous and economically successful. Furthermore, budget airlines are mushrooming providing cheap flights due to tax-exempted air fuel. The result is that the allure of air travel continues to grow. But at what price? Growing air travel translates into a growing prospect of climate change.

Self interest does not appear to work!

One would have expected that the tourism industry would act out of self interest to preserve the very assets it needs for its survival but are under threat from climate change, namely, nature and culture. But relaxed that the threat will only materialize in the future, the sector carries on in the present by finding ever new locations, going deeper into the jungle, higher up the mountains etc. It offers an artificial 'paradise' rather than take responsibility and meaningful steps given the damaging impact from tourism.

There is a paradox when the industry claims it is eco-friendly when high-carbon emitting means of transportation are used to bring customers to their destination.

Why does the industry not follow the path of responsible tourism as offered and successfully implemented in many local initiatives? These show that it is viable to combine local production, soft mobility, cultural exchange and sustainable development in a participatory way, providing livelihoods and protecting nature.

Climate change debate: a new face of colonialism?

Advocates of the tourism industry believe that carbon offsetting schemes are an appropriate solution. But wherever carbon is emitted, it affects the global climate in a detrimental way. It is not enough to implement renewable energy in new projects, but the existing ones have to be transformed as well.

With a few exceptions, the South lacks the technical, personnel and financial means to participate in the energy transformation process.

Southern countries are often bound to contracts with the international financial institutions and donor governments who try to foster their own industries by exporting their new technologies to the 'receiving countries' and managing the operations. The brain drain from the South is encouraged by this system, too.

The world's leading economic powers too continue to secure for themselves energy resources from within the South. The ongoing privatization of public energy services into profit-seeking corporations is another facet to consider.

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All this enriches the world's transnational corporations and powerful individuals at the expense of the poor. The question could be raised whether this represents a new form of colonialism...

Change of mindset

A change of mindset is urgently needed. And with it a change of the mainstream consumption and tourism patterns. Appropriate economic models, including local and organic agriculture, community based tourism and technology for renewable energy, are widely available but still blocked by the big industries and outdated policies.

A new tourism paradigm is needed that does not just adapt the conventional 'Western model' of tourism but encourages a small scale and soft tourism concept where visitors and hosts do live with minimal impact on nature and local culture. Centrally organized mass tourism is not the way to go. The concept of community based tourism can succeed as it aims to generate income and be environmental friendly at the same time.

Our common responsibility

The continuous growth of travel and tourism within a world community that is projected to grow to 9 billion by 2020 will put ever more pressure on the planet's resources and change its climate dramatically in a short period of time. The growing number of poor and vulnerable peoples will be the first to be most severely affected.

The tourism industry bears a special responsibility. It is regrettable that presently leadership for responsible tourism mainly comes from non-governmental organizations. Due to its multi-sectoral setting and in the light of prospective damage to its attractions, the tourism sector has to lead the needed transformation process.

ECOT and partner organizations appreciate some private sector initiatives to become more energy-aware and 'green', and of some European tour operators who are going in the right direction embracing the slogan 'Fly less, stay longer' – but these efforts must become more widespread and be an intrinsic part of each and every tourism operation. They are now miniscule in the light of the current growth and free market philosophy.

Governments in the North and South must play an important role in a threefold way: in providing consumers with relevant and transparent information and offering means to change consumption patterns; in establishing or endorsing environmental friendly transportation models; and in enforcing progressive regulatory systems for the transport and tourism sector. Furthermore, legislation has to be reviewed to ensure land rights of local communities in order to facilitate community based tourism. In general, environmental protection including climate protection must be the core principle of any tourism project.

Having committed to Agenda 21, governments must emphasize an ethical, green and fair travel and tourism dedicated to creating income on a local level. They must not assist in the expansion of current consumption patterns and transportation industries.

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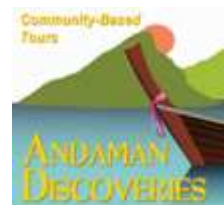
Civil society all around the world plays a crucial role in protecting the climate and the voice of the affected is an essential base for the global climate negotiations. Tourism must be fully incorporated in the 'climate justice' debate; it should not be that the poor who never go on holiday suffer most from the climate impact of tourism!

Those who can afford to travel and go on a holiday should exercise their common responsibility for the planet and its future. It is ultimately the tourists who can unleash a power to change the world by their very own decisions. ECOT and endorsing agencies call on them to be conscious and use their economic power to achieve appropriate legislation and pressure the tourism sector to become responsible. The citizens of the one world must unite to advocate for 'another tourism' in a more just world.

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on behalf of ECOT and endorsing agencies

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