

European Tourism Stakeholders Conference
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Panel 2: Sustainable and Socially Responsible Tourism

Chair: Katarzyna Sobierajska, Undersecretary of State, Ministry of Sport and Tourism, Poland

Rapporteur: Richard Denman, The Tourism Company, UK - TSG Member

Panel:

- Angela Gerekou, Deputy Culture and Tourism Minister, Greece
- Michael Cramer, MEP, Germany
- Liu Kezhi, Director-General of Marketing & International Cooperation Department, China National Tourism Administration
- Margarita Nájera, CEO of the Reconstruction Project of the Palma Beach, Spain
- Axel Biermann, Geschäftsführer, Ruhr Tourismus, Germany
- Sophie Flak, Member Executive Committee, ACCOR, France
- Sebastián Escarrer, Vice Chairman Sol Meliá, Spain
- Javier Bustamante, President SEGITUR, Spain

Introduction and objectives

Tourism cannot be competitive in the long term - and increasingly in the short term - if it is not sustainable, supporting the wellbeing of the environments and people on which it depends. Developing sustainable strategies and products is indispensable to safeguard and nurture European tourism, alongside the promotion of socially responsible tourism that facilitates access to tourism for an increasing number of European citizens.

The panel was invited to consider four key questions:

- Could the tourism industry implement sound sustainable strategies whilst retaining competitiveness? Could sustainable initiatives and management be truly turned to competitive advantage?
- What additional initiatives could the European Commission take to promote responsible practices amongst European tourism enterprises whilst facilitating the sustainable growth of tourism in Europe?
- Does the European tourist have a responsible attitude when travelling to other destinations?
- Is enough attention being dedicated at a European level to the promotion of socially responsible tourism?

Issues identified

The first of these questions was considered to be of particular importance for the future of tourism in Europe and most time was spent on addressing this.

Panellists representing destinations underlined the essential role played by tourism in the economy and in providing current and future employment. In Greece tourism is one of the few large industries. In Majorca economic success depends on tourism. Panellists representing tourism companies reminded the meeting that they were in the business of creating profit, wealth and employment and they had to be competitive to survive.

Despite this emphasis on the economy and competitiveness, all panellists, whether from the public or private sector, underlined that sustainable tourism, addressing social and environmental as well as economic impacts, was now a key part of their strategic approach. Sustainability and competitiveness must no longer be seen as countervailing alternatives; they should be joint aims and can be mutually supporting. In the last two years this imperative has become clearer. Following the economic crisis in Europe, a new approach is called for which underlines the need for competitive industry that is at the same time environmentally and socially responsible.

Excellent examples were given by panellists of how tourism can play a key role in economic regeneration that in turn is dependent on environmental improvement. The Palma Beach project in Majorca is about turning round an outdated resort and providing a form of tourism that the market wants. Environmental imperatives, such as providing green spaces and clean seas and catering for much hotter summers, are dictating design and management, within a holistic strategy that addresses the need for quality employment and service. Likewise in the Ruhr in Germany environmental enhancement and cultural regeneration, making truly creative use of former industrial buildings, has been the key to establishing a competitive position for the area as a new tourism destination. Here, as in Majorca, improving the quality of life of local residents alongside the tourism offer is essential for a sustainable tourism strategy.

A marrying of competitiveness and sustainability was also well demonstrated by the private sector panellists. Accor Hotels consider that it is their strategic position on sustainability that will provide them with a strong competitive advantage. This is followed through in all aspects of management, from energy sources to providing a fair workplace for staff, driven by firm facts about cost and economic advantage. Sol Melia Hotels see sustainability as essential for the wellbeing of tourism. They have set sustainability targets in their strategy and in their compensation scheme for managers at a corporate and operational unit level.

All this evidence points to a positive answer to the main question – the panellists clearly believed that sustainable initiatives and management could be turned to competitive advantage.

