

FOOD WASTE: SHOULD THE TOURISM INDUSTRY WORRY?



Every year, more than 1 billion tons of food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted. Given its position when it comes to consumption on the food value chain, the tourism industry is a key industry to fight against this problem.

Food waste is an enormous problem. Each year, a third of all food produced is lost or wasted. This equals 1.3 billion tons.

Food waste is responsible for an astonishing 8% of global carbon emissions: think of all the water, energy and other resources used to produce, transport, process and sell food, as well as emissions and other by-products generated in the process. When food is wasted, these negative impacts on the environment are all for nothing, and getting rid of unused food further affects our ecosystems and sanitary landfills.

By 2030, food waste is expected to increase by 60%, which will result in a US\$1.5 billion loss. Not surprisingly, this is one of the targets within the Sustainable Development Goals: to reduce global food waste by half by 2030.

Food is lost at several points along the route from the farm to the table. In developing countries, most losses occur during the production, handling and storage phases of the food value chain. For example, Latin America and the Caribbean, two of the largest exporters in the world, are responsible for 10% of global food waste (127 million tons), partly due to weak infrastructure and poorly organized value chains.

On the other hand, food waste in developed countries occurs mainly in the final consumption stage. Since value is added to food as it moves through the value chain from production to consumption (that is, from rice in the field to risotto served in a restaurant), the economic cost of food waste increases as it reaches the final consumption stage.

Given the cumulative and incremental impact on the environment and economic losses as the value chain progresses, tourism is a key industry to reduce food waste.

While the lack of reliable data makes it difficult to quantify the magnitude of the problem in the industry, some critical factors of food waste are quite clear. Take, for example, the ever-present buffet. While this way of presenting food can be appealing to diners, it also encourages waste. Generally speaking, people not only take more than they can eat, but food safety precautions and regulations result in the disposal of untouched food.

Another common issue is overproduction, fueled by the unpredictability of demand and the desire of the hotel industry to promote a sense of abundance for customers when it comes to food. A study of 450 hotel companies (restaurants, hotels, catering companies, and others) in 25 countries found that between 8 and 20% of the total food cost is due to overproduction, cooking mistakes, damaged products and leftovers on plates. Often, food waste can match or surpass the net profits of a

business, which should be addressed by those who are trying to maximize the operating results.

The good news is that the tourism industry is implementing better and better processes and strategies for food waste management. Established hotel businesses such as Accor, Hilton and Hyatt have set goals to reduce 30% of their food waste by 2030.

Hotels and accommodations are better prepared than others to address these problems thanks to a growing trend of implementing environmental management systems and certifications throughout the industry. For example, reuse programs for towels and sheets, low flow faucets, and motion detection light sensors that can now be found in many hotels. In the same vein, the fact that food waste means money waste is an additional encouragement to take action, especially in all-inclusive hotels, resorts, cruises and convention centers, for which food is the central part of their business.

Clients, investors and other stakeholders are paying more attention to how those involved in the hospitality industry address sustainability, including issues like food waste. We've seen how the strong social media-driven reaction against plastic straws has gone viral, pushing many corporations, including Marriott, the world's largest hotel company, to ban their use. While addressing food waste is much more complex than that, this type of external pressure can help speed the call to action in the tourism industry.

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