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**ECOTOURISM: An effective and sustainable way for tackling poverty
Progress, opportunities and challenges**

*Presentation by Eugenio Yunis,
Director of Programme and Coordination*

Major tourism trends worldwide and in Asia

In 2008, international tourist arrivals worldwide reached 922 million, nearly 2% more than in 2007. International tourism receipts grew to US\$ 943 billion (euro 641 billion), corresponding to an increase in real terms of 1.8% over the previous year.

In 2009, as expected, the negative trend in international tourism that emerged during the second half of 2008 intensified. International tourist arrivals have suffered a sharp drop since January of -8% overall for the first four months of the year. Moreover, this decline is expected to have continued through to the end of June.

In real terms, and for the four first months of 2009, Asia and the Pacific (-6%) is well behind its previous growth levels and is one of the regions where the reverse of trend has been more significant. Only Oceania (-4%) declined at below average rate while South Asia (-12%) shows the sharpest drop. In a full year projection for 2009, international tourist arrivals in Asia and the Pacific are forecast to descend by between 4% and 1%. The situation has deteriorated faster than expected, as most emerging economies had remained, in late 2008, somehow immune to the global economic trade and investment contraction. This slowdown is particularly severe when compared with the region's outstanding performance in recent years.

One positive note: some experts see recession ending towards the end of this year, mainly for the reason that China and India have resumed faster growth rates in their economies. Another positive note is that the current economic crisis could be viewed and used as an opportunity to make a number of changes needed to improve the industry, especially from a sustainability perspective. It is a perfect time for strengthening more sustainable segments, like ecotourism, and to see these segments playing a leading role in the restructuration path for the whole tourism sector.

Ecotourism in the global agenda

As you may remember, the United Nations designated the year 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, which was in itself a recognition of its growing importance for

both, the natural environment and the local communities living in non-industrial non-urban areas. In the preparation of and during the International Year, UNWTO and UNEP worked closely together to advance knowledge on ecotourism, to understand the ways in which its benefits and risks are generated and distributed among the stakeholders, and how to face the challenges for maximising its positive impacts and minimising any potential risks.

The Québec Declaration resulting from the Ecotourism Summit of that year, agreed by all parties attending the Summit, has been widely disseminated afterwards. It constitutes a balanced document that has helped to promote and implement sustainable ecotourism policies and management practices in many countries and by many companies. Its validity remains intact until today and may continue into the future. We are constantly pleased to learn that it is being used by many stakeholders as a source of inspiration and practical guidance in their work.

But we are also concerned –and all serious ecotourism stakeholders should be concerned too- that in spite of the Declaration and the overall consensus reached during 2002, the term “ecotourism” is still being misused and abused as a mere marketing and promotional tool by many companies and destinations, without any sense of responsibility or respect towards the natural and human environments. The need for further regulation of the ecotourism segment remains, therefore, high.

Regulatory mechanisms are needed to ensure the quality and sustainability of ecotourism establishments and services, especially lodges, transport equipments, guides and the overall operation of ecotourism circuits. A number of voluntary, self-regulatory systems have been put in place before and after the International Year of Ecotourism; some of them have been quite effective in ensuring sustainable practices, but usually these schemes are limited to a specific territory. Many other schemes have failed to attain their objectives, with a scarce number of followers, and with little recognition from consumers or tour operators. Thus, it seems that to become fully effective, regulatory mechanisms need to be established by governments, in consultation and in cooperation with the private sector, with the aim of reaching the entire ecotourism sector.

The International Ecotourism Year also served to develop further awareness on the need to make the whole tourism industry, including the mass tourism segment, more sustainable, and the UNWTO has multiplied its efforts in this respect, advancing knowledge in the field, sensitising governments and private operators, and providing increased support to its Members for putting at their disposal a growing range of practical tools to achieve a more sustainable tourism industry altogether.

From the perspective of tourists, ecotourism is perhaps one of the few remaining opportunities for people from major tourist generating countries to enter into contact with natural elements. Indeed, more than 70 per cent of residents in OECD countries, including Europe, USA, Canada, Australia and Japan, live in urban areas, most of them have no contact with any preserved environment. Practising ecotourism can offer them a unique opportunity to learn the importance of these environments for maintaining a balance in our planet and guarantee its long term survival. Thus, by increasing their awareness about the natural environment and the fragility of many ecosystems and endangered species, nature tourists are more likely to consider these questions in their

daily life, improving their behaviour vis-à-vis environmental issues in their activities, but also in their involvement toward organisations working for nature protection. Better informed, tourists will also change their habits of tourism consumption and focus their choice of destinations and services on tour operators and hotels that have certified, environmentally friendly and responsible products on offer.

