

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

A POLICY PAPER

1. Background

Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries. In 2003 the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) estimated that there were some 694 million international tourists worldwide. As a result, tourism has major impact on many important areas of society: the economy, the social and cultural aspects and the environment. However, unsustainable ill-considered tourism growth can impact negatively on all these facets. In the long-run, this can have serious consequences – for everyone.

2. What is sustainable tourism?

The WTO defines sustainable tourism as:

Tourism which meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future.

Sustainable tourism is based on a positive relationship between the economy and the environment, with careful concern given to the social and cultural effects of economic growth. This does not, however, mean that economic growth and increased prosperity should be discouraged. The cultural and environmental resources of a destination are the assets upon which tourism depends. This can be a starting point in the search for new growth models, to give greater consideration to the vulnerable features of a particular tourist region and to the general well-being of its inhabitants.

Bearing these remarks in mind, and referring to the Cape Town Declaration,¹ we would propose the following definition of sustainable tourism:

Sustainable tourism is a form of tourism which:

- is economically viable, with direct economic benefits for local people;
- is socially and culturally responsible;
- is ecologically sound; and
- offers a high-quality end product and visitor experience.

Tourism and recreation are based on the concept of a desirable destination. Nature, culture and human capital are the key assets for making a tourist destination desirable.

¹ The Cape Town Conference was organised by the Responsible Tourism Partnership and Western Cape Tourism as a side event preceding the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. The Cape Town Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations was attended by 280 delegates from 20 countries. The conference grew out of the South African work on responsible tourism guidelines and involved delegates field-testing the South African Guidelines on sites in and around Cape Town.

Ill-considered expansion of the tourism industry can generate negative effects, which can harm these key assets or detract from the “unique” character of the destination – thereby making it less desirable. This leads to a negative development spiral, with unwelcome consequences for the local population, the sector, the tourist, the environment and the entire economy of a Region. It is therefore crucial to promote sustainable forms of tourism.

3. How can we achieve sustainable development in the tourism sector?

Achieving sustainable tourism requires explicit commitment to the core principles of sustainable development strategies adopted by the Network:

- integration;
- intergenerational equity;
- sense of place and identity;
- tackling poverty and promoting equity;
- good governance.

An integrated approach to tourism development is necessary, since tourism is integrally and structurally linked to most economic sectors. Achieving sustainable tourism must therefore be the objective of everyone involved in the tourist industry. The main players are the tourists, the tourism sector, the local population, the public, the national, regional and local authorities. All these partners have their own specific roles and agendas, which may lead them to emphasise different social, economic, cultural and ecological factors. The management of sustainable tourism requires active and co-operative partnerships between all these stakeholders.

The pursuit of quality visitor experiences has the potential to deliver social and economic benefits whilst minimising the environmental impacts.

Sustainable tourism is a question of making the right choices and ensuring that every decision is tested against the above core principles of sustainable development, bearing in mind the limits of what is technically and economically feasible.

All the tourist partners are responsible for ensuring the sustainable management of the tourist infrastructure, with the aim of creating a win-win situation, which will benefit not only the tourist, but also the organising agency, the local population and the “destination” in its broadest sense.

4. Action for regional governments

Regional authorities play a central role in setting out tourism policy. It is important that the policy initiatives are compatible with a long-term strategy, which takes equal account of the requirements of the environment, the local population and the economy. Regions are best-placed to establish and implement sustainable tourism policies; therefore they should have decision making powers in this field. They are most familiar

with the needs and potential of their territory and tourism is also an essential tool for their economic development and for promoting their culture and identity.

Tourism also requires consultation and co-operation with players in many other fields, including the environment, transport and mobility, town and country planning, safety and security.

Therefore regional authorities are well-placed to co-ordinate and encourage this multidisciplinary approach; sustainable tourism policies should be thus based on an integrated regional concept. It is in this field that nrg4SD is convinced it can offer added value in creating partnerships that deliver joint promotion of sustainable tourism policies and responsible investment in the tourism industry. Specific attention should be given to:

- Respect for the characteristics of the location and aspirations of the host community;
- Geographic and seasonal spread giving social and economic benefit;
- Procurement of local goods and services, involving the local community and employment of local people;
- Minimising the adverse impacts of tourism through effective visitor management, the promotion of environmentally sound practices and appropriate accreditation of tourism operators;
- Sustainable forms of transport;
- Giving tourists access to unique and remote areas;
- Raising awareness about the benefits of tourism to the local economy;
- Enhancing the skills of the local community to enable their participation in tourism;
- Recognising that the intrinsic value of the environment is far greater than its value as a tourism asset.

In addition regional governments are invited to consider undertaking the following practical actions to build and share knowledge within the Network:

- Exchange experience and best practice;
- Joint research;
- Development of practical tools; and
- Staff exchanges and study tours.

5. Action for partners

Partners in other sectors and spheres of government are invited to reflect on the policy note and to take it into account in their own work and with regional governments, and also to propose ways in which it could be strengthened in the future.

6. Useful References

World Tourism Organisation:

http://www.world-tourism.org/frameset/frame_sustainable.html

**Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions
Basic orientations for the sustainability of European tourism**

Brussels, 21.11.2003

COM(2003) 716 final

Flanders: Flemish Center for Sustainable Tourism:

www.duurzaamtoerisme.be/eng/wat.html

Scotland: Tourism and Environment Forum:

www.greentourism.org.uk

Wales: Wales Tourist Board

www.wtbonline.gov.uk

Western Cape: Sustainable Tourism Development and Promotion White Paper:

www.westerncape.gov.za

Cardiff, 25 March 2004