

WTM – Responsible Tourism Day

Tony Juniper Speech

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to be here this morning and to have the opportunity to share with you all some views on how one of the world's largest industries might contribute to securing not only its own future but also much of life on Earth. This might sound like an overly dramatic statement, but it is one borne out by an ever more certain body of scientific evidence.

You have all heard about the challenges we face. Most prominent in recent years has been that posed by the climate change caused by the build-up of greenhouse gases. I think we collectively struggle with this issue not least because from our ground-level perspective the sky might seem infinite. It is in reality no more than the equivalent of a thin coat of paint on a football. The altitude at which airliners fly, some seven or eight miles high, is at the edge of the dense atmosphere in which the weather and climate are made. This is no more than the distance from here to Oxford Circus. Into this wafer thin and fragile envelope we daily pump tens of millions of tonnes of heat-trapping gases. The consequences are already being seen, for example in among other things rising average temperatures and more extreme weather.

The causes are familiar enough with most of the problem arising from the burning of fossil fuels in cars, homes, ships, planes, power stations and factories, coupled with emissions arising from farming and deforestation. These last two factors, linked to how we use land, are also part of another equally troubling global trend, namely the loss of biodiversity. A mass extinction of animals, plants and other life forms is underway. The rate at which the fabric of life is being depleted is unparalleled in the history of humankind and has not occurred on Earth for some tens of millions of years.

At the same time as we exacerbate these environmental impacts, we are of course also depleting the resources that underpin the way a minority of humankind has come accustomed to living. From soils to freshwater and from fish to oil, many of the key resources which sustain our present style of economic growth are showing signs of stress.

And as we try to address these trends, human demand does not remain static. Our population is expected to rise from about 7 billion now to reach about nine billion people by mid century. And on top of that we can expect to welcome not only more people, but also two billion more middle class consumers, to join the one billion or so of us already living Western lifestyles.

If we continue as we are then during the next forty years we can expect to consume more natural resources and energy than was consumed in all of the rest of human history. This will of course not be possible, at least not without precipitating an ecological catastrophe. This rather challenging arithmetic results in the unavoidable conclusion that a major reduction in our collective environmental impact is urgently required.

Your industry, in common with most others, is at the very centre of this ever tighter vortex of cause and effect. Transport emissions from planes, habitat damage caused by hotel construction, airports and roads, the generation of waste in countries that rely only on landfill, depletion of freshwater and sewage pollution causing damage to coral reefs and other sensitive habitats are among the vast array of impacts associated with your businesses.

All of this is of course tied up with a complex web of social and economic issues as countries seek to attract inward investment and create employment opportunities, including from tourism. In addition to the economic gains that have undoubtedly been achieved there are also massive benefits in terms of human happiness that have been generated as well.

With this context in mind the job at hand is at one level quite simple. It is to minimise, and where possible to eliminate, the environmental damage while at the same time as meeting social goals, including those relating to poverty reduction and job creation. This process has a name, it is called sustainable development, but unfortunately we are still very far from meeting its aim of improving human wellbeing within the capacities of our finite planet.

I am in contact with companies in several sectors and am very pleased to say that compared with just a few years ago the penny does finally seem to have dropped. The fact that your meeting today will see the allocation of responsible tourism awards addressing some of the challenges I just mentioned tells us that things are beginning to change.

But what would change look like if in 15 years we did manage to make that transition to a more sustainable tourism sector?

Technology is of course key, a lot of what we need is already invented and now must be deployed at scale. Energy efficient buildings, renewable power and heating systems, water efficient appliances and electric vehicles all exist already and will be joined by other technologies in the years ahead, especially as incentives introduced by governments begin to shift behaviour by changing the commercial viability of emerging technologies.

Aircraft design is changing too, with new planes offering savings in both emissions per passenger kilometre and in operating costs as well.

Alongside technology there is a great deal your industry could do in making greener tourism more attractive. Your collective global communications spend runs to billions of dollars per year and could be a powerful factor in shaping cultural norms to the point where green is seen as normal rather than alternative. I recognise that this is a big ask and that many of you will be wondering what all this has to do with individual businesses looking at ways of surviving a

difficult recession. Well, the simple fact is that there is a huge business case for action.

As well as being about the right and responsible thing to do, part of the response is about long-term self-interest. The simple fact is that many of the key tourism assets upon which your industry depends are under threat. The Great Barrier Reef could be in a state of widespread dieback due to rising ocean temperatures within a couple of decades. So could other reefs that are worth many millions of tourist dollars. The famous snows of Kilimanjaro have already undergone a major retreat and are expected to soon disappear completely. Many skiing resorts have already seen a long-term reduction in skiing days while many destinations once famous for sport fishing are struggling due to the scarcity of fish. Many favourite resorts are already suffering water stress at a time when climate projections suggest that conditions now prevailing in the Sahara desert could be normal in southern Europe. The on-going depletion of natural resources, including oil, could soon create volatility on commodity markets that will affect all sectors, especially energy-hungry ones such as tourism. The simple fact is that it is your own interests to act. This will require, however, taking steps to join up short-term market priorities with those of a few decades' hence. This is not easy, but it can be done.

So where to begin? With carbon dioxide emissions is one obvious place. Aircraft will remain a challenge for some time with no zero carbon option on the horizon, but what about moves to go toward zero carbon on the ground while pressing for cleaner technology in aviation over the longer term? Some destinations are already working in this direction, with the Maldives recently emerging as a leader. Would it not be possible for some partnerships to be forged between a group of your companies and with willing government there to set out a plan for low carbon tourism? The same goes for working in

partnership with the authorities in different destinations in relation to water conservation and waste minimisation.

There is also a major role, I think, for your industry to demonstrate how low carbon, resource efficient and greener tourism can be highly aspirational. At present greener tourism is often regarded a niche market for the already 'green' tourist. Is there scope to show leadership in aligning what mass markets demand with what it is increasingly accepted is needed? There is a powerful route to do this which goes very much with the flow of where many experts are now seeing the future of the sustainable development agenda – it can be summed up in one word: Happiness.

As societies seek to minimise their environmental impacts while at the same time seeking to sustain a high quality of life there is a growing consensus that one logical way forward is to focus more on wellbeing and less on material consumption as the way in which we judge success, either culturally or economically. Surely this is near to the heart of what you all stand for and perhaps provides your industry with a unique platform for action.

One final thought. Whichever way you go in seeking to adopt genuinely responsible businesses that unite short-term pressures with long-term imperatives, there is one precious resource that you will need and which in my experience is more important than all the others. And that is leadership. This particular resource comes from individual people, there are many kinds that work and it can occur at all levels in all kinds of organisation. It is fortunately also an infinitely renewable resource and is the one you must focus on increasing. Because when leadership becomes evident, others follow.

But why show leadership, why step out and take risks that others are not prepared to bear? There is a simple answer to that. The world is changing like never before. While these changes present uncertainty and risk, for enlightened

leaders there is also a huge opportunity. Ask yourself what you expect the world will be like in 2020? Will the tourism sector be like it is now, or will it be greener and what we might describe as more responsible? If that is the direction of travel we can expect, driven by science, policy and public acceptance of the need for change, it seems to me that an ecologically responsible approach toward business development is the only sensible way forward.

Ladies and gentlemen, the journey toward responsible tourism is getting underway. I hope you all will wish to be inspirational leaders in ensuring that we can travel a long way in a short time.

Thanks you for listening.