UNEP's Achievements in Facilitating Sustainability into Mountain Tourism

Erica Allis, Helena Rey, and Garrette Clark
July 2009

The tourism industry is among the most powerful drivers of economic and social development. With its decision making power, industry is shaping the development of tourism in mountains. Furthermore, the operational and managerial decisions of tour operators and other tourism professionals greatly influence the level of negative impacts and positive effects of tourism in the mountain environments. Engagement of the industry in for sustainable tourism efforts is imperative.

In recognition of this potential, the United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP has championed a number of sustainable tourism initiatives designed to promote sustainability in mountain tourism activities. The Practical Guide to Good Practices "Tourism and Mountains" and the Marketing Assistance for Sustainable Tourism in Nepal (MAST Nepal) project are two recent initiatives coordinated by UNEP to support Mountain destinations.

The Guide to Good Practice was developed through a collaborative process by the United Nations Environment Programme, the Tour Operators' Initiative for Sustainable Development, Conservation International, and their partners. It is meant to be a key resource for operators and purchasers of mountain recreational tours and presents the key issues for mountain tourism, its potential problems/benefits and specific recommendations to facilitate more sustainable practices. The publication includes a 'sustainable mountain tourism checklist' companies can use to assess their current practices and build the foundation necessary for improvements in sustainability.

MAST-Nepal was a 2-year project effort funded by the European Commission's Asia-Invest Programme designed to assist tourism companies in Nepal to develop and market more sustainable tourism products. The project was the first in Nepal to use market mechanisms to promote, motivate, and reward sustainable operations among private sector tourism companies. Capacity building seminars were held to increase private sector awareness on the concepts of sustainable tourism and experts provided assistance in the development of sustainability action plans (the TOI publication provided the basis for this training). Companies demonstrating commitment to their actions plans were eligible for the marketing phase where training and marketing assistance was provided to enhance linkages with the growing European sustainable tourism market. As a result of this project each of the 23 companies implemented a minimum of two sustainable actions. Furthermore, marketing links between these companies and Europe were made at international trade fairs.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Approved by ITF-STD - Marrakech, 21st April 2009

The International Task Force on Sustainable Tourism Development is a voluntary initiative led by France. Its main objective is to encourage the implementation of actions that promote sustainability in tourism by developing tools that support the various stakeholders in achieving this objective. The Task Force also presents and disseminates existing initiatives to inspire the replication of pilot projects and good practices on sustainable tourism. The Taskforce is comprised of members from 18 developed and developing countries, nine international organisations, seven non-governmental organisations, and seven international business associations.

The recommendations will be presented during preparations for the 18th Session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in 2010, where the development of the 10-Year Framework of Programmes (10YFP) on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) will be discussed. It will also be presented at the UNWTO General Assembly by a group of Member States in October 2009. Members of the Task Force recommended this document to be disseminated among all relevant stakeholders who have responsibilities for sustainable tourism development.

A shorter version of this document will be produced for communication purposes. The policy recommendations address key stakeholders – governments including local authorities, indigenous and local communities, international organisations, the private sector, NGOs and consumers. These recommendations build upon the projects of the ITF-STD, and lessons learned on promoting sustainable tourism.

I – Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries and an important source of foreign investment and employment for many developing countries. According to the UNWTO statistics 903 million international tourists travelled in 2007 with an average annual increase of over four percent since the year 2000. In spite of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, which has continued into 2009, the same statistics indicate that the global figure will reach one billion international tourists by the end of this decade and 1.6 billion by the year 2020. These millions of people are already consuming and will continue to demand enormous quantities of energy, water, and other natural resources to support their tourism activities. Domestic tourists also add to this sector's environmental footprint. On one hand tourism will bring additional income to local communities and will increase direct and indirect employment at this level. On the other hand, the increasing demand for basic goods and services from tourists will often cause price increases that negatively affect local residents whose income does not increase proportionately.

As it is a large and growing industry, tourism is often scrutinized in terms of its impacts on the environment, economy, culture and societies. Some reviews highlight the power of tourism to contribute to economic growth while others emphasize the negative impacts to ecosystems, indigenous societies and cultural heritage. It is thus clear that tourism can have positive or negative impacts depending on how it is planned, developed and managed. Developing 'sustainable tourism' means that strategies are in place to promote the positive impacts and minimise the negative.

The concept of sustainable tourism is applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including the mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development. Sustainable tourism requires the establishment of a suitable balance between these three dimensions to guarantee long-term sustainability of tourism development.

