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TOURISM AND WATER: MAKE THE HUMAN RIGHT TO WATER A REALITY !

Message to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) for 2013 World Tourism Day (27 September) under the theme 'Tourism and Water: Protecting our Common Future'

Tourism and Water is a burning issue for humanity as fresh water resources in tourist destinations are rapidly dwindling due to overuse and shortsighted practices. The excessive consumption of water by the tourism industry deepens poverty and hardship for many local people, and causes conflict, particularly in the developing world.

In the face of such patterns, we can no longer afford to remain idle and to make mistakes. Without water and healthy natural water cycles, the Earth's biosphere and climate collapse, and life systems are compromised. According to United Nations statistics, more than one billion people lack access to safe water and sanitation. By 2025, two-thirds of the world's population will face water shortages or lack of clean water. Forecasts suggest that climate change may further exacerbate water shortages. The spreading water crisis threatens to reduce the global food supply, jeopardizing food security for all (1).

With water becoming an extremely precious resource, competition for water is intensifying everywhere. There have been forecasts that wars will be fought over water within this century(2). But in many cases, the issue is not just water scarcity or quality of available water. Water management policies often lack distributive justice. As the UNDP's Human Development Report points out, unequal access and persistent political bias against impoverished peoples are at the heart of the water equity problem (3).

It was a great success for the world's peoples, when in 2010 - after many years of debates and struggles - the United Nations General Assembly explicitly recognized through Resolution 64/292 the human right to water and sanitation and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realization of *all human rights* (4).

It is a concern that the UNWTO Secretary-General Dr Taleb Rifai in his message for World Tourism Day did not make any reference to this important UN resolution, which was adopted by the General Assembly without a single vote in opposition (5). The resolution obliges governments to fulfill their duty to protect local residents' right to water, including protection from water overuse and degradation by the tourism industry.

Unfortunately, the UNWTO has never recognized local people as rights holders and overlooks that the management of natural resources for common good is all about rights. Despite its profession to 'sustainable tourism', the UNWTO has neglected to steer the industry towards environmental, social, and cultural 'sustainability.' Rather, its efforts have been directed to bolstering tourism's unsustainable growth rates. We wonder: when will it do something to 'protect our common future,' as directed by the 1987 Brundtland Report?

The tourism industry's lack of sincere regard for nature, and its abuses of water resources in particular, have been well-documented (6). If the UNWTO intends to use this World Tourism Day as a propaganda tool to portray industry interests as 'protectors of our common future', we must dissent. It would be preposterous to declare that the future the tourism industry wants is also the future meeting the fundamental needs of the world's peoples and the next generations.

Here are some of the reasons why (beyond standard conflicts of interest) we believe the private sector is not a legitimate custodian of our water resources:

Worldwide, local communities and peoples have seen their territories invaded by tourism protagonists and 'developed' with no regard for the integrity of water reserves, watersheds, groundwater, and water-related ecosystems or biodiversity (7). The construction of hotels and resorts, holiday villas, 'eco' retreats, golf courses, marinas, and tourism infrastructure proceeds unabated, often within or near fragile ecosystems and cultural landscapes (for example, territories of Indigenous Peoples). Meanwhile, carbon emissions from air travel contribute significantly to climate change - further disrupting natural hydrological cycles (8). Populations living in poverty, particularly women who must search for uncontaminated water for their families and carry water over ever longer distances, are hardest hit by the environmental deterioration (9).

Most egregious is the waste of water for tourist luxury. For example, it has been found that luxury hotels in Zanzibar consume more than 3,000 litres of water per room per day, while average household consumption is less than 100 litres of water per day. Or in Goa, India, one five-star resort consumes some 1785 litres of water per guest per day, whereas a neighbouring resident consumes just 14 litres of water per day (10). Top-end resorts boasting extravagant water features are a thorn in the eye of citizens from Mexican, Mediterranean to Southeast Asian destinations, where droughts have become more frequent and water taps often remain dry.

With an increasing shortfall of accessible, reliable and safe water supply and locals more frequently fighting tourism developers and operators over water rights, meaningful standards and limits for water use must be implemented within the tourism industry. While it is reported that water-related problems may thwart the tourism and hotel industry in major cities such as

Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai and Dubai - and lead to reduced numbers of visitors (11) - our first concern should be local citizens' water needs and local ecosystem integrity, not industry attrition.

Mitigation strategies being discussed within industry realms are not adequate. Measures such as water saving and reuse techniques, improved operation efficiency and technological innovations may be pointless unless the root causes of local water conflicts are properly addressed and water as a human right is fully recognized. There are lessons to be learned from cases where the violation of human rights associated with water has led to violent conflicts (12).

A major problem is that tourism businesses scarcely engage with the public or civil society organizations who are skeptical of their projects and ideas on water management. Many companies do not seem to know how essential water is for local peoples' survival, health and well-being. Their mindset is such that they treat water as an 'asset' that can be appropriated and used primarily for profit-making, as if supplies are endless and their privileged access is a given.

Unfortunately, governments often give in to powerful companies that seek to own and exploit water sources because they believe that only the private sector can generate sufficient resources to finance innovation. It is this trend towards the privatization and commercialization of water that poses the biggest threat to the human right to water (13).

'Pro poor' and 'smart growth' programmes give an impression of 'trickle down' - but profits are largely exclusive, opportunity costs are localized, and negative impacts of water 'investment' primarily affect the socially and politically marginalized.

