

Sustainable Tourism



Editorial

The Assembly of European Regions has the pleasure to present its new initiative: thematic issues.

Published each trimester these dossiers will pertain to a theme covered by one of the AER Committees. We hope that the information provided will give our readers an overall understanding of the issue examined.

The first issue looks at sustainable tourism. In anticipation of the "Sustainable and quality tourism: the regional experiences" seminar organised by the AER 'Regional Policy' Committee on the 26th and 27th of June in Istria, Croatia, this dossier will investigate the major challenges, quality labels, existing regional initiatives, and the establishment of a European Tourism Charter.

For many years the AER has been working toward solutions to problems related to rapid growth in the European tourism industry. In 1998, the AER 'Regional Policy' Committee published an initial report on environmental standards in tourism*. AER member regions have since worked to develop the notion of sustainable tourism and have made particular advancements in the area of sustainable transport at the regional level.

To show its desire to further progress in this area, the AER is establishing an Award for the most environmentally friendly European Region which will be dedicated this year to sustainable tourism.

We hope that these thematic issues will be useful tools of information as well as interesting reading.

Yours Sincerely, <

Liese Prokop
AER President
Vice-Minister President of Lower-Austria (A)

*available for view at www.aer.org/COMMUN/A48bis.html

Three Guiding Principles

Ten years after the Rio Summit (June 1992), two years after members of the World Tourism Organisation adopted the first Code of Ethics on Tourism (Santiago de Chile, October 1999) and several months before the Johannesburg Summit (August 2002), the United Nations in December 2001 adopted a resolution lending its full support to

Three guiding principles set out the requirements for public and private stakeholders in tourism development.

1 Respect the principles of sustainable development. The development of tourism must not be detrimental to the environment. Biodiversity and natural resources must

be preserved to maintain healthy, continued and sustainable economic growth, with a view to meeting the needs of current and future generations. Water and energy in particular must be used in moderation, waste production avoided and the flow of visitors spread over time and space so as to minimise the environmental impact.

2 Preserve social and cultural heritage. Tourism should be in harmony with the special circumstances and traditions of the host country and its regions. Local laws and customs should be respected. Tourism should be designed to ensure that cultural products and traditional handicrafts survive and flourish and are not trivialised or impoverished.

3 Foster local economic development. Local communities should benefit equitably from the economic,



Gains from tourism must contribute to the preservation of the natural and historical heritage (Mont St. Michel-F, World Heritage site).

a global policy of sustainable tourism. The first world code of ethics for tourism was born. In 10 sections it set out rules of conduct for governments, private companies (airlines, hotel chains, tour operators) and travellers, clients and stakeholders in the world's leading industry.

social and cultural profits they generate. For instance, priority should be given to hiring staff locally as long as they have the necessary skills. And resources generated by visits to local attractions should be used to maintain, safeguard and improve this heritage. <



In Europe, the world's leading tourist destination, tourism puts intense pressure on the environment, thus the necessity for a sustainable development strategy (Piazza di Spagna, Roma-I).

A European Charter is Essential

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM HAS BEEN AN ISSUE IN EUROPE FOR THE PAST TWENTY YEARS. BUT LEGISLATION IS STILL TOO VAGUE. WITH MASS TOURISM ABOUT TO EXPLODE, THE NEED FOR A CHARTER HAS BECOME URGENT.

Europe is the world's leading tourist destination, accounting for half of all tourist revenues. Two million European businesses are directly or indirectly linked to this sector. In 2001, Europe welcomed 400 million tourists representing two thirds of global travel. The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) estimates that in 2020, 1.5 billion tourists will travel worldwide, of which 800 million will be to Europe.

It is a well-known fact that tourism puts great pressure on the environment and natural resources. As a result, Europe must commit to a true strategy of sustainable development. Given these conditions, it seems that tourism requires a basic degree of regulation. According to the WTO, sustainable tourism should not be considered a passing phase or gimmick. In 2002 (Ecotourism Year), the WTO secretary general stated that *"it is a way forward for the tourism industry because it lies at the heart of building balanced, sustainable and responsible tourism"*.

In the face of growing mass tourism, the time has come for concerted action. It is not about making quick changes, but rather constructing a new model of tourism development, one that no longer threatens natural resources or the environment. Over and above purely economic responses, a sustain-

able balance must be struck that delivers viable economic development, the preservation of resources for future generations and the fostering of local culture and heritage.

A greater role for tourism

The Treaty of Rome, the European Union's founding document, made no mention of tourism. But for twenty years now, the Old Continent has begun to pay greater attention to tourism. The importance of tourism was first recognised in 1982 when the Council of Europe laid the foundations for a tourism policy. In 1987 the idea of a European action plan for tourism took shape. After these beginnings, the Council of Europe proclaimed 1990 European Year of Tourism. Tourism was becoming a way to enlarge borders and had a special role to play in fostering local, national and international development.

