

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: IS IT ACHIEVABLE?



Each year, millions of tourists pack their bags and travel in all directions. But they don't only want to discover the world; they also want to be sustainable - in theory, at least.

Discover a new country, explore foreign cities, relax at the beach - the perfect vacation can be many things to various people. **Many travelers have set a new goal for themselves: they want to improve the lives of locals during their stay.**

There were 135 countries present at the ITB in Berlin, two thirds being emerging countries. For the local population, tourism usually is a vital part of the economy, making up a fifth of the economy and ten percent of the overall employment. And tourism is a great source of money.

Gerd Müller, Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development in Germany, demanded at the ITB to protect tourism in countries where it is the most important source of income:

"Tourism has a remarkable potential for young employment. By providing the required education, we can give them a chance for independent income and an autonomous future."

The direct connection between tourism and local welfare can be seen right before Europe's door: Only few people currently plan to make a vacation in Tunisia or Egypt despite the nearly perfect touristic infrastructure of these countries. The fear of terror attacks and political unrest weighs in too heavily. But once a region drops out of the international tourism picture, hundreds of thousands lose their livelihood - which in turn worsens the political instability. A downward spiral.

By bringing tourism and investments to emerging countries, travel agencies and tourists can contribute to remedy the causes of poverty. That's why many travel companies and the industry association Futouris support local projects in various countries: such as Africa's biggest nature sanctuary, the Okavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area, where they are realizing an industry-spanning project for sustainable tourism lodges. The area is in the border region between Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Travel companies such as Tui, DER Touristik, Thomas Cook and other contributors to the project hope to get the ball rolling on a sustainable economic development and to reduce the rural exodus of the local population. "Tourism is the best kind of development work," Thomas Ellebeck of the Tui Group said.

Projects like these can certainly be a great start for a tourism turnaround towards sustainability, but Heinz Fuchs of "Brot für die Welt" sees a general error in the approach: "It is not sustainable to fly hundreds of thousands of people all around the world in order to put them inside sustainable tourism lodges." This is why Heinz Fuchs demands that the tourism industry does not develop "a legalized model Volkswagen". One should "not turn on setscrews to make an industry come across as sustainable."

According to "Brot für die Welt", **tourism does not actually fulfill its promise of bringing poor countries more development and welfare.** According to the protestant aid association, "more

tourism equals more development" does not work either, since the money made in the tourism sector mainly gets back into the hands of elites.

So what can be done? The education of young people, a direct ingress to the local population of tourist destination and usage of the economic power of travel companies play a central role: the industry association Futouris supports projects, which fosters the youth of the respective countries with initiatives like a hotel school in Cambodia. Here, students learn how to sustainably and economically lead a hotel. They become sensitized to this topic and are guided so they can deepen this understanding in their later occupation. In order to protect the biodiversity of emerging countries, they also teach farmers of other countries to protect their fields from trampling elephants with chili and bees instead of shooting them with rifles.

Another measure can be to motivate tourists to approach local products more openly: if the cold cuts on Mauritius taste different than those in Germany, it might be because they were made by a local butcher. Especially the culinary tastes of foreign hotels, restaurants and excursions can be an important part of the vacation. Do you really need to eat Argentinean beef on the Maldives if you can satiate your appetite for an authentic travel experience by discovering local dishes and drinks?

The production, processing and disposal of food are linked to environmental issues. Long transport routes or a production in heated greenhouses cause CO2 emissions. The artificial watering of agricultural areas makes up a majority of the worldwide water usage. Travel companies can help here by utilizing their large economic power in emerging countries. **By switching to a more sustainable buying policy, they can support local farmers and food producers.** Otherwise disadvantaged small companies can take part in this development. Sustainable tourism can greatly benefit other industries, such as agriculture, crafts and artisan craftwork.

Even single travelers can contribute: Why not stay longer at a destination of your circular tour? This way, you can explore the surrounding area and come into contact with the local population, other cities and support the local economy by buying your lunch in a small village restaurant.

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