A number of specific issues were identified which will affect success with this strategic approach and which are relevant to the other questions posed, relating to enterprise response, consumer behaviour and socially responsible tourism. These issues concerned three main areas – focus, evidence and communication. Many initiatives could gain more from better coordination and there is a danger of underachievement through fragmentation in Europe. A common call during the meeting was for an improvement in the evidence base to support sustainable tourism strategies. Ineffective communication, within the industry and with consumers, was

seen as holding back progress and preventing the spread of awareness and support for sustainable tourism that is needed.

Conclusions and recommendations

In addressing these issues, the experience of the panellists and feedback during discussion point to the following requirements for success:

Partnership working at all levels

This is partly about vertical coordination and relationships - the need for effective and supportive links between the EU, Member States, Regions and local destinations was apparent. There is also a need for horizontal coordination – the need to overcome fragmentation between small authorities in the Ruhr was one example. Finally, joint initiatives between the public and private sector have proved very helpful in addressing the sustainability agenda.

Bold planning

Sustainable and competitive tourism can be assisted by positive, coordinated planning. The presentation from the China National Tourism Administration demonstrated a range of significant initiatives within a comprehensive plan, including increasing the coverage of protected areas, a new green hotel standard, stronger promotion of sustainable tourism and a manual for environmentally friendly travelling.

Positive incentives, not penalties

There was a call for an approach based on positive encouragement and incentives to enterprises to embrace sustainability, rather than using penalties to influence action. While the meeting heard about the impressive response of large companies, the needs of small businesses with less capacity were recognised.

Convincing commercial arguments

Private sector panellists pointed to the need for the commercial benefits of sustainable tourism to be better articulated. It is important to be able to show that improved environmental management, for example, can help businesses to reduce costs. The positive advantages of a well compensated and trained workforce should be demonstrated.

Robust measurement

The need for better measurement of impacts was stressed. This is part of the answer to the above need to strengthen the commercial argument.

Sharing data and knowledge

More work could be done across Europe to share knowledge that is helpful in planning sustainable and competitive strategies. This could range from benchmarking data on enterprise performance to lessons from different initiatives. Panellists stressed that data should be relevant to the type of enterprise concerned.

Creative products, demonstrating success

Product innovation and creativity should form part of sustainable and competitive strategies. The story of cycle trails, including the new Iron Curtain Trail initiative, presented by one panellist provides a good example. Following early scepticism about the economic value of such products, tourism enterprises now appreciate that cyclists can be high spenders and wish to see cycle trails in their vicinity.

Active awareness-raising amongst consumers

Panellists underlined that sustainable and competitive tourism are not achievable without a consumer response. More should be done to raise awareness. However, messages should be positive and consumer focussed, putting across the benefits to them of forms of tourism that are socially and environmentally responsible.

Implications for the EU

The points raised above should be borne in mind by stakeholders at all levels. However, the questions posed were partly about European level action and so it is appropriate to identify some recommendations for the European Union based on comments made during the panel meeting. These are provided below:

- **Help overcome fragmentation.** Through various programmes and initiatives the EU can stimulate and facilitate vertical and horizontal partnerships.
- **Continue to support networks.** These should include networks of destinations, enterprises and other stakeholders, building on initiatives taken so far, such as NECSTouR and EDEN.
- **Illustrate and promote practical solutions.** Action should include identifying case studies of good practice across Europe and disseminating them through websites, conferences etc., reflecting the practical focus called for by the panel.
- **Assist in measurement and exchange of knowledge.** The EU can assist in providing common frameworks for measurement, such as the current work on destination indicators, as well as supporting and disseminating research.
- **Provide funding for positive initiatives.** While not all action requires sizeable funding, well targeted financial support for practical initiatives is very valuable.
- **Continue to work on social tourism.** Comments from the discussion suggested that work in promoting social tourism across Europe is valued, especially in light of the potential positive impact on seasonality of demand.
- **Communicate the good work done.** Panellists indicated that there has been much relevant work by the EU on business sustainability and competitiveness, both within the tourism sector and more widely, such as in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility. This needs to be communicated as effectively as possible.

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