

Sustainable tourism and pleasure



Learning how to cast a fishing net on a lake © Eco-Benin

With a turnover of 500 billion dollars and 250 million employees, tourism is one of the main economic activities globally. However, revenue from the tourist business is often distributed unfairly and the environment is under pressure because of tourism. Does 'sustainable tourism' offer an alternative? And how can the triple P of sustainable development (people, planet, profit) be reconciled with the P of pleasure?

A sector with an impact

Until 1930 tourism was only for a select few. With the introduction of paid leave 'the average worker' gradually also had access to travel. By 1950, 25 million people were already travelling abroad, in 1970 there were 165 million travellers and in 2012 one billion. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) expects no less than 1.6 billion people will travel abroad by 2020. Obviously, such exponential growth generates revenue and jobs, not just in the North but also increasingly in the South.

This offers opportunities for developing countries. Often these countries have a great deal to offer: beaches and sun, cultural heritage and unspoilt nature. In 20 of the 48 least developed countries tourism is already the main or second source of revenue. In some countries, especially small island states, tourism even amounts to a quarter of the GDP. It is good that the sector creates jobs for women and young or unskilled people. Not so good is the fact that chiefly countries in the North (through their hotel chains, airline companies and tour operators) benefit most from this business, while only a minority of the local population shares in the benefits. Also, revenue from tourism is uncertain: an ecological disaster or political tensions can suddenly keep away tourists and investments become worthless.

A destructive sector

A lot depends on how the tourism business is run. Mass tourism is usually a disaster for the environment with few winners, several losers and a great deal of dependency in the underlying relations.

"In more than 50 countries I have seen with my own eyes how destructive tourism can be", says Marie-Paule Eskénazi, journalist and founder of Tourisme Autrement. The numbers on the organisation's website speak for themselves: "An average tourist in a country in the South uses 7 to 10 times more water than a local inhabitant. In the Philippines the water used for a golf course covers the daily needs of 15,000 inhabitants of Manila, or of 60,000 people in the countryside. During a one-hour flight one passenger emits more CO₂ than an inhabitant of Bangladesh in a whole year. In Nepal a tourist trekking through the mountains uses approximately 6 kilos of wood per day for heating, while the country suffers from erosion."

"Tourism is not the answer to development questions, but it can contribute significantly," is the UNWTO's conclusion.

Sustainable tourism

In response to the many pleas for sustainable development many people and instances have advocated 'sustainable tourism'. In 2004, the UNWTO defined sustainable tourism as "Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impact, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities".

The triple P of sustainable development tourism obviously also applies to sustainable tourism.

- **People:** Tourism must respect the social and cultural identity of the host communities, their cultural heritage and traditional values and must contribute to a dialogue between cultures and promote mutual understanding.
- **Planet:** Tourism can make use of the natural resources of a country but it must maintain the ecological processes and help conserve the natural heritage and biodiversity.
- **Profit:** Tourism must establish long-term economic relations and fairly share the social and economic benefits between all stakeholders. For host communities, this means stable employment and income that contribute to poverty reduction.



Playing in Benin © Catherine Piret

A fourth P

Manu Minne, the coordinator of the ViaVia Tourism Academy (a division of travel agency Joker, specialised in adventure and discovery trips), sees several reasons why sustainability is lagging behind in tourism compared to other sectors: "First of all, tourism is a complex and multidisciplinary business, in which economic activities such as building, catering and transport come together. This does not make things easy. In addition, the sector is very volatile and short-term thinking often still prevails. Another important reason is that for a long time sustainability has been a moralizing story; sustainability meant giving up prosperity, while most people see their holidays as synonymous to pleasure."

"Fortunately, the rhetoric is changing. I prefer a model that puts a fourth P in the middle of the triple P: the P of **pleasure**. Not in a limited sense of the word, but with a broad range of possible emotions such as joy, emotion, surprise... That is how you create added value: *pleasure* for the traveller in the sense of the experience, *pleasure* for the local host in the sense of being respected and having decent work.

Just consider the fourth P as a check for the other Ps. How can an ecological project enhance the experience of a tourist and at the same time boost the local community's income? If you look at it that way, sustainability becomes a means to achieve innovation."

Local entrepreneurship

What sustainable tourism concretely means, according to Manu Minne, can only be said for a specific local context. While Tourisme Autrement mainly targets travellers, the ViaVia Tourism Academy also offers training sessions in the South. "We tell small, local entrepreneurs what European tourists expect. Not to take these expectations as an absolute starting point but instead to consider them and together think how tourism can be made sustainable in the local context."

Through its training sessions the ViaVia Tourism Academy advises local entrepreneurs to invest carefully. Tourism is uncertain. For instance, it can be a clever move to take an on-the-side job in tourism instead of immediately going for a full-time job. Moreover, a combination of agriculture and tourism often offers tourists a more authentic experience.

