5TH WORLD ECOTOURISM CONFERENCE

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Conservation is not preservation. It is sustainable use. When it comes to your own nest egg, isn’t it common sense to deposit more than you withdraw? For a factory, would you ramp up manufacturing capacity without sufficient raw material? That is conservation, sustainable use, living within our means. With so many governments and corporations at Davos acknowledging that sustainable development is “table stakes” for anyone seeking to remain viable and competitive in a highly variable, climate defined future, conservation is more important than ever.

The Great Acceleration describes a sustained spike in global economic activity, extending from the mid 20th Century to the present. Tourism contributed to that spike.

Over much of this period, we saw nations of all types, with no ecological bank statement to track extraction rates, expending their natural capital blindly. There was no gauge to indicate where we were consuming resources and generating waste faster than the rate at which nature could absorb our waste, and generate new resources. And so, we plunged on.

Humankind has since taken our carbon footprint, built-up land, forest, cropland, pastures as well as fisheries well into ecological overshoot. The Global Footprint Network reports that humanity’s footprint now stands at 50% beyond the planet’s sustainable limits. We are in deficit.

This is the Asian Century. To an extent greater than ever before, Asia will define the pace and directions of global growth. The Global Footprint Network reports that the Asia Pacific footprint now stands 77% beyond the region’s sustainable limits. Ecologically, Asia Pacific is in the red. What do we need to do?

For many years, “carrying capacity” was the ecotourism mantra. It was believed that “Use Limit Policies” could be designed to temper biophysical impacts simply by controlling the overall level of recreational use. The carrying capacity approach has failed. Why? That paradigm impelled ecotourism managers toward the wrong question: how many is too many? Much current research has shown that many problems of recreational use are a function, not so much of the numbers of people, but of their behavior. Behavior defines footprint.

Two alternative management systems emerged, both with an enhanced social dimension. VERP added social capacity as a key element. Another model, the Limits of Acceptable Change, asked a different question: *What resource and social conditions are appropriate (or acceptable), and how do we attain those conditions?* Both systems were much more closely aligned to the principal job of ecotourism managers, i.e., protecting the values for which an area was established.

In many developing nations, however, these approaches have not worked either. Founded on the assumption common in developed economies that ecotourism’s financial benefits will naturally trickle down – these systems set up the table for external “commerciantes” rather than indigenous communities. They do not provide management structures specifically designed to fuel inclusiveness, equity and shared value. For developing and emerging economies, these essentials cannot be left to chance.

Tourism is a business. Like all business, it must deliver on its promises. Not just for resource protection and the visitor experience, but more importantly, for the host community for which it promises direct benefit and shared values. Ecotourism unites these three crucial elements. When nature pays, nature stays.

When nature pays too well, however, things can go haywire. Beware the goose that lays the golden egg. Many years ago, it was said that when you give a man a fish, he can eat today. When you teach him how to fish, he will eat forever. Well, many people learned how to fish, and today, an estimated 90 Million tons of seafood are captured each year. Our oceans are badly overfished and dying.

WWF believes that ecotourism, should be part of a wider sustainable development strategy. To provide a meaningful contribution that makes sense, ecotourism should be environmentally sustainable, economically viable and socially equitable. It should also be firmly regulated and driven by clear, enforced standards.

Ecotourism is a campfire. It is not a wildfire. Especially since it often relies on activities that depend on the conjunctive use of natural capital, and can deliver a substantial direct benefit that boosts community livelihood, it should be a well-regulated experience, not a contrivance of commercialism gone haywire.

Ecotourism is not anti-development. Once again, people may have been asking the wrong question. The question has never been whether or not to develop, but how to develop.

Ecotourism is theater. It delivers what is perceived to be a unique, enriching, highly-personal experience. In reality however every well-managed ecotourism package must involve a script, a director, a soundtrack and a highly trained stage crew that are all moving in sync. This involves training, rules, certifications and standards. Why are festivals and flash mobs so full of energy, and why do they look so good? They are choreographed.

**And now, we face climate change - the dark demons of Pandora’s box.**

Climate change changes everything. Characterized by inter-annual variability, its manifestations – though site specific – are non-linear. And its impacts will be systemic, redefining the world as we know it.

The very real prospect of more frequent social and economic dislocation stares us in the face. Is it the strongest species that will survive? Is it the most intelligent? Charles Darwin said no. It is the species most responsive to change.

How many of us have taken the time to understand how the world will change in a climate-defined future? How many of us are taking real steps to reduce climate-induced downtime, to re-configure our products, itineraries and communities, and capitalize on these systemic global changes? Climate change is here, and its impacts are accelerating. What good does it do to point fingers, moaning and groaning about the loss of endowments?

The imperative is to understand what is here now, and look for glimpses of what is coming. Then, we can begin to figure out how to bounce forward, rather than simply bounce back. There is no room for silo thinking, palliatives aimed at public appeasement and business as usual formulas. The exigencies of our climate-beleaguered future demand that we muster up the courage to walk unfamiliar paths and take the steps now to be imprecisely right, rather than to remain precisely wrong. Whether in business or the public sector, this is the hallmark of leadership.

Collectively, we stand at a crucial pivot in human history. To cross that bridge, there are several things we need to keep in mind.

**Ecotourism planners need to figure out how to manage the risks of climate-related variability and disasters.**

We must shift mindsets and come to grips with a range of scenarios that describe the changes that will happen. While aiming for no downtime, we must build the platforms for new opportunity. It will be a complex and fast changing time.

In a highly urbanized world, facing a climate defined future, the tools that cities need go way beyond what is called the food, water and energy nexus. Cities and communities are going to have to pro-actively manage air quality, governance & citizenship, ecosystem services & biodiversity, houses & buildings, health, mobility and accessibility, consumption, waste & sinks, education – all feeding into mitigation, adaptation and resilience. Don’t all these elements impact on the visitor experience?

