



Sustainable tourism: from intention to manifestation

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The use of multinational fora to engender global consensus on sustainable tourism goals and objectives has gained in prominence over the past two decades. Beginning with the Global Code of Ethics of the UN World Tourism Organisation and including a plethora of declarations, agreements and conventions, there is a great deal of consensus on the urgency and action items required to make tourism more sustainable. On the other end of the spectrum, there has been no shortage of sustainable tourism performance programmes targeted mainly at accommodations. These have ranged from voluntary standards and certification programmes for products and services, to codes of best practice, corporate sustainability reporting and other participatory schemes. What is not so clear is, with the available options, why there is such a lack of progress made in

solving the chronic environmental and social problems of Caribbean tourism destinations.

With over a decade of experience in implementing sustainable tourism programmes such as Green Globe and Blue Flag in the tourism private sector, the Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism (CAST), the environmental division of the Caribbean Hotel Association (CHA), is ever committed to its regional mandate for sustainable and responsible tourism operations. Even though continually challenged by lukewarm interest in environmental and sustainability programmes, we are encouraged by the few notable exemplars of performance and albeit slow, the steady progress made in stimulating awareness on the issues over the years.

Multinational instruments typically reveal a commitment to protecting human and cultural rights of existence, heritage resources and indigenous lifestyles, tourism health and safety; to preventing pollution and harmful emissions, organised sex tourism and exploitation of children; to promoting responsible tourism development and biological diversity through standards and codes of best practice; and maximising beneficial social impacts. Outside of these public sector working forums however, is where the real challenges exist: how do states manifest their stated intentions into effective policy and action? How are the different national publics to be engaged or involved in these calls for action?

There are no simple or straightforward answers to these questions. With few exceptions, the manifestation of stated intentions has been circuitous, hampered by unclear jurisdictions between state agencies, inadequacy of purpose to solve long-standing issues and resources for empowerment and success, and frequent challenges encountered in working with the private sector – the implementation specialists. In other words, bureaucracy and inertia have often frustrated implementation. States play their leadership roles very well in discussing the actions required for sustainability. Implementation, however, is a frequent



Preserving Caribbean cultural heritage requires a sincere belief in the value of the Caribbean citizen



obstacle to successfully achieving set goals.

The private sector has been described as the 'engine of growth' because of their access to capital and production technologies, organisation for efficiency and commercial prowess. The latter characteristic underscores their implementation expertise as projects are typically subject to budget and time limitations and personnel held accountable for meeting targets. As a service industry, tourism is a magnet for businesses that directly or indirectly serve visitors to the destination. The quality of service must match expectations in regard to accommodation styles, culinary tastes, entertainment and other destination services for example shopping, transportation, IT/Internet and healthcare, amongst others. The tourism private sector competes not just locally and regionally but internationally. The success of the Caribbean tourism product is a reflection of the regional private sector's ability to satisfy the needs of visitors. In spite of this success, the private sector has yet to prioritise environmental sustainability into their operations.

Tourism sustainability programmes such as Green Globe and Blue Flag have had a lasting impact in situations where they encounter an enlightened and committed group of individuals who have a heightened social conscience and an intention to make a difference. These three essential attributes are interrelated and appear to be the difference between good and great performers. The successes of the long standing participants of the Green Globe and Blue Flag programmes have illustrated that, inter alia, these programmes do:

- Raise consciousness of key problems and issues;
- Establish abiding partnerships between persons in the public and private sectors;
- Elevate desires for problem solving and accomplishing set goals;
- Empower and motivate staff at all levels to take decisions and execute their jobs responsibly;
- Stimulate participants to share their successes with their customers, stakeholders and the general public.

All of the above are essential ingredients for sustainability. However, there is an absence of that critical mass of stellar performers generating the proverbial ripple effect of consciousness throughout the regional industry. What prevails is an attitude of business as usual.

The Caribbean is continually faced with major and recurring threats to its natural resource base and

tourism assets. These include:

- Land-based sources of pollution to the marine environment.
- Natural disasters, especially hurricanes.
- Loss of biological diversity in marine (coral reefs) and terrestrial (forestry) ecosystems.

These threats permeate almost every facet of Caribbean island life and manifest at varying scales and degrees of impact across the region. They are also likely to be compounded by the effects of global warming and climate change. Similarly, the juxtaposition of visitors and host populations has highlighted disparities in personal circumstances and introduced foreign influences into indigenous lifestyles, often with irreversible consequences. Destinations are grappling with increases in violent crime, declining living standards, devaluation of local currencies, erosion of purchasing power, deteriorating social infrastructure and institutional services, among other problems. These are all diminishing the quality of the Caribbean tourism experience.

How can a tourism industry flourish, therefore, when it requires a largely satisfied and hospitable host population, quality natural attractions and seamless interfacing between productive sectors providing high quality services? This question is at the core of the discussion on tourism sustainability and has consequently raised

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the bar on the pre-conditions for achieving a balance of economic, environmental and social benefits.