Travel 3.0

Another interesting given is that, increasingly, small entrepreneurs in the South can also communicate directly with potential customers. In the past, the monopoly was with tourism information offices and tour operators (*Travel 1.0*). Then travellers started to inform each other (*Travel 2.0*). Now, local entrepreneurs sell themselves through social media and the internet (*Travel 3.0*).

Warm Heart Travels

Warm Heart Travels is a nice initiative that embodies the 4Ps. It was founded by a young local entrepreneur in Malawi. The grandson of a village elder he was destined to succeed his grandfather, but instead he chose for tourism. "Together we considered how we could preserve his personal story, his culture, his DNA within a tourism undertaking," says Manu Minne.

The families we visit in Malawi are not traditional tribe members in exotic clothes but normal farmers who are willing to share their home with visitors. The financial contribution is very often more than welcome and helps to send their children to school. Central activities include visiting the village chief, cooking together and exploring and learning from cultural differences.

A stay at Area 21, the *township* of the capital Lilongwe, is also possible. Tourists can visit a school, have his or her hair done at a hair dresser or play a game of football with local kids. That way, Warm Heart Travels tries to make a difference between "a *nice holiday* and a *lifetime experience*".



Cooking with the host @ Warm Heart Travels

Contacts are often established through small things. For instance, foreign visitors are given a few phrases in the local language written on a piece of paper and sent to the market to buy vegetables for their host. For the tourist this is a genuine experience. The local economy also benefits. And for the host it is a first step before actually cooking together.



Collecting mangrove trees near Lake Antheme © Eco-Benin

Trees4Tours

ViaVia Tours, which is linked to the ViaVia Traveler Café in Jogjakarta (Indonesia), is one of the final contenders for the 2013 Wild Asia Responsible Tourism Award.

A few of the arguments of the jury show what sustainable tourism can be:

- Lets travellers get to know the old Javan culture and how it merges with modern values today. Prepares its travellers before meetings, tells them how to dress and behave and asks a contribution for the cultural heritage.
- Prefers small accommodation and knows the owners personally; the owners are asked to give feedback and clear arrangements are made with them.
- Teaches about waste and the environment in village schools where it operates.
- Organises workshops and working visits for students in tourism and for young, local entrepreneurs about inter-cultural communication and how to guide a group.
- Organises street festivals for the neighbourhood. Supports local artists. Provides its space to local groups.
- Contributes to emergency relief after earthquakes and disasters.
- Staff is 100% local. Some have moved up from low-skilled positions. Promotes gender equality on the workfloor.
- Offers local and organic products from local producers as much as possible. No palm oil. No GMOs. Has a Fair Trade Shop with products from disadvantaged groups such as street children.
- Uses public transport as much as possible during tours. Compensates travel emissions by planting trees (Trees4Tours).



The secret of an Indonesian meal disclosed
© ViaViaTours Jogjakarta

Eco-Benin

Another nice example is the NGO Eco Benin, which promotes about ten tourism initiatives throughout Benin through its website, Facebook and YouTube. The organisation offers trekkings through valuable nature reserves as well as opportunities to meet with local cultures. The local community is always hosting and accompanying tourists. Sometimes they even build cottages or lodges or even traditional round housing in their villages.

At the Fula settlement in Alfakoare, for instance, in a few days, tourists learn to herd cattle, manufacture the local cheese and understand what beauty is for the proud Fula. Between 10 and 25% of the revenue goes to concrete projects such as schools and latrines or to the poorest families within the community. In 2011, Eco Benin welcomed 6,322 tourists.

For Eco Benin tourism is a way to start sustainable development in regions where agriculture or fisheries are

losing foot or where cultural or natural resources are under threat. Eco Benin honours its 'eco' name through a CO₂ action plan and with ecological development activities such as organic farming or ecological toilets.

In the south-east of Benin unemployed fishermen restore the mangrove. One hectare of mangrove stands for 200 tonnes of CO₂ absorbed. To compensate for their travel emissions tourists can help plant these aerial root trees. In the north of Benin, near Pendjari National Park, the fight against the advancing desert is key. Eco Benin promotes improved cooking ovens among the local population, which consume up to 60% less wood. It slows down deforestation and releases less carbon. The ovens are produced by local crafts people.

Ecological projects enhance the experience of tourists and boost the local community's income: a win-win situation. Or how sustainability can be a means for innovation in a blooming sector.



BTC TRADE FOR DEVELOPMENT

WWW.BEFAIR.BE

**THE BELGIAN
DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION .be**

Sources

UNWTO, project 'Sustainable Tourism': sdt.unwto.org
Tourisme Autrement: www.tourisme-autrement.be
ViaVia Tourism Academy: www.viaviatourismacademy.com
Warm Heart Travels, Malawi: www.warmhearttravels.com
Eco-Benin, Benin: www.ecobenin.org
ViaVia Tours Jogjakarta: www.viaviajogja.com

The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of BTC or of the Belgian Development Cooperation.