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Background document on Tourism
Northern perspective

By EED-TOURISM WATCH

> The views expressed in this background document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Environment Programme

Tourism and Environment

Background paper

for the 7th Global Civil Society Forum (GCSF)

prior to the 9th Special Session of UNEP's
Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum

An NGO perspective from the North

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Objective and Background

The aim of this background paper is to stimulate discussion on civil society's responses to the questions raised in relation to tourism and environment and to assist in formulating civil society position papers in preparation for the 7th Global Civil Society Forum to be held from 5 to 6 February, 2006 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, prior to the 9th special session of the Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GCSS-IX/GMEF), scheduled from 7 to 9 February, 2006.

This paper draws upon the experiences and perspectives of European NGOs who have for many years been working with a specific focus on tourism from an environmental and developmental perspective, who are involved in information and education on the impacts of tourism in their respective countries, and in campaigns and advocacy work at national and international levels – often in close cooperation with partner NGOs in the South.[1]

The Tourism Challenge

Tourism has become a global phenomenon of major economic importance, but with ambivalent socio-cultural and environmental impacts. The tourism industry directly accounts for 3.8 % of global GDP. Taking its indirect impacts into account, the figure rises to 10.4 %.[2] The number of international arrivals reached an all-time record of 760 million in 2004 and continues to grow.[3] Domestic tourism is not included in this figure and has a volume several times larger than international tourism. While tourism plays an important and certainly also positive role in the socio-economic and political development of many countries, many hopes that were placed on tourism as an engine of economic development have been disappointed. At the same time, in many tourism destinations negative environmental, cultural and social impacts have become apparent, calling into question whether tourism is a viable development option.

Tourism is not a 'White Industry' - Examples of Environmental Impacts

As far as environmental impacts are concerned, tourism is not at all a 'white industry'. A considerable proportion of burgeoning global transport volumes and the associated environmentally damaging pollutant emissions are due to tourism. Tourists consume about 90 percent of the primary energy required during a holiday for transportation during their arrival and return journey by car, bus, aircraft or railway. Particularly the pollution caused by air transport is continuously rising, contributing to global climate change and its devastating consequences, such as rising sea levels which threaten the survival of small island states.

Like other industries, tourism consumes resources and generates waste. Tourism is frequently in conflict with other forms of resource use, sometimes it is complementary. An intact balance of nature is one of the essential foundations of the tourism sector. However, tourism can damage the environment to such an extent that the region loses its attraction as a destination. The high water demand of tourists is a major problem. In areas where water resources are scarce, tourists are often supplied at the cost of the local population. In developing countries, sewage and solid waste disposal are often not properly managed. Tourism which generates considerable amounts of solid waste and sewage is a source of serious ecological damage and causes major health risks to the local population.

The land requirement of tourism is enormous. The construction of land-intensive hotels and resorts, camping sites, golf courses and other sports facilities, theme parks or tourism-oriented transport infrastructure (access roads, parking lots, funiculars and airports) may only indirectly benefit the local population (if at all), while leading to massive environmental damage. Coastal areas are dammed in, wetlands are drained, dry areas are irrigated, forests are cut down and coral reefs are blasted. The great demand for building materials in the tourist centres leads to sand being extracted in large quantities from the beaches, limestone from coral reefs and timber from coastal mangrove forests, severely damaging the ecosystems involved. The clearing of mangroves to make way for the development of tourist resorts and infrastructure has destroyed natural protection barriers, exposing coastal areas to high risks, as experienced in the countries of South and South East Asia which were severely affected by the tsunami in December 2004.

Where tourists or dealers collect corals and shells, this impairs coral reefs and the species composition of ecosystems. The trade in products of endangered animal and plant species is frequently in violation of

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[1] They include the members of the networks TEN (www.ten-tourism.org) and DANTE (www.dante-tourismus.org)

[2] World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) data, 2004 (www.world-tourism.org)

[3] World Tourism Organization (WTO-OMT), Jan. 2005 (www.wttc.org)

conservation laws. Many tourism activities, such as skiing, diving, boating, mountain hiking and trekking, present different forms of stress to natural areas and their animal and plant life.