In 1995, the Council of Europe noted that *"parks, reserves and other protected areas are attracting a growing number of visitors"* and recognised that *"sustainable tourism should be seen as one way of promoting social and economic development in the regions"*. That same year, the European Commission adopted measures to improve the quality of tourist services and encourage better co-operation between public and private tourist bodies. While these measures

had no legal basis, they were nonetheless the premise for the multi-year European tourism programme from 1997 to 2000. The importance of tourism as a driver of job creation was confirmed. At the Council of Europe in November 1997, European ministers of tourism stated that balanced and sustainable development of tourism would contribute greatly to reducing unemployment in member states.

In May 2000, the same ministers met in Vilamoura, Portugal, and agreed better co-operation between member states in the field of tourism. At stake was integrating tourism into transportation policy; designing *"policies of sustainable regional development based on qualitative criteria"*; investing in human resources and training; *"developing a European strategy for employment within tourism"*; and *"promoting Europe as a union of countries characterised by tradition, wellbeing and progress"*.

Europe has gradually come to realise the importance of tourism and issues associated with it. The conceptual basis of sustainable tourism has been set out, somewhat haphazardly perhaps, but at least it exists. Now, the major issues of sustainable development in terms of environment, growth and employment must be addressed in a coherent manner. <

Reinforce local and regional involvement

ACROSS EUROPE THERE ARE ENCOURAGING EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICES IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AT THE LOCAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL, BUT THESE CASES ARE STILL TOO FEW IN NUMBER.

Today, those who want to make a living from tourism can no longer reason in economic terms alone. A holistic approach is necessary". This is how François Seppey, head of tourism and economic promotion services in the Swiss canton of Valais, sees sustainable tourism. It is an approach he is well familiar with because Valais, the second most popular tourist destination in the country, has developed a policy that is largely based on the principles of sustainable development.

Valais aims for excellence

The canton introduced the label Valais Excellence, and officially adopted it last year. It encourages local stakeholders to promote high-quality tourism. Already, thirty businesses have joined the project. Ski lift companies have been part of a pilot project and the results have been compelling. "Companies involved in the pilot project have all reported fewer customer complaints since they joined the Valais Excellence scheme", adds François Seppey. "Don't forget: a happy customer is a repeat customer!"

The canton's clear goal is to promote customer loyalty and improve added value generated by tourism. "We are guiding tourism towards more profitable activities", points out François Seppey, "but our approach is always based on sustainable development." As a result, the canton prefers hotels to apartments and rented chalets: not only is the hotel sector more lucrative, it also means fewer areas are built up.

Another requirement: socio-cultural issues

To breath new life into otherwise deserted villages, some local authorities have taken very strict measures, refusing for example to grant construction permits to private individuals who want to build apartments solely for tourist rental. "If someone decides to build a chalet with several apartments, he is obliged to rent at least one to people who intend to live in the village all year round", explains François Seppey.

Finally, in order to involve the people of Valais in sustainable development projects, the canton is launching an awareness campaign with a particular emphasis on children. "We are going to add tourism to geography classes," says François Seppey. "Children who are going to make a living from this activity in the future should be educated about the basic notions of sustainable tourism."

In the French Alps, the department of Haute-Savoie is also engaged in developing sustainable tourism. Many local authorities half way up the mountain have purchased snow guns because of the lack of snow above altitudes of 1,500 metres. This costly investment (€1.5 million for 30 guns) has had an impact on local water resources management. "We have come to realise that this is not the long-term solution, explains Laurent Collinet, from the department's tourist agency. It is not cold enough at lower altitudes and in the winter you can see snow guns in the middle of luxuriant green meadows!" These resorts have now turned to other activities, such as fitness, hiking and heritage tours. Today, only 25 to 30 % of winter tourists come to ski.

The North: heading for the real ecotourism

The Nordic countries lead the way in sustainable tourism. "More often than not, the initiative is taken by locals", explains Marit Olsson, who is in charge of tourism in Halland, a region in southwest Sweden. "Our role is simply to help them with the administrative side." Here, ecotourism is part of the mindset. Alvhaga Vildmark, in Sweden, is a telling example. On the shores of Lake Fegen in the southwest of the country, the area is part of the "Natura 2000" network, introduced by the European Commission to bring together the protection of natural species and habitats with the development of ecotourism. When you come for a holiday, it is for a completely natural experience: the cottages are lost in the wilderness, days are spent fishing on the lakeshore, canoeing, or picking wild strawberries. For now, this sort of holiday mainly attracts families.

In France, a more cautious approach is being taken. "In Alsace (northeastern France), we don't have a sustainable tourism plan", says Christian Fleith from the tourist development agency. "But we have put in place concrete measures which are similar."

The ecomuseum in Ungersheim where 25 hectares of wasteland have been turned into an open-air museum is one of these initiatives. Initially, this "ecopark" was supposed to safeguard endangered rural architecture. Then, its scope was progressively expanded. Today, the ecomuseum, which is run by locally-recruited staff, is home to an important collection of objects, documents and buildings from Alsace. 400,000 visitors a year come to see houses and farms typical of the region,



The regions have a central role to play in developing tourism that both respects the environment and local inhabitants.

the oldest of which dates back to the 15th century. The ecomuseum has also given new life to traditional trades. Old-fashioned bakers, saddlers, blacksmiths, cartwrights and sawyers have reappeared in the ecomuseum. A pottery, closed since 1959, opened again in 1994 and makes reproductions of old varnished clay pottery. The ecomuseum also makes traditional charcoal. While on the one hand the objective is to revive an old trade and a technique that had died out, on the other it is to commercialise high-quality charcoal while deriving benefit from the ecomuseum's forest land.

