

Tourism Feels the Heat of Global Warming

The promoters of 'adventure-' or 'ecotourism' have popularized slogans such as: "Go visit the last paradises... before they'll be destroyed by tourist hordes." In a similar fashion, the British daily The Observer recently suggested that world travellers need to hurry up if they want to see the '10 wonders of a vanishing world'. According to the related article, the most wondrous natural tourist attractions we can no longer take for granted due to global warming include:

Africa's highest mountain – the spectacular Kilimanjaro in Tanzania will never look the same as snows are disappearing at an alarming rate.



The Caribbean coral reefs – particularly the Meso-American reef, the world's second biggest, stretching from the coast of southern Mexico down past Belize and into Honduras, is threatened by a three-fold environmental disaster: Warmer water disrupts coral growth; acidic water affects coral's abilities to secrete new skeletons; and increasingly intense hurricanes break it up. As a result thousands of marine species are on the brink of extinction.

The Maldives in the Indian Ocean – many tropical islands forming the Indian Ocean archipelago are likely to become submerged in the next two decades as a result of rising sea levels and increasing numbers of heavy storms.

Traditional ski resorts in the Alps such as Kitzbuhel in Austria for example will disappear from the tourist map within 20 years because of the lack of snow.

Furthermore, the future of many unique animal species that have attracted wildlife tourism is in jeopardy as habitats, breeding grounds and migration routes are changing. If global warming gets worse, entire populations of polar bears in the Arctic region, Wildebeests in East Africa, Mountain Gorillas in Uganda and Rwanda or Monarch Butterflies in Mexico may be destroyed.

Tourism world wakes up to the climate crisis

Climate is an essential resource for tourism, and especially for beach, nature and winter sport tourism, and the phenomenon of global warming already gravely affects the industry and an increasing number of destinations. In 2003, the Madrid-based UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) convened the 1st International Conference on Climate Change and Tourism in Djerba, Tunisia, to help the travel and

tourism industry to respond to these issues. The UNWTO, that only a few years ago became a special UN agency, is traditionally driven by a strong Business Council that aggressively advances the interests of the world's most powerful tourism-related corporations.

That the UNWTO declared climate change a priority issue shows the growing awareness among industry leaders and policymakers that the impacts of global warming pose a serious threat to tourism – one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries, generating over 10.4 per cent of world GDP, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC).

Notably, the Djerba conference recognized that the relationship between climate change and tourism is two-fold: Not only is tourism affected by a changing climate, at the same time it contributes to climate change by the consumption of fossil fuels and resulting greenhouse gas emissions.

It was concluded that there was an “urgent need for the tourism industry, national governments and international organizations to develop and implement strategies to face the changing climate conditions and to take preventive actions for future effects, as well as to mitigate tourism's environmental impacts contributing to climate change.” (Djerba Declaration 2003).



Image is all

While the global travel and tourism lobby has adopted the rhetoric of corporate social and environmental responsibility, reality checks on the ground show that tourism's environmental performance has remained very poor. Neither the UN-initiated International Year of Ecotourism 2002 or multilateral environment agreements such as the Tourism Guidelines under the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), have achieved anything to stop tourism from pervading pristine coastal areas, islands, forests and mountainous areas.

On the contrary, more fragile ecosystems and biodiversity are destroyed, local communities displaced and traditional livelihoods destroyed – all for the establishment of huge exclusive resorts, golf courses and marinas. These massive tourism complexes are also notorious for high per capita consumption of energy and water. But however damaging and wasteful these projects may be, with the right PR efforts, they can still pass as ‘ecotourism’ developments and even raise their profile thanks to eco-accreditation schemes, or environmental Best Practices awards.

As long as no proper legally binding frameworks are in place to check and redress excessive and

damaging tourism activities, 'green-washing' continues and climate change culprits are likely to get away scot-free.