The response of the tourism sector to the current unprecedented economic crisis should include elements that reinforce sustainability parameters in tourism planning and management. Great challenges present great opportunities. Tourism can contribute to its own resilience and to the global economic recovery by pursuing a climate neutral strategy, as well as innovation in the use of cleaner energy and more efficient resource use. Combining these strategies and approaches contributes to the reduction of poverty, and to social and economic development within the carrying capacities of ecosystems. A strong leadership and a shared purpose are needed to guide the identification and realization of these opportunities. This document aims at providing a set of policy recommendations to achieve this.

II – A vision for sustainable tourism development

Given the important, but relatively unexploited potential of tourism to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (particularly in developing and least developed countries), international organizations, governments, local authorities, the private sector, consumers and the civil society are asked to foster sustainable consumption and production (SCP) patterns for tourism, with the following overarching objectives:

- Tourism continues to be an important economic sector capable of attracting foreign direct investments and supporting sustainable economic development, the production of fairly distributed wealth, the creation of employment opportunities and poverty alleviation, particularly in developing countries and least developed countries.

- The destination's local society and environment can absorb and benefit from the positive effects of tourism and such sustainable tourism development also provides ways of protecting and enriching the knowledge from local and indigenous culture.

These economic benefits from the tourism sector can be offset by negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts, which should be addressed and reduced through planning, policies and regulations. Voluntary mechanisms, access to training, fostering communication for transfering of knowledge, access to financial mechanisms, as well as consultations with local communities based on sustainability parameters, all have a key role to play in constructing these solutions.

In order for all forms of tourism to become more sustainable, the systematic application of sustainability objectives and criteria to new and existing infrastructures and services should be encouraged. This also includes improved governance, rethinking the existing infrastructure at destinations, especially with the assistance of relevant public and private operators, identifying innovative modes of travel, and strengthening the development of various 'niche' tourism segments (e.g. ecotourism, community or rural tourism, heritage or cultural tourism) to become a more significant share of the market and a major form of tourism for some countries.

Given the cross-sectoral characteristics of the tourism industry, this document's references to the private sector cover the transportation to and from tourist destinations, the tour operators, the accommodation/hotel chains, and all the economic activities generating resources, products and services throughout the entire tourism value chain.

III – Recommended approach

Recognizing that the implementation of this vision will require an integrated open-ended process engaging governments at all levels, international organizations, businesses, NGOs and consumers, the recommendations are structured around a simplified life-cycle of the tourism value chain, including:

- Tourism planning
- Tourism operations and management
- Tourism investment
- Tourism promotion and marketing
- Capacity building
- Consumption of tourism products and services
- Monitoring and evaluation of tourism development

III.1 – Tourism planning

There is a need to integrate sustainable tourism planning into national and regional development plans to strengthen action on the ground and build the skills and resources needed to apply them effectively. Public policies, governance mechanisms and stakeholders' involvement should be incorporated into the framework outlined in the national and regional development plan. Planners should identify and utilize legal and fiscal regimes, information, knowledge, evaluation tools, and cooperative processes among professionals and civil society.

Several umbrella recommendations, guidelines and principles are used to frame planning as a continuous process. These include:

III.1.1 – The principles of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism adopted by UNWTO and endorsed by the UN General Assembly and the recommendations and guidelines provided by Multilateral Environmental Agreements and conventions as appropriate, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the World Heritage Convention, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the Code of Conduct for the protection of children against sexual exploitation in travel and tourism:

- Tourism planning at the national and sub-regional levels should coordinate and interact with the local level.

- Planning should be closely connected to policies for sustainable development, i.e. national sustainable development strategies, poverty reduction strategies, and local Agenda 21.

Public and private institutions and organizations engaged in tourism planning, including tourism master plans, should make use of credible scientific methods and tools encompassing economic, environmental and social approaches and assessments for sustainable development that will help stakeholders relate to different components of the value chain understand their environmental and socio-cultural impacts. They then should work to maximize benefits and reduce negative impacts.

III.1.2 – Experience has shown that a plan is more effective if produced by a multi-stakeholder participatory planning process (NGOs, local authorities, community based organizations, enterprises, experts, and Destination Management Organisations, etc.), as well as through the development of partnerships at local, national, regional and international levels. Establishing structures to enable this participatory process ensures that different stakeholders, especially local communities, have their say in how tourism is developed and managed. They are, in turn, encouraged to reflect on agreed priorities for tourism in their own work. It is thus a two-way process.

The effectiveness of policies will be thus enhanced by the setting up of structures that would allow coordination between all stakeholders, and the adoption of a balanced mix of tools, including economic and legislative instruments and Strategic Environmental Assessments. Structures which promote the implementation of the provisions of multilateral environmental agreements relating to the obligations for conservation and environmental protection, prevention and control of pollution, and sound management of natural resources will also contribute to the planning of sustainable tourism development.