Alsace promotes walking and cycling so that tourist development in the region is environmentally friendly and in keeping with the needs of the local community. It has 11,000 km of marked paths, or 10% of those in France. Another innovation is an Alsace label, which the tourist development agency has been working on with a view to promoting rural cuisine and other products. By 2004, about one hundred artisans from local culinary sectors will be featured in a tourist brochure. In order to qualify for the label, the artisans must meet quality standards.

A growing number of similar initiatives are appearing across Europe, but because tourist facilities are so diverse, thought must be given to finding the right solution for each region, taking into account the varying environmental and socio-cultural pressures. <

A Choice of Labels

Agenda 21 for the travel and tourist industry is an action programme adopted by 182 countries in June 1992 at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development. It is a great success because it is the first such agreement to secure a broad consensus. It makes a series of proposals for achieving sustainable development in the world throughout the 21st century. Agenda 21 sets out a global vision of development (*refer to the column on the right*).

To complete this agenda, there are management systems based on **ISO standards** (International Standards Organisation) which help businesses take the practical steps required to comply with sustainable development. Many companies have also designed their own systems based on ISO standard 14,000, which makes the environment an integral part of running the business. The company sets the goals it would like to achieve and an outside body certifies compliance. *"We have undertaken to reduce annual energy consumption by 10 %",* explains Didier Houi, director of the Regional agency for the environment in the region of Midi-Pyrénées (southwest France). *"An auditor visits us every year to see whether we are achieving our goals. The system imposes constraints of course, but it makes a lot of sense and is very worthwhile."*

A general code of conduct. In December 2001, the UN Environmental Programme voted in favour of a resolution that sets out the basis of sustainable tourism worldwide. This global code of ethics, the first of its kind, emphasises how important it is that all stakeholders in the tourist industry work together, be they host countries or regions, private businesses or travellers. The drawback is that this code of conduct is voluntary.

"Quality Standards" and "Quality Assurance". There are a great many across Europe, but they do not provide consistent

recommendations. "Quality assurance" logos are mainly used in the accommodation and restaurant sectors. "Quality standards" tend to be quite vague about matters such as water and energy consumption, waste management and protection of the ozone layer. There are however a number of very worthy "quality standards", including "Pavillon bleu", which appears at 2,800 beaches and pleasure-boat harbours in 23 European countries and is based on three indicators: water quality, environmental education and environmental management.



Labels such as "Pavillon bleu" help in promoting environmental awareness.

"Eco Standards". "The Nordic Swan" is one of the most highly-reputed standards in the world. Introduced in 1998, this regional standard is awarded to tourism products in Nordic countries that abide by strict environmental standards. It applies to environmentally-friendly bed-and-breakfast establishments and restaurants. At the international level, "Green Globe" has existed since 1994 and is awarded to tourist businesses that comply with the principles of Agenda 21 for the preservation and improvement of the environment, with a focus on waste reduction and recycling, water resource management and energy management, etc. <

The Istria (Croatia) Meetings on 26 and 27 June 2003

"Sustainable and high-quality tourism: the experience of the regions", this is the title of a seminar organized by the Assembly of European Regions (AER) to be held on 26 and 27 June 2003 in Porec, Istria (Croatia).

Over the course of the two days the focus will be on exchanging experiences. European regions will come together to discuss sustainable and high-quality tourism. Regions will be able to draw on the experience of successful projects presented at the seminar. The objective of the meeting is to promote an integra-

ted approach to sustainable tourism using the resources specific to each region and with a view to creating jobs. The first day will be devoted to successful regional strategies. Participants will then have an opportunity in the breakout sessions to discuss the tools required to set up such projects. On the following day, 27 June, the results of the discussions will be presented and in the early afternoon, Brian Greenslade, Chairman of the AER's Regional Policy Committee, will present the seminar's conclusions.

Agenda 21: four sections

1. Social and Economic

- Poverty reduction
- Promotion and protection of the health of local communities
- Promotion of co-operation between peoples
- Creation of jobs for local communities

2. Resources

- Reduction of deforestation and desertification, development of mountain resources
- Protection of the atmosphere
- Preservation of biodiversity and ecosystems, rational management of biotechnology
- Protection of seas and oceans
- Protection of fresh water resources
- Rational management of solid waste, radioactive waste and chemical toxins

3. Stakeholders

- Importance of involving children and young people in the promotion of sustainable development
- Strengthening the role played by local communities
- Strengthening the role played by NGOs, local communities, scientists and farmers

4. Means

- Use of proper environmental technologies
- Putting science at the service of sustainable tourism development
- Promotion of education and training, raising public awareness
- Putting a stop to or limiting protectionism



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