

“Climate Change – Reality Check and Opportunity for Tourism ”

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This is a call to the leaders in the public and private Tourism Sector and ultimately to travelers themselves Climate change is real, its effects are proven and the Tourism Sector has to play its part in contributing to the solution of the challenges it poses.

The efforts of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) are embedded in the activities carried out by the international community over the last years, kicked-off in 1992 by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development - also known as the Earth Summit - in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This led to the agreement on the Climate Change Convention and the negotiations leading to the Kyoto Protocol, which came into force in 2005, assigning mandatory emission limitations for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to the signatory nations.

The need for a response to climate change in the tourism sector is a message that the UNWTO has been developing over the last years. Since the beginning of the decade we have taken on the climate challenge next to our more familiar work on poverty alleviation through sustainable tourism and in 2003 convened the 1st International Conference on Climate Change and Tourism (Djerba, Tunisia).

During the years since Djerba, UNWTO has become a fully fledged member of the UN System. The UN, in turn, has been given the key responsibility to address the global response to the effects of climate change.

As the lead UN agency for tourism, UNWTO is now dealing at the highest level on our sector's response in this matter and I am privileged to be part of the Secretary-General's Chief Executive Board. Mr Ban Ki-moon has identified the vital coherence between poverty alleviation and climate change responses, as pursued by UNWTO.

Tourism has now a window of opportunity to input an industry viewpoint to the current climate discussions, as the UN-backed Global Climate Change Meeting draws nearer (3-14 December, Bali, Indonesia). This was also requested by the UN Secretary-General during his recent visit to the Madrid headquarters of UNWTO.

In order to address the matter in a comprehensive and transparent way, we must not forget the dual relationship between tourism and global warming, both as its victim and vector: While rising sea levels, desertification, deforestation or the melting of snow and glaciers hurt the tourism economy, our sector also contributes through its very existence to the warming process.

The effects of climate change are occurring now and must be dealt with promptly. It is therefore vital for tourism destinations to anticipate these coming changes and to draw their consequences. We must increase our efforts towards the necessary and sustainable diversification of our sector vis-à-vis global warming. It is also imperative to address the issues around energy-efficient technologies and transportation.

We have to share the burden of the global response of the international community to the climate challenge. It is the UNWTO's conviction that the mitigation potential is especially high in the tourism industry, because efforts to lower its energy consumption are still in their infancy and have in many cases been undertaken without a global vision. Furthermore, the expected growth of our sector (more than 850 million international travellers expected in 2007 and over 1.6 billion in 2020) justifies that it be given particular attention.

This growth perspective is directly linked to the development contribution of tourism for poorer countries. That's why the preoccupation about climate change must be dealt without losing sight of other priorities and, in particular, the plight of the poorest populations.

The challenge now is to effectively provide in a very short timeframe the industry's key thinking into the necessary process of adapting to the consequences of global warming, while mitigating its effects.

While UNWTO's efforts will continue interfacing with the relevant players in the future, it is now and over the next three months that a series of events offer a unique chance to help put in place a global response framework within the UN process leading to the Bali Climate Change Convention:

- 2nd International Conference on Climate Change and Tourism, 1-3 October, Davos, Switzerland
- Tourism Ministerial Summit in London, 13 November, London, UK
- UNWTO General Assembly, 22-29 November, Cartagena de Indias, Colombia

Davos is the key, as it will set the framework for the subsequent meetings. Davos is symbolic in that it is the kind of mountain sports zone that is so much under threat. Davos is also the place where world leaders gather every year to consider the challenges facing humanity. And we are privileged that our colleagues at the World Economic Forum are a supporting partner of the event - along with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the Government of Switzerland.

This multi-stakeholder conference is of particular interest to everybody involved in the Tourism Sector and its leadership, with the guaranteed exposure to over 40 world experts on the subject and industry leaders.

If you cannot come to Davos yourself, please make sure that the senior person in charge of dealing with these issues in your organization in the coming years makes an effort to attend. In order to facilitate participation there will be no cost for the meeting other than asking people to offset their travel. We have to be consistent with what we stand for.

And we have to stand up for the interests of our sector as we respond to what has been termed the most significant shift in living patterns since the industrial revolution. We know that tourism must adapt to the changes. We know that we will have to reduce our dependency on traditional energy sources. The challenges are how we do it. How we maintain the great benefits we bring to the world in terms of wealth creation, jobs, investment and cultural harmony: And how we particularly help the poorest countries to enjoy a greater share of those benefits.

Come to Davos and help us build a more responsible and sustainable future.