Tourism on the International Agenda and NGO Responses

Despite the challenges posed by tourism in the context of sustainable development, tourism was not an issue on the agenda of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. To fill this gap, the "Earth Summit + 5" Special Session of the UN General Assembly held in June 1997 in New York requested the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) to elaborate an action-oriented international programme of work on sustainable tourism. This was done at the 7th session of the UN-CSD in April 1999 in New York. The work of the CSD was supported by a multi-stakeholder dialogue in which NGOs, organised in the NGO Tourism Caucus, were involved. The decision by the CSD on "Tourism and sustainable development"[4] was generally welcomed by NGOs as a comprehensive approach, taking into account the complex nature of tourism. Other international platforms at which tourism was debated, with different emphases, included:[5]

- the focus on tourism and poverty alleviation at the 3rd UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries (UNLDC) in Brussels in 2001 and within WTO-OMT's "Sustainable Tourism – Elimination of Poverty" (ST-EP) initiative. While tourism NGOs have welcomed a clearer WTO-OMT focus on the broader UN agenda, especially the UN Millennium Development Goals, they have emphasised that the overall economic and political frameworks first need to be created before tourism can actually benefit disadvantaged groups of the population. They have warned against the appropriation of development aid for the expansion of tourism or infrastructure from which local communities do not benefit.

- the process leading to "Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism development"[6] under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). NGOs have criticised that the outcome has taken the form of a management plan rather than principles, and that it has taken too narrow a perspective.

- the International Year of Ecotourism 2002 and the World Ecotourism Summit[7] in Quebec. Many tourism NGOs have criticised this UN initiative and have raised concern about the expansion of so-called "ecotourism" into new (previously untouched) areas and about the potential "green-washing" of unsustainable tourism products.

- the highly controversial but ongoing negotiations on the economic liberalisation of the tourism sector under General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) at the World Trade Organization (WTO-OMC) in Geneva. These remain a major concern for NGOs, as they are likely to undermine local efforts to promote sustainable development in tourism (including regulation to protect the environment) as "trade distorting".

- the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002 ("Rio+5"), which failed to review progress on tourism since CSD-7. The WSSD outcome on tourism is, according to NGOs, too narrow as compared to the CSD decision, focussing too much on the niche segment of ecotourism and economic aspects while neglecting the important involvement of stakeholders such as indigenous and local communities.

In addition to UN-related international fora which give more or less opportunity for NGO involvement, NGOs have also used their own civil society space to highlight tourism issues: at the 4th World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai, India, in 2004 and at the 5th WSF in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2005.

Many of the points suggested in the following draw upon advocacy documents and position papers developed by NGOs in the international processes mentioned above.[8]

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[4] www.un.org/esa/sustdev/sdissues/tourism/tourism_decisions.htm

[5] There are many more, of course, e.g. the process leading to the WTO-OMT's "Global Code of Ethics for Tourism". The emphasis here is on broader approaches and on those that are of relevance to "tourism and environment" as the focus of this paper.

[6] www.biodiv.org/programmes/socio-eco/tourism/guidelines.asp

[7] World Ecotourism Summit Final Report, published by WTO-OMT and UNEP: www.uneptie.org/pc/tourism/documents/ecotourism/WESoutcomes/Final-Report-WES-Eng.pdf

[8] Sources include, among others: a position paper of the German NGO Forum on Environment & Development on the environmental and social responsibility of tourism in the context of sustainable development, presented to the seventh meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-7) in New York, April 1999; a background document on "Influencing Consumer Behaviour to Promote Sustainable Tourism Development", prepared by the UN CSD NGO Steering Committee for the multi-stakeholder dialogue at CSD-7, 1999. a strategy paper entitled "Red Card for Tourism?", developed by the German/Austrian/Swiss NGO Network for Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable Tourism – A Definition

Just as there has been a variety of approaches to tourism, there is also a wide range of definitions of what constitutes sustainable tourism. German tourism NGOs have formulated the following: "*Sustainable tourism needs to meet social, cultural, environmental and economic criteria of viability and acceptability. Sustainable tourism has a long-term perspective, relating to both present and future generations, and is ethically and socially just and culturally appropriate, environmentally/ecologically sustainable and economically profitable and feasible. These dimensions of sustainability are closely related and interact with each other, and need to be considered and addressed in an integrative manner.*" [9] The integrative approach is of major importance. NGOs have generally objected to isolated approaches that focus on individual aspects of tourism (such as the environment) without taking into consideration the wider context. It also needs to be noted that some NGOs are not happy with the term "sustainable tourism", but prefer to talk of the role of tourism in the context of sustainable development – its possible contributions and the problems and dangers associated with it.