Therefore, we take the opportunity on occasion of this World Tourism Day to call on the UNWTO to:

- * Respect the United Nations resolution the human right to water and sanitation (Resolution 64/292) and join efforts by other intergovernmental agencies as well as national governments and civil society to make the human right to water a reality;

- * Acknowledge that water is to be treated as a social, cultural and spiritual good, and not primarily as an economic good, and that, therefore, water resources must be in public custodianship of society as a whole;

- * Use its influence and offer guidance to ensure that tourism development projects and businesses do not infringe on human rights or public health and well-being, and do not interfere with local peoples' access to adequate and safe water;

* Require the tourism industry to fully take responsibility for their actions that cause damage to local water reserves, impinge on water availability and/or disrupt hydrological cycles, and to comply with all applicable law, particularly international law on human rights.

* Educate the tourism industry in keeping with the above principles, to involve industry in meaningful problem solving and ethical practice.

A rights-based approach and ethic of care must guide future actions by the UNWTO to address existing and emerging water crises.

This Statement was prepared by Anita Pleumarom, Director of the Tourism Investigation & Monitoring Team, Bangkok/Thailand, with support of the International Support Centre for Sustainable Tourism, Vancouver/Canada

Notes:

(1) For details on the spreading global water crisis, see for example the United Nations websites <http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade> and www.unwater.org/. As for climate change impacts on water availability, a particular concern is the melting of glaciers along mountain ranges; see e.g. Clark P. (2013), 'IPCC head warns on Himalayan melting glaciers', Financial Times, 22 September.

(2) cit. in Connell, D. (2013), 'Water wars, maybe, but who is the enemy? Global Water Forum <http://www.globalwaterforum.org/2013/04/10/water-wars-maybe-but-who-is-the-enemy/>, 10 April.

(3) United Nations Development Programme (2006), *Human Development Report 2006: Beyond scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis*.

(4) United Nations, *The Human Right to Water and Sanitation Milestones*, http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/pdf/human_right_to_water_and_sanitation_milestones.pdf.

(5) UNWTO (2013), Message by UNWTO Secretary-General Taleb Rifai, <http://wtd.unwto.org/en/content/unwtosg>.

(6) On tourism and its negative environmental impacts in general see e.g.: Mowforth, M. and Munt, I. (2003) *Tourism and sustainability: Development and new tourism in the Third World*. Routledge, London and New York, 2nd edition; Johnston, A.M. (2007) *Is the sacred for sale? Tourism and Indigenous Peoples.*, London, UK, 2nd edition; Pleumarom, A. (2012), *The politics of tourism, poverty reduction and sustainable development*, Third World Network (TWN) Environment & Development Series No. 17, Penang, Malaysia. As for Tourism and Water in particular, the UK-based NGO Tourism Concern kickstarted a Water Equity in Tourism (WET) campaign and in this context conducted valuable research that triggered interest and debate worldwide; for details see Tourism Concern's website at <http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/wet.html>.

(7) See e.g. the case studies from Bali, The Gambia, Zanzibar, and Goa and Kerala in Southern India in: Tourism Concern (2012), *Water equity in tourism. A human right- A global responsibility*, London; and the academic paper on Bali by Cole, S. (2012), 'A political ecology of tourism and water inequity: A case study from Bali'. *Annals of Tourism Research*,, 39(2), p. 1221–1241. Another noteworthy study on water over-use and mismanagement by the tourism industry in Mexico is: Society of Akumal's Vital Ecology (SAVE) (2013), *Water, Water Everywhere... but soon, not a clean drop to drink'*, *Report on the development and destruction of the Riviera Maya*, March.

(8) Pleumarom, A. (2009), *Change tourism, not climate!* TWN Climate Change Series No.3, Third World Network, Penang, Malaysia.

(9) See, for example, the documentary by Pamela Novicka on the extreme weather and water shortage impacts of air travel and tourism: *Climate Change? No Thanks!* (2010). It was filmed in southern India, featuring local people and tourists talking about climate change, water shortage and the holiday experience.

(10) Tourism Concern (2012), op. cit.

(11) Kim, K., Lindström, A., Weinberg, J. (2013), *ITP Water Risk Assessment*, International Tourism Partnership (ITP), August.

(12) See e.g. Houdret, A. (2008) *Scarce Water, Plenty of Conflicts? Local Water Conflicts and the Role of Development Cooperation*, Institute of Development and Peace, INEF Policy Brief 3/2008; as well as the tourism-related academic study by van Eeghen, S. (2011), *Water conflicts in Costa Rica? Sardinal: a case study on the emergence of a water conflict in the context of high speed growth in (residential) tourism*, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, March.

(13) See e.g. Solon, P. (2011) 'We believe it would be suicide to follow the path of privatization and commercialization of water and public services', Speech by Ambassador Pablo Solon, Permanent Representative of Bolivia at the United Nations discussion on the Right to Water and Indigenous Peoples, May 24, <http://climateandcapitalism.com/2011/06/09/bolivian-ambassador-speaks-out-against-water-privatization/>; as well as Chee Yoke Ling (2013), *Access to Water a Precarious Human Right*, Keynote Speech at the Institute of Science in Society (ISIS) on occasion of World Water Day, ISIS Report 16/05/13, London.