As mentioned above, many solutions for tourism sustainability are available from a variety of sources. Multi-national instruments and frameworks (legal and non-legal) enable the operating environment, while a range of industry tools, manuals, guidelines, performance aids and reference materials, most of which are accessible via the internet, provide the sustainability strategies and know-how.

Yet, raising the 'consciousness' of the three major groups of societal actors (public, private and community) appears to be that missing ingredient for achieving the desired results. Over the years, CAST has interviewed several successful hoteliers with exemplary sustainability programmes. We can conclude that an intimate connection has been made with their natural surroundings and their communities, for which they have a deep and abiding appreciation. The latter provides the impetus to contribute to community wellbeing and to preserve what is held sacred. The desire to make a difference in their communities and their islands has become a core value. Their leadership and business strategies are therefore guided by these desires.

However, this type of consciousness for a better island community does not appear to prevail in the region. The concept of 'national service' i.e. volunteering, which should stem from compassion for the less fortunate citizenry and concern for deteriorating lifestyles or natural and cultural heritage resources, has perhaps

been tainted by the corrupted image of 'public service'. The Caribbean needs a greater number of its citizens developing a passion for causes and generous enough to volunteer their time and money for the greater good. By contrast, national service is a vocation in the US with its strong military tradition and at a time when confidence in public institutions is at its lowest ever. Americans also have the reputation for being the most philanthropic, donating billions to charities every year.

How do we incorporate consciousness-building in our sustainable tourism agenda? The first step is to acknowledge that all persons are endowed with core values which drive their existence. It is these values which harbour the deepest desire to make a difference and which need to be nourished in order to elevate consciousness. The public sector can lead by advocating volunteer programmes designed to aid failing institutions and help less fortunate kids through education or seniors with their healthcare needs. The private sector can increase focus in company wellness programmes and encourage staff to volunteer their time and effort to worthy causes. This is a regular feature of multinational companies with Caribbean operations such as bpTT in Trinidad, the Hilton family of hotels, Chevron and American Airlines, among others. The top Caribbean commercial banks (for example Republic Bank, Scotiabank, First Caribbean, RBTT) have also invested in regional charities and social programmes. The objective should be to establish a critical mass of consciousness.

The next step is to strategically harness that elevated

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consciousness and direct it towards goals established for a quality tourism destination and experience. This approach may seem unconventional but it is precisely what has been absent in traditional approaches to strategically planning the tourism sector. Tourism is a people-dependent-labour-intensive industry. Consequentially, people are its greatest asset. The industry is also characterised by low wages, high staff turn-over and low levels of job satisfaction. The most productive employees are those that are motivated to perform, have the skills to act and can maximise opportunities to live out their deepest desires. In other words, they are fulfilled and have achieved a good work-life balance.

Strategic plans for the sector will not accomplish their stated objectives or move from intention to manifestation, without the commensurate investment in workers. It is not enough merely to give them a stake in the proceedings. They must belong, own and care about their industry and job responsibilities to the extent where their inner desires are driving their exterior actions. It is no longer just a job but an extension of their core purpose.

Consciousness-building has to be injected into every facet of sustainable tourism development. At the national and local levels, planning and development must ensue with the communities to be affected sitting at the table as peers in the planning process. Their core desires must be respected and incorporated into plans. This creates ownership and partnership. Too often we have witnessed scenarios where complete plans are presented to communities and form the source of persistent conflict. The same technique should be applied to tourism businesses i.e. all involved in services. The top Fortune 500 companies have mastered the technique of treating staff as partners and tapping into their resourcefulness. Tourism training courses and instruction methods should be oriented towards not just imparting skills but raising consciousness.

The resulting strategic or business plans will reflect clear intentions based on the core values of stakeholders, which are enunciated in language understood by all. It may also uncup other hidden resources required for plan implementation. This also makes it more accessible and improves the chances that it will be successfully implemented and goals and objectives manifested.

In the Caribbean tourism industry, we have learned from our exemplary hotel leaders such as:

- The Curtain Bluff Resort in Antigua, whose Old

Road philanthropic fund has supported kids in the adjacent Old Road community and increased access to educational and sports opportunities. The fund is 100 per cent supported by hotel guests.

- The Bucuti Beach Resort in Aruba, by empowering staff to be innovative and creative in their approaches to environmental conservation has also developed good stewards for community development and environmental preservation through their on-going work along Eagle Beach.

- The former Casuarina Beach Club (now Almond Casuarina) in Barbados, whose pioneering environmental conservation programmes led to award winning hotel performance, including their efforts at empowering staff to be leaders in their own right and to eliminate conflicts between vendors and guests.

- Tiamo Resort in the South Andros island community of the Bahamas, whose hotel operations are fully integrated into its natural surroundings and within the South Andros community as the largest employer and promoter of community wellbeing.

Seeking to achieve higher levels of consciousness for preserving Caribbean natural and cultural heritage only requires a re-orientation of priorities and methods and a sincere belief in the value of the Caribbean citizen as a key asset and resource. It is the missing link so critical for progressing from intention to manifestation and one sorely needed for the growth and prosperity of our Caribbean tourism industry. ■

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Mature tropical gardens at the award-winning Almond Casuarina hotel in Barbados