1. What roles governments should play to address challenges such as biodiversity protection, mobilizing demand for environmentally friendly tourism products, engaging the private sector, ensuring integrated environment and tourism planning? (with particular reference to governance structure and policy implementation tools)

a) Biodiversity protection

Tourism, when properly managed, can be an incentive for biodiversity conservation. However, many tourism activities, often labelled as "ecotourism", have accelerated the erosion of both biological and cultural diversity. Representatives of indigenous peoples have warned that their traditional knowledge systems and the associated practices, beliefs, and rituals integral to biocultural diversity are highly vulnerable to tourism. Governments at national and local levels need to play a key role in preserving the ecological and biocultural balance of particularly sensitive regions. While officially protected areas are often in the spotlight, governments also need to include buffer zones, sacred sites, conservation corridors, and other biodiversity-significant areas as integral parts of the planning process, in line with the ecosystem approach. Governments need to ensure through regulation that the ecological and biocultural carrying capacity of the regions concerned is not exceeded. It is vital to ensure that all forms of tourism are developed with full benefit sharing by indigenous peoples and local communities and are based on prior informed consent. Governments at all levels should directly involve and support indigenous peoples and local communities in the development of criteria, indicators, early warning systems, and guidelines that embrace both the cultural and ecological aspects of biodiversity. Governments must recognise tourism as a potential catalyst for biopiracy and must ensure the effective prevention of biopiracy through binding legal instruments at national and international level.

b) Mobilising demand for environmentally friendly tourism products

Governments need to support measures for awareness raising and information on the objectives and criteria of sustainable tourism, with the aim of changing the consumption patterns of tourists (towards rarer, longer and more aware travelling, and an appropriate, environmentally and socially acceptable behaviour in the destinations). In major tourist sending countries, governments have neglected the need for national strategies on outgoing tourism and their responsibility for the impacts of their citizens in other countries. This gap should be filled. To improve the conditions for sustainable consumer behaviour in incoming and domestic tourism, governments should provide and/or promote sustainable tourism facilities.

c) Engaging the private sector

The tourism sector has been lagging behind in engaging in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), defined as environmentally sound, ethical and socially responsible standards of conduct in the world of business. There have been a few initiatives, such as the Tour Operators' Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development (TOI)[10], which deserve further encouragement. In order to significantly improve industry commitment and transparency, governments at national level should put sustainability reporting by the

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Development (DANTE) for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002; an NGO Statement on Tourism and Biodiversity, developed at an International NGO Workshop on Tourism and Biodiversity in March 2000 in Berlin.

[9] As defined by the German NGO Forum on Environment & Development for CSD-7 in New York, April 1999.

[10] www.toinitiative.org

tourism industry high up on the agenda and call upon tour operators to make use of and apply the "Sustainability Reporting Guidelines" established by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)[11] along with the sectoral performance indicators for tour operators developed by the TOI in cooperation with GRI. Governments should use market based instruments and incentives for the targeted promotion of environmentally and socially acceptable tourism products, such as contests, awards, certificates and "best practise" projects. Governments should encourage CSR initiatives that distinctly go beyond merely observing minimum environmental and social standards. "Soft standards" promoted with public funding are not helpful. Governments should enhance the credibility of voluntary industry initiatives by putting independent monitoring systems in place.

d) Ensuring integrated environment and tourism planning

Tourism planning must not be considered in isolation, but must be integrated with both development planning and environmental planning at all levels. The pros and cons of tourism development must be carefully considered, in line with the precautionary principle. Integrated planning and management instruments must be created within national sustainability strategies that all countries have been called upon to develop in the Rio follow-up process. From such strategies follows the development of national and regional sustainability action plans, with due consideration of tourism issues. Independent, strategic environmental and social assessments of tourism projects and tourism development plans need to be put in place.

Integrated planning includes ensuring sustainable resource use, including measures to minimize the consumption of water, energy and other resources, the utilization of environmentally sound water and energy conservation technologies, the promotion of renewable sources of energy, the prevention of pollution, sewage treatment, waste management at source and recycling.

Governance systems should incorporate partnerships with indigenous peoples, local communities and people's organisations. Governments need to create structures that facilitate cooperation among all parties involved (at local, national and international levels). In the decision-making process in tourism development, power relations between stakeholders are unequal. Structures for participation need to consider this, to ensure that costs and benefits of tourism are shared in a fair and equitable manner, and that there is long-term commitment to the planning process. At local level, Local Agenda 21 processes are a useful tool to address tourism issues.