To keep ecotourism humming, all of that must work well. Clearly, we are not talking about a tune-up. We are talking about new formulas, and serious retro-fits. We have to work together.

**Natural capital is your product. Keep tabs on what is happening.**

Do you have an accurate database that tracks the trends and current status of your ecotourism resource? Development decisions made both yesterday and today, will define resilience tomorrow. The greatest tension between a country’s early development decisions and its later resilience lies in the stewardship of each nation’s natural capital. Calcium deficiencies lead to osteoporosis.

Poor decisions made in the early stages of development, such as the formation of institutions or the design of infrastructure, may spawn weak resilience at later stages. Poor logistics, open sewage, unsafe procedures, bleached coral reefs, garbage on the streets, unsustainable practices, empty promises…..bad news spreads fast. In today’s ecotourism marketplace, travellers have many other options. It is a competitive arena.

**Resilience must be hard-wired into strategies for ecotourism, national development and business.**

As engines of growth, ecotourism strategies need to work under different scenarios involving a spectrum of interacting climate and socio-economic trends. They need to proactively contribute to the resilience of crucial systems at different scales – local, national, regional, global. As shock absorbers, they need to be able to take climate shocks. They must be designed to deal with a higher frequency of spikes. They need to cushion the depth and impact of those dislocations. Without resilience, you won’t be around for long. And, if you are not around, how can you be sustainable?

**Resilience is not a “cut and paste” process.**

A climate future will play out in radically different ways, in different settings and geographies. What are the trends in your area? The appropriate responses, of business and governments, while rooted within their geographies, should involve thought and action beyond their fences. Feeding into open source, open data platforms, it is evidently clear that marine and coastal management must be anchored on an ecosystem approach that recognizes “ridge to reef” connectivity. What happens in the uplands, will define the coastal zone. We have to work together.

**Site-specific realities will define the appropriate response.**

The most resilient economic systems are founded on robust infrastructure, transparent and flexible human institutions as well as functioning natural capital. The coherent and effective management of all essential ecosystem services balances off consumption, production and trade requirements against a country’s natural resource endowments.

Do the ecological math. Are we extracting more than we can afford? Are we consuming someone else’s share? We court disaster if, as a planet, we continue to withdraw more than we deposit. We have to work together.

**Achieving coherence and resilience at one scale does not translate to achieving resilience at other levels.**

Resource trade-offs occur primarily at the local level. The conceptualization and management of development objectives often occur at the national level. Climate change poses a risk to resilience at the global level. Knowledge management, feeding into cross-sector communications contributing to trans-scale synergy will be key. We have to work together.

**We must “weave” shared value chains.**

Excessive dependence on resource extraction can lead to permanent reductions in resilience. Emerging economies must graduate beyond that old school growth formula. Recognizing that a commitment to sustainable use of natural systems is “table stakes” for the future, we must feed into and draw from collective intelligence, and leapfrog past the outmoded, destructive and polluting technologies of the past. These belong in an archive. They were not designed with resilience in mind.

Sustainable development is defined as chains of shared present and future value that link source to use, supply to demand, both for today and for tomorrow. Ecotourism is anchored on this very concept. It provides us the platforms where we can learn how to sustainably produce more with less. We have to work together.

We live on a water planet. 70% of our world’s surface is under the sea. For air-breathing humans, it is a hostile environment. Many years ago, I chose to enter that world. As I came to understand our oceans little by little, I discovered wonderful new things that most people do not know. Each time I sit on the boat’s edge to back flip into the sea, I never know what to expect. But I come prepared, with contingencies for almost all situations. Preparedness makes all the difference. When we understand what to expect, and prepare for it, the most daunting of challenges morph into new worlds of possibility.

A decade ago, we stumbled into the Age of Information. Knowledge was proclaimed as the new currency. Many profound changes have taken place since then.

Today, we are witnessing the birth of what I call the Age of Citizenship. Where gateways to real-time information, give access to new thinking, new formulas, new voices, from new parts of the world. The archaic hierarchies of history are slowly settling into the periphery, and in their place a global matrix of solutions and ideas is emerging. Though modular in nature, these are designed to steer us quickly toward the appropriate responses, allowing better transparency, improved cohesion and flexibility. Unless they are designed to network, coordinate and feedback, however, they will be nothing more than a mat of pixilated “selfies”. Crowd-sourcing has its handicaps, I know. But, governance is not government. It is you and I. We have to work together.

There is an elephant in the room. For all of this to work, there must be trust. How does one weave a synergistic global framework from dissonant ideologies, competing interests, clashing cultures and a wide range of world views?

The foundation for all this must be respect. Respect for each other. Respect for the cultural and natural endowments that make us what we are, and keep us alive. Acknowledgement that we have different aspirations, and that there is no single formula or solution. There is no level playing field. There is no silver bullet.

Each nation, and each region, must define their own path in such a way that their key interests and interventions converge. It is not sufficient to simply connect at a nexus. The task is to take this forward into an interactive weave of human action, designed collectively to fuel inclusion, build equity and create a world equipped to rise and fall, then rise again, with the tides of outrageous fortune.

We live in the anthropocene. This is a period in which human actions play a major role in shaping the biosphere and its processes. Physical processes can no longer be examined in isolation, because the human footprint has taken over as the dominant driver of change.

We are a growing world. Over the next half century, our population will increase from 7 Billion to 9 Billion. Swarming into mega-cities, much of that growth will happen here, in the Asia Pacific. We are a rich, diverse and highly textured world. Ultimately, however, we share one future, and one planet.