In addition to awareness-raising on environmental issues, ecotourism also contributes to a better spread of tourists in different territories and areas, thus reducing possible congestion phenomena that may occur in main roads, in specific natural systems and protected areas, and around the most renowned and publicised attractions of a country. By offering products based on nature and the discovery of local cultures, ecotourism trips have the capacity to spread tourists throughout the country, to the remotest countryside, forests and mountains. And by doing so, it also allows a more balanced distribution of its economic benefits to small and isolated communities.

Ecotourism and poverty alleviation

One of the most fundamental challenges of our societies today is to be able to achieve the most important and pressing of the Millennium Development Goals, namely reducing by half the proportion of people living with less than one dollar per day by 2015. In the world of abundance that we live, with affluent societies overspending in unnecessary goods and services, in luxury goods, not to speak of arms and weapons, it is no longer acceptable to have nearly 2 billion people living, and dying, in misery. The tourism sector cannot remain indifferent to this challenge, especially because it is in a position to do something about it.

The continued growth in tourism in all types of destinations, and particularly in natural areas, offers interesting opportunities and challenges to poor communities living in such or around such areas. Let us remember that 75 per cent of those 2 billion people living with less than a dollar a day live in rural areas, surrounded by natural or cultural attractions that can be given economic value through tourism.

Ecotourism represents indeed an economic opportunity for local communities, especially for the poorest populations. Many local examples exist around the world, showing how tourism can improve living conditions of the local communities. UNWTO has identified seven different ways of addressing poverty through tourism and these can be applied almost everywhere, provided a number of issues are suitably addressed:

- 1) **Employment of the poor in tourism enterprises**, within or close to protected natural areas, as well as in a wide range of other companies serving the tourists.
- 2) **Supply of goods and services to tourism enterprises by the poor or by enterprises employing the poor**, such as food and textile furnishings, handicrafts and decorations, building services at the construction stage, etc., especially if these are produced with traditional techniques, thus doubly enhancing the cultural experience of visitors. The advantage of the supply-chain approach is that it can make better and increased use of existing skills in poor communities; the existing hotel and other tourism infrastructure should be encouraged to examine its supply chain and to strive to use locally supplied goods and services instead of imports.

- 3) **Direct sales of goods and services to visitors by the poor.** This is about the informal economy, and includes stalls selling food and handicrafts, some forms of transport, and informal accommodation. The informal sector is hugely important in many developing countries and this can be one of the most direct ways of getting visitor spending into the hands of the poor. However, it is usually characterised by chaotic trading conditions, congestion in the site access, over-supply and, frequently, child labour. Eco and cultural tourists require a quality service in tourism establishments, quality cultural performances, quality and authentic handicrafts, and so on, thus offering an opportunity to involve a larger number of local people with enhanced training and therefore improving their chances of increasing their earnings from tourism.
- 4) **Establishment and running of tourism enterprises by the poor.** These may be micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs), or community based enterprises. Compared with working in the informal economy, this is about helping poor communities develop something for the longer term, and about placing power and control in their hands. In the case of ecotourism, the corresponding authorities can grant technical, financial or simply marketing support to poor communities to produce traditional shows, cultural performances, and even improve their traditional handicrafts in order to complement and diversify the cultural tourism offer. In parallel, tourists ought to be encouraged to pay fair prices for cultural goods (such as handicrafts) and services (such as nature interpretation and guiding) that they purchase in developing countries, as they normally do in their countries of origin.
- 5) **Tax or levy on tourism income or profits with proceeds benefiting the poor.** This has the advantage of enabling resources to be channelled to the most needy people and communities without requiring their involvement in tourism activities, directly or indirectly. There are a number of examples showing how this can work quite well at a local level – such as negotiating concessions with tourism enterprises involving a proportion of income per bed night being given to the local community. Fiscal income can also be perceived on national parks, protected natural areas, monuments or sites as entry fees and can partly be affected to poverty alleviation programmes.
- 6) **Voluntary giving/support by tourism enterprises and tourists.** This may include payments into general charities and social local programmes by tourists and tour operators, or more specific support for projects in destinations visited. Many tourism enterprises are engaged in supporting social programmes in their neighbouring communities. During the visit of a natural or cultural asset, or during cultural performances offered to tourists, the guide could be the “spokesperson” of the surrounding poor communities and raise awareness among visitors about the role they could voluntarily play in helping them financially to undertake specific improvements in the village, etc. Although these approaches can generate substantive resources that can be directed to needy causes, it is important to be sensitive in promoting this type of activity and to avoid token gestures.
- 7) **Investment in infrastructure stimulated by tourism also benefiting the poor** in the locality, directly or through support to other sectors. This is about the provision of roads, energy supplies, sanitation, clean water and telecommunications, on the back of tourism investment.