2. What can be the role of economic instruments to modify production and consumption behaviour and to raise revenue for conservation?

a) Modifying production and consumption behaviour

Major influence on consumer behaviour can be exercised by governments in the form of ecologically appropriate pricing. This includes removing subsidies and other economic incentives that lead to negative environmental impacts, the taxation of aviation gasoline to discourage unsustainable forms of air travel (such as burgeoning no-frills short-haul flights), strengthening environmentally sound modes of transport and developing appropriate transport concepts. Demand can be shifted to less environmentally damaging modes of transport by promoting regional/national tourism products instead of long-haul tourism. The polluter pays principle and the internalization of external costs must be fully applied in tourism. At the international level, governments should help to ensure sustainable resource use through internationally coordinated economic instruments and the harmonization of legal and economic frameworks.

b) Raising revenue for conservation

Tourism is frequently praised as an important instrument of nature conservation. Income from tourism can help to finance protected areas and to safeguard ecologically sensitive regions against more environmentally damaging alternative uses. Research has shown that tourists are potentially ready to contribute to conservation measures in the destinations. To increase their willingness to contribute, attractive educational programmes for different target groups should be put in place to raise awareness for environmental and development issues. Specialised guided tours which provide a higher valued added to special interest groups (e.g. bird watchers, photographers) could generate additional income. The number of visitors can be

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[11] www.globalreporting.org

regulated through pricing mechanisms, at the same time increasing revenues, but this should be handled in a socially equitable manner, taking into account different levels of purchasing power of visitors.

Appropriate economic and legal mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that visitation fees and tourism revenues are paid back to the destinations and benefit both protected areas and local community development. Buffer mechanisms should be developed to avoid seasonal revenue variations. Regional eco-taxes in destinations could be considered, the benefit of such measures should be made transparent.

3. Protected areas are increasingly valuable "tourism products": what forms of additional protection would be needed to prevent tourism to generate additional impacts?

Many tourism activities present various forms of stress to natural areas, fauna and flora. In many cases it is nature-based tourism which opens up previously undeveloped natural areas to tourism activities and causes or exacerbates ecological degradation. Necessary measures to prevent negative impacts include:

- Identification and particular consideration of all ecologically important areas (not only protected areas but also adjacent areas and others)
- Determination of ecological carrying capacity limits
- Stipulation of permissible sites and activities, reduction of tourism intensity in space and time (e.g. through channelling and restrictions upon the number of visitors, nature conservation oriented zoning with closed areas in ecologically sensitive core zones)
- Abstention from the further expansion of tourism in areas in which the natural environment is already under great stress
- Removal of intrusive structures and implementation of clean-up measures in order to restore the degraded environment in regions where carrying capacity limits have already been exceeded
- Protection of local and indigenous communities and their active involvement in conservation efforts, including benefit sharing.

4. What strategies, tools and actors should be involved in promoting sustainable consumption in tourism?

Many of the demand patterns in tourism reflect the unsustainable lifestyles of industrialised consumer societies. Consumer behaviour in tourism is both a product and cause of policies by government and industry. Governments in many tourist destinations and local communities have little or no information on what to expect from tourism and the incoming tourists and how to influence and control tourism and guide tourist behaviour. Strategies to influence consumer behaviour should include both fighting unsustainable aspects of tourism (sanctioning and discouraging inappropriate consumer behaviour), and encouraging responsible patterns of consumer behaviour and best practises, at the various levels. There are different types of instruments and measures available, including:

- legal measures (rules, regulations, sanctions)
- market based instruments, such as taxes to influence market prices
- promotion of and (financial) support for best practice
- industry self-monitoring/codes of conduct
- information, education and research

A comprehensive approach is required to solve the problems associated with market-driven tourism. Tourism should be viewed as a major environmental and developmental issue that all stakeholders need to be actively engaged with. To develop effective partnerships, the imbalance of power between the different stakeholders needs to be addressed. The UN system should play a supportive role. The media who exercise major influence on consumer behaviour should report in a responsible manner, criticising problematic developments, highlighting sustainable alternatives and encouraging responsible behaviour.

