In the framework of the 45th UNWTO Commission for Europe Meeting, which took place 25-26 April 2006 in Almaty/Kazakhstan a seminar on “Policies, Strategies and Tools for Sustainable Tourism Development” was held. Beside delegates from 36 UNWTO member States, representatives from several international organizations and from various Kazakh regions participated in this seminar. In the morning session UNWTO experts delivered introductory presentations on tourism and sustainability, which were followed by case study presentations by some countries on national policies and the application of policy instruments for sustainable tourism at the national and local destination levels. The afternoon session was dedicated to the topic of indicators of sustainability for tourism destinations, which included presentations by UNWTO experts and by country representatives.

Conclusions of the first session on Tourism and Sustainability

- There is evidence of a continued growth and of growing economic importance of tourism in the European region, including Central Asian countries, which calls for enhanced policies and planning in order both to raise the sustainability of tourism and to increase the contribution of tourism to the overall sustainable development of societies.

- Sustainable tourism is now widely recognised as the way forward. Various UN/International statements in the last five to ten years support the sustainable development of tourism (E.g. Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism, World Summit on Sustainable Development - Plan of Implementation).

- The presentations made during the Seminar clearly demonstrate that the sustainability agenda is very relevant to the countries of the UNWTO European Regional Commission. The challenges are huge, given the ever-increasing demand and pressure on the natural and cultural environments of destinations. Many of these management challenges and solutions are common in the region, and UNWTO can help in finding
appropriate solutions for each country, through technical assistance and capacity-building activities.

- It has been stated, however, that sustainable tourism is not just about conservation of the physical environment. Many of the issues detailed during the Seminar concerned social and cultural impacts. There is an international tendency to focus increasingly on the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of development, balancing them with environmental factors, and this is very valid for the tourism sector as well. In Hungary, for example, in the framework of the new National Tourism Strategy, tourism is considered not just as a key driver of the national economy, but also as an integral part of the quality of life of the population.

- Although the most operational level of tourism is at the local destination level, their sustainable development can be only accomplished within the framework of a coherent national policy. In Kazakhstan, Serbia and Montenegro a cluster-based tourism development is applied with a regional approach, recognizing the linkages between tourism attractions and services, and how they can be marketed most effectively.

- There is a need for public authorities at the national, regional and local levels to take the lead in the policy formulation and implementation process for various reasons:
  1. the tourism sector is highly fragmented, therefore coordination is needed between the diverse stakeholder groups,
  2. sustainability agenda is mostly about areas of public concern
  3. public authorities are responsible for many fundamental functions (land use, labour laws, provision of basic infrastructure, etc.)

- The relative market share of the European region is decreasing, due to the other emerging regions and destination. Nevertheless, the overall volume of tourism continues to grow and the region has extremely diverse and rich natural and cultural heritage that serves as strong basis for the development of a sustainable and competitive tourism sector. For a successful market strategy, national priorities need to be set for the development of products based on the unique and distinguishing features, which represent comparative advantages for the countries and destinations, aiming at providing a unique visitor experience. Governments should set incentives and regulatory frameworks to ensure that the product development process also support the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage, and helps its valorization through tourism use.

- Part of the product development strategy should aim at the diversification of the range of the tourism products. For this purpose it is useful to develop specific strategies and plans for the different products and market segments, such as in the case of Bulgaria and Romania where national ecotourism strategies are being developed and implemented, or in the case of Kyrgyzstan where community based tourism is developed in a comprehensive national framework. In Croatia the product diversification strategy also aims at improving the geographical spread of
tourism to more inland and rural areas. This will also help to alleviate tourism concentration and pressures on the coastal zone. In Kazakhstan product diversification aims at establishing tourism centers in the different regions of the country, based on a regulatory framework, financial incentives and innovative approaches. This will ensure a more balanced development of tourism throughout the country, as tourism activities have been concentrating so far in the Almaty region.

- A key message coming out from the presentations today has been the need for Governments, Non-Governmental bodies, the tourism industry and local people/community to work together. All the presentations underlined the need for open consultation processes for the formulation of national policies and strategies, using multistakeholder committees, working groups and other forms of coordination mechanisms.

- The role of regional cooperation in the formulation and implementation of sustainable tourism strategies has been also highlighted, recognizing the need for aligning national tourism strategies with the European Union regional and cohesion policies. The Silk Road project provides a good framework for regional cooperation in tourism development, and not just between the core Central Asian countries, but also linking a broader range of nations in Asia and Europe. Good examples have been provided by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), demonstrating how regional organizations can encourage multi-sectoral dialogue and collaboration in devising tourism friendly policies and standards.

Conclusions of the second session on Indicators of sustainability for tourism destinations:

- There is a range of instruments that can be applied to support the formulation and implementation of sustainable tourism policies, and among these indicators are basic tools that can be used to evaluate the entire range of impacts of tourism at the destinations and supply reliable information for responsible decision-making. It is important to be realistic in the use of indicators and other tools. It is better to do a few things successfully than to do many things inefficiently. For example, with respect to indicators, it was recommended to start with a smaller set of key indicators that can be effectively monitored and then add to them over time.

- The case studies presented from European regional initiatives, from a national level application in Malta, and at the destination level in Algarve, Portugal demonstrated well the benefits from applying sustainable tourism indicators systematically to monitor tourism impacts (both positive and negative) regularly. In Malta indicators are used to establish a complex framework of carrying capacity assessment that helps authorities and managers to keep tourism operations within its limits. In Algarve, the indicator system is based on the national objectives and
indicators for sustainable development, and specified for the characteristics of this coastal region.

- A wide variety of examples of good practice have been presented from the participating countries. One of the main benefits of the Seminar is the experience that can be gained from sharing our ideas and experiences. UNWTO can help with the publication and dissemination of the results of this Seminar, as well as with technical assistance for the countries of the region. Networking and information dissemination mechanisms, such as the one provided by the DestiNet portal, represent important support tools for tourism officials, professionals and planners.

- As far as technical solutions are concerned, and what Governments can do, the UNWTO book “Making Tourism more Sustainable – A guide for policy makers”, serve as good reference, detailing policy instruments ranging from regulations and land use planning, to economic instruments, voluntary tools and support through capacity building and marketing. This publication is well complemented by the UNWTO “Guidebook on Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations”. Indicators are one of the various available tools, but are essential to make sure that other instruments work effectively.

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The delegates of the UNWTO member states expressed their gratitude to the Republic of Kazakhstan for hosting the 45th UNWTO Commission for Europe Meeting and for the warm hospitality which was received during their entire stay in Almaty. The representatives of Kazakhstan praised the topic of the seminar, which was useful and informative, given the sharing of experience with other countries and the expertise provided by UNWTO experts.