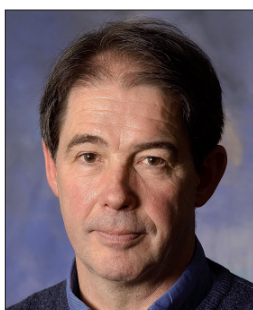


Taking a lead on climate change

By JONATHON PORRITT

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JONATHON PORRITT studied at Oxford, became a comprehensive school teacher, and entered politics to become Chair of the fledgling UK Ecology (now Green) Party in 1978. He became Director of Friends of the Earth in 1984 until 1991. In 1996 he co-founded Forum for the Future, the UK's leading sustainable development charity. Mr Porritt was appointed Chairman of the UK Sustainable Development Commission in 2000. He is also Co-Director of The Prince of Wales's Business and the Environment Programme.

When Mexico's Environment Minister committed his country to halving their emissions of CO₂ by 2050 at the 2008 Poznan Climate Conference, people sat up and listened. As a key member of the G5 group of emerging economies and a member of the OECD, Mexico is in a unique position to provide real leadership on climate change. And as a country that's already feeling the impacts of climate change (particularly in terms of water shortages in the North and growing frequency of hurricanes in the South), Mexico is under no illusions as to how crucial concerted international action is going to be and how important that action will be for its own people.

More than 20 per cent of Mexico's 107 million people still live in serious poverty. Measures to address climate change or the continuing loss of forests have to take their interests into account, accentuating the dilemmas that countries like Mexico face as they struggle to protect their natural environment. Mexico is the world's fourth most biodiverse country and the country's scientists and economists are now very focused on finding ways of capturing the economic value that will flow from maintaining these natural capital assets intact rather than liquidating them in pursuit of short-term economic growth.

Tourism is perhaps the most important industry having to juggle with this kind of challenge. When I was out in Mexico in February this year, I met a number of smart new entrepreneurs developing businesses in adventure tourism and eco-tourism. Depending on the duration of the recession, they had detected huge enthusiasm for tourism propositions geared to increasingly green US and European consumers. A revitalised national association for eco-tourism and adventure tourism, AMTAVE, is one of the first in the world to bring together small businesses to promote their shared offers. In 2008, the Association launched a promotional campaign, 'Mexico Sagaz' (meaning 'Astute Mexico'). And later in the year, Mexico's Tourism Ministry announced that it would double its budget for nature-based travel and eco-tourism.

The real tourism story in Mexico is of course what happens to mainstream tourism in Cancun, Cozumel, Playa del Carmen and so on. The Tourism Ministry is planning an international conference on 'sustainable tourism' in October, with the active support of the UK. As part of the high-level Sustainable Development

Dialogue between the UK and Mexico, one of the key projects has been a training programme for large hotels in the Mexican Caribbean, where most of the 300 visitors from the UK end up.

I was hugely impressed by the scope of the projects being taken forward as part of the Sustainable Development Dialogue – from natural resource management projects in Oaxaca and Nayarit through to urban regeneration schemes in Mexico City itself. And I was particularly struck by the Industrial Symbiosis Project involving more than 60 companies in waste diversion and resource efficiency schemes. As ever, the role of the private sector is critical.

All governments need to get business on board in pursuing more sustainable policies, and Mexico has a good track record in this area. Back 1989, it established a National Commission for Energy Saving, and measures including greater use of natural gas, energy efficiency and reductions in deforestation have helped curb growth in the country's CO₂ emissions by around 10 millions tonnes a year since 1990. The Environment Ministry has already put in place a whole host of agencies with a mandate to guard Mexico's natural resources, including the National Forest Commission and the National Water Commission. And there's no doubt that things have moved up a gear since President Calderón's inauguration. A series of major measures have been put in place, notably on enshrining sustainability as a priority in the National Development Plan, setting out plans to further curb greenhouse gas emissions, expanding sustainable forestry, protecting biodiversity and boosting wind power.

But it's still tough. Levels of air and water pollution are still very high in many parts of the country. Water shortages are a massive issue. The relatively undeveloped south of the country gets 80 per cent of the rainfall – but economic development is out of kilter with natural forces. Industry, much of it linked to the US economy, is heavily concentrated on the arid centre and north. 77 per cent of the population lives here, producing 87 per cent of Mexico's GDP – and putting the underground aquifers under massive pressure.

So there's no shortage of issues for environmental campaigners and NGOs to pursue and I learnt while I was out there how important it is for civil society to be working as closely as possible with business and government to help accelerate the transition to a more sustainable Mexico. **F**