Governments should

- regulate tourist access to ecologically fragile or stressed natural areas;
- in tourist sending countries: develop policies on outgoing tourism from a development perspective;
- provide frameworks for ecologically appropriate pricing by strictly applying the polluter pays principle to internalise external costs. This includes ecological tax reforms and the removal of subsidies/other economic incentives with negative environmental impacts;

- promote environmentally friendly modes of transport and transport concepts, reduce tourism-related traffic, shift demand to less environmentally damaging modes of transport;

- promote renewable sources of energy such as solar power, reduce the use of non-renewable energy, reduce the use of limited local resources through more sustainable practices/consumption patterns;

- develop information and education programmes in co-operation with local stakeholders ensuring all stakeholders' involvement (e.g. women's); provide information to tourists on appropriate behaviour (sensitivity, respect for/adaptation to local culture), e.g. by establishing information centres in destinations, or by including briefing material for package tours; taking into account specific information needs of various market segments, provide information to the local population on the opportunities and risks from tourism and on how to influence tourist behaviour;

- adopt, observe, implement and promote codes of conduct;

- integrate sustainable development education including tourism in the curricula of schools at all levels, universities and training institutions, involving all stakeholder groups;

- create and promote open networks for information and research on sustainable tourism, disseminate and implement results;

The tourism industry should

- promote sustainable tourism products, using market related instruments and incentives, such as contests, awards, certification, model projects, comprehensive quality labels covering both environmental and social sustainability;

- make use of Sustainability Reporting Guidelines to improve transparency of tourism operations;

- reduce inappropriate consumption, use local resources in preference to imports in a sustainable manner; reduce and recycle waste, ensure safe waste disposal, develop and implement sustainable transport policies and systems, e.g. efficient public transport, walking, cycling in destinations;

- provide tourists with authentic information, enabling them to understand all environmental and related aspects (e.g. human rights situation) of tourism when selecting any destination or holiday package; educate visitors in advance of arrival and give guidance on 'dos' and 'don'ts'; make tourists aware of their potential impact on and their responsibilities towards host societies; provide information on respecting the cultural and natural heritage of destination areas; employ tour guides who portray societies honestly and dispel stereotypes;

- ensure that the marketing of 'green' tourism reflects sound environmental policy and practice; use non-exploitative marketing strategies that respect people, communities and environments of destinations, dismantle stereotyping, integrate sustainable tourism principles when creating new marketing strategies;

- train staff to foster tourist responsibility towards the destinations;

- adopt, observe, implement and promote voluntary codes of conduct.

NGOs should

- disseminate information to a wide public about the complexity of tourism and about the objectives and criteria of sustainable tourism;

- educate tourists to change consumption patterns and promote appropriate, environmentally and socially acceptable behaviour in the destinations;

- launch broad awareness campaigns on the worst impacts of tourism, to be funded by international governmental and non-governmental agencies;

- promote criteria for sustainable tourism and possibilities for implementation;

- monitor tourism development, policy, industry initiatives, local people's reaction to tourism development and policy, implementation of stakeholder action.

5. What is the role of certification in promoting sustainability in tourism?

Tourists require clear, reliable information about the sustainability of holiday packages or individual products they are buying, based on relevant criteria, enabling them to compare a variety of products available. However, due to the complexity of the tourism product, certification has been difficult in tourism. There has been a proliferation of eco-labels, many of which focus on individual aspects, entailing the danger of "green-washing" of products, rather than transparent consumer information. NGOs agree that a mess of simple labels based on weak criteria is not desirable. Future perspectives for certification in tourism vary.

Some NGOs believe that standardised labels would enhance sustainability by allowing consumers to make informed choices in favour of ecologically sustainable and socially responsible products and continue to work towards viable solutions for certification in tourism. Others believe that due to the complexity of tourism and the fact that conditions vary across countries and regions, certification is not a feasible approach, and implementation extremely expensive. If certification in tourism is to be pursued, there is basic agreement on the following principles:

- There is a need for comprehensive research to develop effective certification schemes. A close cooperation of all those concerned, from suppliers to consumers, is indispensable.

- Strong criteria must be defined and products transparently labelled in such a way that helps consumers make conscientious decisions when purchasing a holiday package.

- A uniform quality label for sustainable tourism and differentiated product declarations must include all dimensions of sustainability, above all criteria of both environmental and social sustainability.

- Regular external monitoring by independent authorities must be ensured.

- The inclusion of smaller suppliers and poor regions must be guaranteed. Special support must be extended to them as required.

Major Challenges

To be effective, approaches to the challenges in tourism needs to take the broader issues of sustainability into account, e.g. the effects of the liberalisation of tourism under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) at local level, ensuring that progress made on one front (in the Rio follow-up process) is not jeopardised on another front.

There is no lack of proposals, demands, principles and programmes to make tourism more sustainable, but there have been considerable gaps in the actual implementation which need to be addressed.

There is a need for an internationally coordinated development and application of criteria by which to assess and continuously monitor both the impacts of tourism and progress made in the implementation of measures taken (or yet to be taken) to ensure sustainability in tourism.