For these poverty reduction benefits to occur in any significant manner, a concerted action is needed, involving national and local authorities, the local population and their community organizations, and the support of the tourism business sector to facilitate the creation of job and enterprise opportunities for the poor. External support is required, for example, to:

1. delivering business support to micro and small ecotourism businesses, the viability of which can be underpinned by policies on business services, such as training or advice in management and marketing skills;
2. help in reducing leakages, ensuring that a large proportion of total tourists' expenditure is received locally;
3. strengthening links between local businesses, encouraging and facilitating local sourcing of supplies and encouraging clusters and networking of businesses;
4. influencing the levels of visitor spending, attracting higher spending markets, increasing length of stay as well as the availability of spending opportunities and visitors' awareness of them, and promoting among visitors the purchase of local products;
5. including local stakeholders in the decision-making process of the tourism plan and promotional actions.

Cooperation

Many of the UNWTO development assistance activities refer to rural and natural areas, helping local authorities or communities in the implementation and control of ecotourism products (e.g. the ST-EP project for pro-poor ecotourism in Stung Treng and Kratie, Cambodia), or have contributed to the formulation of ecotourism master plans at national or infra-national levels (like in West Bengal, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh in India).

With the continued growth of tourism demand in general, and a growing number of communities in the developing world realising that ecotourism can be an instrument for their economic development, the need for a regulated ecotourism industry and for its controlled development becomes ever more important to ensure its long term sustainability. Therefore, and notwithstanding the progress so far achieved, the challenges ahead are still numerous and should be tackled by all those concerned, in a cooperative manner.

Cooperation is needed to involve and provide technical advice and support to the thousands and thousands of small and micro ecotourism enterprises that appear every year in the global market, with the legitimate intention of offering services that they believe are of a truly ecotourism nature, but which in reality fall short the required levels of quality and sustainability. Cooperation is also needed to facilitate market access to existing and new ecotourism service providers, especially to those in developing countries, where ecotourism represents perhaps the only opportunity to set in motion a sustainable socio-economic development process. Cooperation is still essential to achieve a universal commonly agreed understanding of what type of operations can be qualified as ecotourism, and whether a branding or label is necessary to certify these operations. And most of all, cooperation is needed to involve local

communities and especially the poor in the ecotourism businesses, as main actors in the development of opportunities, in the marketing of products, in the management of daily operations, and in the sharing of economic benefits.

2010, International Year of Biodiversity

As you probably know, the year 2010 has been designated by the United Nations as the “International Year of Biodiversity”, and specific targets have been set in which tourism can play a significant role. In the particular case of ecotourism, the protection of biodiversity represents a core issue: without an important diversity of fauna and flora, this tourism segment would simply lose its attractiveness. For this reason, we should use the framework of 2010, on the one hand, to promote more sustainability in tourism activities and, on the other, to demonstrate how tourism, when properly developed and managed, can contribute to environmental sustainability worldwide. The Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Development¹ produced by the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) could be a good basis for further reflexion and action during 2010 and beyond.

Conclusion

Seven years after the International Year of Ecotourism, we can look back with a degree of satisfaction. Ecotourism is no longer a vague concept or a marginal tourism segment. The guidelines for its development and management provided by several institutions in this respect, amongst them UNEP, IUCN, CBD and of course UNWTO are permitting today to reconcile nature conservation with tourism and socioeconomic development, while at the same time continue educating visitors about the fragility of ecological systems and their importance to humanity.

Nonetheless, challenges ahead are numerous: firstly to apply all guidelines available, not only for ecotourism operations, but for the whole tourism sector; secondly, to monitor the sustainability performance of all tourism operations, especially in ecotourism; and thirdly, to strive and ensure that ecotourism benefits not only nature conservation purposes, but also and with high priority the poor people that live in the areas where ecotourism is practised. The latter is, in our opinion, an ethical obligation that, if not fulfilled, may have very negative consequences for the survival of the planet and humankind.

Thank you

¹ CBD Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Development available at:
<http://www.cbd.int/tourism/guidelines.shtml?page=a>