Within this framework, the recommended tourism planning approaches are:

- Planning defines a vision for tourism and other public use development and management. It includes zoning systems with the appropriate visitor experiences aligned with the zone.

- Desired conditions serve as the basis for planning and product development. Descriptions of desired conditions are based on local, regional and national values, existing national legislation, and the goals and objectives of management authori-

ties. Consultation with relevant constituencies is recommended in formulating desired conditions.

- Plans are developed so as to preserve destination values by outlining processes to monitor change, evaluate threats and opportunities, and permit public and private leaders to respond to key values so as to maintain the destination's sense of place.

- Planning can also address the potential negative impacts of extensive tourism operations on land and property prices and the consequent evolution of ownership patterns, as well as on local assets such as the aesthetic value of landscapes.

- Planning is a process which provides important opportunities to build community and constituency engagement, to better understand changing expectations and environmental and social conditions and to support local values. By involving constituencies in the planning process, conflicts can be resolved and the constituencies develop the sense of responsibility and ownership needed for the implementation of plans. The establishment of a council comprised of those constituencies, including the tourism industry, helps to understand and reflect the different values attached to tourism and its outcomes. Moreover, the engagement of the tourism industry is important in the development and implementation of the plans. The value-chain perspective would thus enhance the understanding of the various roles of different tourism players and enhance opportunities for cooperation and collaboration.

- Planning facilitates cooperation and collaboration between ministries of tourism and similar agencies, and ministries of culture, departments of conservation, and ministries of the environment.

- Planning is viewed as a mechanism for building the technical capacities and proficiencies of management in public conservation institutions and agencies. Building the capacity of a specialist or coordinator within the agency in charge of tourism planning is essential.

- A plan is developed and implemented by public staff at the local level. An external consultant can mentor the local planner during the developmental phase of the plan. However, local professionals should be involved in producing the plan. This contributes to the sense of ownership by management, local communities or other constituencies; recommended tools, methods and timetables are then better gauged to the technical, financial and governance capacity of management.

- Coordination between destinations within a region usually improves planning. Considering the ties among regional assets and attractions during the planning phase will create opportunities for linking all the regional attractions of a destination. If properly planned, it may also diminish pressures on certain attractions. It can also help to maximize the complementary roles of various agencies and organisations in management and economic development issues.

- Governments and all stakeholders should consider promoting regional and/or sub regional approaches to sustainable tourism development.

III.2 – Tourism operations and management

III.2.1 - Tourism businesses and public institutions in charge of tourism should adopt innovative and appropriate technology to improve the efficiency of resource use (notably land, energy and water), tackle the challenges of climate change, minimize emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG), and the production of waste, while protecting biodiversity.

III.2.2 - Tourism operations and management should respect the legislated and/or planned objectives related to tourism development and management, as set out by local and national authorities; this includes conditions related to the environment, economy, and socio-cultural concerns.

III.2.3 - Operations should use internationally recognized standards for sustainable tourism.

III.2.4 - Tourism actors should participate actively in the initiatives and processes put in place or supported by the International Task Force on Sustainable Tourism Development like the 'Davos Process' on climate change and

tourism, the Sustainable Investment and Finance in Tourism (SIFT) Network, the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council (STSC) etc.; and use the tools developed by the International Task Force projects and other relevant voluntary initiatives.

III.2.5 - Tourists can make more sustainable choices if efforts are made to communicate clear information on labels clamming sustainability. In this respect, two strategic developments are necessary: better consistency between such labels and a clear validation of content on labels. A wide variety of communication techniques and claims (based on sound underlying data) can also ensure that the public has the best possible information, delivered in the most appropriate way, which will allow them to make to most sustainable choices in their tourism selection.

III.2.6 - There is also a need to inform, educate and work collaboratively with the tourism industry to integrate sustainability into their policies and management practices, and secure their active participation in developing sustainable tourism.

III.3 – Tourism investment

III.3.1 - Financing from national and international organisations (public and private) dealing with investments in public infrastructure related to tourism or investments in private tourism businesses should estimate their social and environmental impacts and adopt economic measures to compensate and offset unavoidable impacts.

III.3.2 - Regulatory instruments with fully integrated environmental and social criteria should be applied in tendering, licensing and permit-approval procedures. These instruments should also include and support the application of tools, such as Strategic Environmental Impact Assessments, Environmental and Social Impact Assessments, and related enforcement and monitoring processes. Moreover, regulatory instruments contributing to sustainability should be designed to help governments to build institutional capacity and develop streamlined and coordinated procedures for this purpose.

