

From Rio to Johannesburg

New Paths for International Tourism *by Lisa Mastny, Worldwatch Institute*

WORLD SUMMIT POLICY BRIEFS



When delegates at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit drafted their long-range blueprint for action, Agenda 21, they made little reference to the environmental and social impacts of one of the world's most rapidly growing industries—tourism.

Since Rio, international concern about the sustainability of tourism has grown steadily. Countries have endorsed declarations on a wide range of related topics, including tourism and sustainable development, the social impact of tourism, tourism and biodiversity, and tourism and ethics. In 1996, in an effort to integrate tourism into broader sustainability discussions, the World Tourism Organization, the World Travel & Tourism Council, and the Earth Council released their own action-plan, *Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry*, outlining key priorities for governments, the industry, and others.

International discussion about tourism's impacts has taken on even greater momentum in 2002, as the U.N.-declared "International Year of Ecotourism" gets underway. The year will be marked by a series of multi-stakeholder meetings and a World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec this May.

Tourism will also be an important topic at the upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. It is a particularly relevant area of

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focus for the conference's "type two" initiatives—partnership agreements that will identify areas for practical, action-oriented cooperation among key stakeholders, including industries, governments, international institutions, and non-governmental groups.

The importance of addressing tourism's impacts worldwide cannot be understated. By some estimates,

communities and the environment.

The Tourism Industry

Many tourism businesses are beginning to take positive steps to become more environmentally and socially responsible. But long-term sustainability will require deeper changes in the way the industry operates. Self-

interest may very well drive this shift: while declines in environmental quality can hit industry pocketbooks directly, evidence is accumulating that adopting more sensitive practices and helping to make destinations more attractive can lower costs and boost profits over the long term.

Priorities for Action:

- Restructure management and operations along environmental lines, includ-

ing reducing consumption of water, energy, and other resources and improving management, handling, and disposal of waste.

Between 1988 and 1995, Inter-Continental Hotels reduced overall energy costs by 27 percent. It saved \$3.7 million in 1995 alone, cutting sulfur dioxide emissions by 10,670 kilograms and saving 610,866 cubic meters of water—an average water reduction of nearly 7 percent per hotel, despite higher occupancies.

- Accelerate the transfer of environmentally sound technologies, practices, and management tools to the developing world, including desalination plants and other water-saving systems, renewable energy technolo-



tourism is now the world's largest industry—in 2000, it generated an estimated \$3.6 trillion in economic activity and accounted for one in every 12 jobs worldwide. Tourism is especially important in the developing world—it is the only economic area where developing countries consistently run a trade surplus. But the industry's rapid growth has placed a heavy burden on local economies, cultures, and environments. Uncontrolled tourism development is stressing many of the planet's most sensitive locations.

As the World Summit negotiations begin, Worldwatch encourages participants to work together to develop practical initiatives to minimize tourism's negative impacts while boosting its benefits for local

gies, and ecologically sound chemical management practices.

- Develop voluntary "codes of conduct" to regulate the environmental and social impacts of staff and clients, and ensure that compliance with these codes is adequately monitored.

Under the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators' voluntary code of conduct, the 40 member tour operators are required to land no more than 100 people per site at a time and to make sure that visitors do not disturb wildlife.

- Adopt and participate in voluntary certification schemes that grant a seal of approval to companies or destinations that demonstrate environmentally or socially sound practice.

Europe's Blue Flag Campaign awards a yearly "eco-label" to some 2,750 beaches and marinas in 21 countries for their high environmental standards and safe, sanitary facilities.

Government

Governments will need to play a proactive role in supporting the growth of sustainable tourism. Regulatory and policy frameworks can be altered to support key environmental and social goals, without stifling incentives for investment.

Priorities for Action:

- Encourage tourism planning authorities at the national, regional, and local levels to incorporate key social and environmental goals.

In 1997, the Council of Europe recommended that member governments limit tourism development to a level compatible with ecological and social carrying capacity, including supporting activities that benefit local communities and controlling coastal construction.

- Integrate the development of sustainable tourism projects and facilities into overall land-use plans.

At Cuba's Cayo Coco, hotels must be no more than four stories high and are required to be set back from the beach. Each new building must go through an extensive government environmental impact assessment before construction is approved.

- Develop regulations and policies that support smaller-scale tourism initiatives that are actively planned and managed by local communities. For example, governments can boost local land and resource ownership and market access by offering incentives like tax breaks, special interest rates, or micro-enterprise loans, providing low-cost licensing, or offering training in languages, small business development, and marketing.

The Namibian government allows local communities to assume legal responsibility for zoning their own agriculture, wildlife, and tourism activities in multiuse areas called conservancies. Residents oversee these activities and can derive direct financial benefit from them.

- Impose tourist quotas or encourage the use of taxes, entry fees, and other economic instruments that reflect the environmental and social costs of tourism services. The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan practices an official policy of "high-value, low-volume" tourism. It accepted only 7,500 visitors in the year 2000, at a cost of \$250

In April 2001, local and international activist groups helped convince the Mexican government to revoke permits for five hotel companies to build resorts, golf courses, and other facilities at a 165-hectare stretch of beach south of Cancun that is home to 40 protected species.

each per day.

- Support and implement regional and global envi-

developments.

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- Help raise awareness of tourism's negative impacts through information campaigns and training.

CyberDodo, a partner of the World Travel & Tourism Council, has created a video series on tourism's environmental impact aimed at airlines and schools.

- Encourage tourists to engage in environmentally and culturally sensitive behavior, including supporting businesses that are locally run and staffed, that seek to minimize their

environmental and cultural impacts, or that donate a share of their profits to local community or conservation efforts.

The Vermont-based International Ecotourism Society helps travelers choose responsible tour operators and guides and offers "green" travel advice on their website.

ronmental treaties that relate to tourism, such as the climate change and biodiversity conventions.

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and International Institutions

Non-governmental players—such as citizen groups and grassroots activists—have played an important role in generating much of the pressure for more sustainable tourism. International institutions such as the World Bank and UNEP have also stepped up their support for sustainable tourism, including engaging in efforts to create benchmarks for sustainable tourism that will make it easier for governments and businesses to measure progress.

Priorities for Action:

- Discourage unsustainable and inappropriate tourism



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