Ecotourism promoters' intention to help minimize tourism's carbon footprint is laudable. The GEC07 Oslo Statement, for example, outlines an action plan that aims at "encouraging adapted travel patterns (e.g. increase length of stay per trip); promoting more energy-efficient, alternative or non-motorized transport options; utilizing reduced and zero-emission operation technologies; and increasing participation in reliable high-quality carbon offsetting schemes."

But many of the new initiatives that promote 'zero-carbon' or 'carbon-neutral' tourism businesses need critical examination because they may just be marketing gimmicks. For instance, The Guardian (UK) announced in January that Per Aquum, the brand behind some of the world's most luxurious resorts, was the owner of the first 'zero-carbon' five-star beach resort designed by architects in London. The developers of the resort claim the project has no negative environmental impact and is totally self-sufficient, using only energy from the sun and wind and producing little waste or carbon emissions. "The only drawback, environmentally speaking, is its location – thousands of fuel-guzzling miles away [from London] in Nungwi, Zanzibar," cautioned The Guardian.



Six Senses Resorts and Spas, a Bangkok-based luxury hotel chain with properties in Thailand, Vietnam and the Maldives is now specialized in 'carbon-cutting getaways' for millionaires who do not want their "vacation dampened by global warming guilt". Apart from introducing energy-saving innovations at the luxurious island resorts, all visitors are required to pay a tax for their flight, which goes into a carbon offset fund.

The project owners say the fund will be spent on renewable energy projects for villages in Sri Lanka and India, thus, offsetting among the poor the carbon emissions caused by jets transporting the rich to their holiday destination. Yet, can Six Senses really be called an environmentally friendly company considering that it consumes exorbitant amounts of water to run their spa facilities, for example?

Controversial carbon offsetting

A growing number of airlines have included carbon offsetting into the price of tickets. However, there are increasing reports about shady 'think green – see cash' carbon trading businesses that are trying to take advantage of well-intentioned air travellers. When Lufthansa was looking for a partner to offer a carbon offsetting scheme to customers, half of the 13 studied companies were considered unreliable.

The activists Timothy Byakola and Chris Lang exposed a Dutch company called GreenSeat which promised to invest airline passengers' carbon offset contributions in climate friendly projects in poor countries. For the paltry sum of US\$28, one would be able to cover the costs of planting 66 trees to 'compensate' for the CO2 emissions of a return flight from Frankfurt to Kampala.

But looking closer at one of these projects, in Mount Elgon National Park in Uganda, the activists found that local people were harassed and even driven from their land to pave the way for the tree plantations. GreenSeat has since stopped selling carbon credits from Mount Elgon – because of the problems there. Earlier this year, farmers cut down half-a-million of the project's trees and planted crops and fruit trees on the land.

Carbon trading that enables companies and consumers to buy themselves out of responsibility are highly controversial. It "dispossesses ordinary people in the South of their lands and futures without resulting in appreciable progress toward alternative energy systems," argues Larry Lohmann of the UK-based The Corner House, who has co-edited the book 'Carbon Trading: A Critical Conversation on Climate Change, Privatization and Power'.

"Tradable rights to pollute are handed out to Northern industry, allowing them to continue to profit from business as usual. At the same time, Northern polluters are encouraged to invest in supposedly carbon-saving projects in the South, very few of which are actually helping to halt dependence on fossil fuels."

What next?

It is urgent that civic movements concerned with climate change issues monitor and respond to these ongoing activities because travel and tourism is one of the world's most omnipotent industries, not only because of its size and growth but also as a driver of globalization and trade liberalization.

Existing campaign networks such as Third World Network or the UK Working Group on Climate Change and Development that includes the New Economics Foundation (nef), Friends of the Earth (FoE), Greenpeace, Oxfam and WWF, should pay more attention to the problems of tourism-related climate change issues in their action plans and help lobby industry, governments, and intergovernmental agencies to take more decisive steps to curb relentless tourism expansion that exacerbates the climate change crisis.

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