III.3.3 - The estimation of the expected benefits of tourism development on the basis of the 'Total Economic Value' that includes ecosystem services and social accounting benefits should be considered in investments decision-

making. Particular emphasis should be given to the inclusion of impacts in societies and local communities.

III.3.4 - Corporations should adopt corporate social and environmental responsibility (CSER) principles in their tourism investments. Traditional investors should be invited to strengthen their commitments towards responsible investments, because they are among the key actors currently able to promote sustainable practices.

III.3.5 - Methods and tools based on new economic and financial approaches can support decision makers to identify and make sustainable investments, including methods developed through environmental economics that estimate the expected Return on Investment (ROI) and Internal Rate of Return (IRR).

III.3.6 - The criteria for sustainable investments in the tourism sector should be adopted within the spirit of the "Equator Principles". The criteria should also prioritize investments on projects developed by Small, Medium and Micro-sized Enterprises (SMMEs) that steer sustainable consumption and production processes in tourism businesses in order to facilitate the access to specific funds or financial resources by micro and small investors. The creation of new financial and investment tools or mechanisms to support SMMEs aiming at sustainability should be promoted.

III.3.7 - Investment in sustainable infrastructure is of priority importance in successful tourism development.

III.4 – Tourism promotion and marketing

III.4.1 - Marketing strategies should promote the idea and need for sustainability. Existing promotion and distribution channels should emphasize sustainability as a primary option for tourism development and to influence consumer choices.

III.4.2 - Governments, businesses and civil society organizations should be encouraged to make all meetings, incentives, conferences and excursions (MICE) activities as sustainable as possible, using both policy and technical tools to ensure responsible execution of these activities.

III.4.3 - The 'success' of tourism destinations should be evaluated not only in terms of 'arrivals', but also in terms

of economic and social benefits that stay in the destination, and in terms of limitation of the negative environmental and social impacts.

III.4.4 - The development of an event-related communication strategy should be encouraged in order to mainstream the sustainability message, particularly encouraging the use of the media in major sports events to promote sustainable tourism.

III.4.5 - The use of local goods and services in the tourism sector, which minimizes economic leakages, should be promoted. These products and services have a strong role in leveraging additional local investment, creating employment for the local workforce and helping these actors to be competitive, while offering concrete opportunities to contribute to the conservation of the natural and cultural environment.

III.4.6 - Opportunities provided by modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to raise awareness on sustainable consumption and operations in tourism should be part of the marketing activities.

III.4.7 - As part of socio-economic sustainability, tourism businesses should be promoted by conventional and modern marketing techniques that ensure adequate access of local tourism small and medium enterprises (SMEs), local communities and other suppliers (especially in developing countries) to domestic and international markets.

III.5 – Capacity building

III.5.1 - All stakeholders should be encouraged to build capacity for sustainable tourism and apply this capacity in their internal operations as well as to influence the decision of other stakeholders. Within this framework, the capacities of local communities and indigenous populations should be enhanced, while respecting their traditions, and enabling them to build sustainable, community-based initiatives.

III.5.2 - International organisations, NGOs, academia and knowledge-brokers should be engaged to support the capacity enhancement of all stakeholders, including national governments, for the achievement of sustainable tourism objectives.

III.6 – Consumption of tourism products and services

III.6.1 - Consumers should be encouraged to use locally developed products and services that generate local employment and support initiatives for social and infrastructure community development including, among others, education, health, and sanitation.

III.6.2 - Consumers (individuals, businesses and public sector) of tourism products and services should be encouraged to evaluate the environmental, socio-cultural footprint and economic implications of their decisions. They should also be inspired to purchase local sustainable tourism products and services, including products such as crafts, food, etc.

III.6.3 - Guidelines for the behaviour of tourists at destinations should be promoted using networks, media and other communication channels, such as information from service providers and operators through the whole value chain of tourism.

III.7 – Monitoring and evaluation of tourism development

III.7.1 - Governments and businesses should set baseline and measurable targets, review progress and report towards the achievement of sustainable tourism objectives. The UNWTO guide on 'Indicators for Sustainable Tourism' should be used for examples of practical applications.

III.7.2 - Given that an activity can be acceptable in one context and very harmful in another, monitoring and evaluation approaches should be adapted to the specific context of each local destination according to resources, forms and volumes of tourism, management capacity, etc.

III.7.3 - The concept of a 'Global Observatory on Sustainable Tourism' may be considered as an initiative to stablish a network of regional, national and local observatories. Its objective would be the promotion of systematic application of monitoring and information management techniques, as well as related communication and reporting processes, supporting informed decision-making in sustainable tourism matters.