

# Conference Report

## The World Conference on Sustainable Tourism

*Mark Hampton*

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Because of its rapid growth and projected future increase, international tourism is being considered as a possible development option for many countries. Governments of least-developed countries (LDCs) and some development NGOs are re-appraising tourism in the light of its 'sustainability' in economic, environmental, and cultural terms.

The Lanzarote World Conference on Sustainable Tourism, held in April 1995 in the Canary Islands, was billed as the tourism industry's follow-up to the Rio Earth Summit. It was partly sponsored by UNESCO, Directorate-General XVI of the European Union, the UN Environment Programme, and the World Tourism Organisation, with some assistance from Spanish local government. Over 180 papers were read in four parallel sessions over four days. Around 500 delegates were drawn from NGOs, international institutions, governments, academic institutions, and the private sector, although there were some surprising omissions: the global airlines and largest tour operators and hotel groups did not appear to be represented. The final day was used to draft a Charter for Sustainable Tourism, which will be presented to the UN.

Many papers addressed important topics facing LDCs, and in particular issues such as the question of tourism as an economic development strategy, local participation and empowerment especially for indigenous peoples, gender issues, ethical tourism, and cultural change. Although some presentations were somewhat bland, or even just advertisements for their author's organisation or country, among the most challenging were

those presented by delegates from environmental and development NGOs. These posed difficult questions, both for the international tourism industry and for those in LDC governments who see tourism as a fast track to economic nirvana.

Several speakers started with the problem of definitions, particularly the difference between sustainable tourism and nature tourism — terms which are often used interchangeably. Many speakers adopted the Ecotourism Society's definition of sustainable ecotourism: 'responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local communities'. This was contrasted with nature tourism, which was seen as being broadly traditional tourism with exotic flora and fauna, plus occasional visits to see 'colourful' native people.

**Andy Drumm** discussed converting from nature tourism to ecotourism in the Ecuadorean Amazon rainforest, and presented a useful typology of five operations: backpacker; economy lodges; eco-adventure camping; luxury nature lodges; and indigenous community enterprise. This last type was illustrated by the Capirona and Zabalo native communities, who have developed small-scale programmes to teach visitors about their communities and their relationship with the forest. Small, simple cabins have been built from local materials for the visitors. Drumm argued that local communities have the most invested in the sustainable development of the rainforest, and that the success of these two pioneer projects is encouraging for other native groups in the Amazon and beyond.

**Henrike van Engelenburg** from the Dutch NGO ProFound spoke on development NGOs and sustainable tourism from her fieldwork in Irian-Jaya, Indonesia. She noted

that local peoples such as the Papua need to be seen as central actors, especially women. Two projects were discussed: Wasur National Park and Bian River. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is involved in the former, and (with a different emphasis) a Dutch NGO in the latter. She argued that for the development NGO the local people's needs were a clear priority, whereas for the WWF 'nature' was more important. As **Duccio Canestrini** noted in his paper on ethnic tourism, this narrow focus on flora and fauna rather than the rights of indigenous peoples has often led to forced resettlement schemes outside government-declared National Parks in many LDCs.

**Amran Hamzah** discussed small-scale tourism development in Malaysia, arguing that this is now seen by the Federal government as an 'important catalyst for reviving the rural economy'. He analysed two sites and found that the backpacker (or budget traveller) and the increasing numbers of domestic tourists created by Malaysia's economic boom wanted superficial impressions of Kampung village life, but were relatively uninterested in 'nature watch', or actual participation in local crafts such as *batik*. This raises serious questions for the green tourism lobby, which wants to promote such activities for tourists.

**Silvie van der Cammen's** paper on responsible tourism and sustainable development in Third World countries focused on the Maasai people in the Loliondo area of Tanzania. Unlike the assumptions implicit in many other papers, her argument was that 'responsible tourism should be enhancing sustainable development, but is not necessarily sustainable itself', and that it could be a temporary activity that can be used to empower local people.

**Mohamed Ouali Bendjebila** addressed the connection between sustainable tourism and security, using the continuing problems in Algeria as an example. This topic generated considerable debate (itself unusual for this conference, given the generally low standard of the chairing of sessions).

Other notable contributors included **Tim Forsyth** of British NGO Tourism Concern on how the tourism industry can implement the principles of sustainable tourism in commercially viable ways; **Enrique Perez Parilla** on Lanzarote as an example of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, and how its designation affects tourism development; **Alan Clarke** on culture and sustainability; **Elena Nikitina** on environmental tourism in Russia; **Rodolfo Lizano** on the role of the State in sustainable tourism; and **Andrew Holden** on UK operators who offer 'green' holidays overseas.

The particular problems of tourism in small island developing states (SIDS) were highlighted by several papers: **Lino Briguglio** on Malta; **Prem Saddul** on Mauritius; **Ingrid Loderez** on the Seychelles; and **Jean-Yves Rochoux** on Reunion. However, the poor organisation of the conference meant that the presentations of this group of scholars could not easily be compared, as the papers were spread across different sessions over the four days.

In general this lack of organisation was a major weakness of the conference, which was typified by the lack of a detailed printed programme, lack of photocopying facilities, and various minor slip-ups all week. Clearly, for such a large, international conference, good organisation is vital to get the most from bringing together 500 or so delegates.

Nevertheless, Lanzarote was an inspired choice as a location for this conference, as its government appears committed to the sustainable development of tourism. For example, it is using alternative energy sources such as wind energy (wind farms now supply over 30 per cent of the island's electricity), and is encouraging greater environmental awareness in the tourism industry.

In sum, the conference was a useful starting point. It is vital for the international community to be more aware of the fragility of many ecosystems, especially those of small islands, coral reefs, rainforest, mangrove forest, and so on. Unconstrained

international mass tourism has the potential to destroy the very assets that attracted the tourists in the first place. For some countries, for development to be truly sustainable into the future, minimal tourism (or even no tourism) might be the best option, or perhaps a temporary development phase. For other countries, sustainable tourism requires local grassroots participation to ensure increased welfare for the poorest.

## The author

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# Feedback

## Some thoughts on gender and culture

*Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay*

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Mike Powell's article (*Development in Practice* 5:3) raises many issues about subjective perceptions, mainly those of 'outsiders' who interfere in cultures they do not fully understand. Such dilemmas have implications for 'insiders' as well as 'outsiders', because all practitioners are in some way intervening in processes of social transformation, and are involved in the business of allocating resources.

I would like to explore the issue of gender and culture: areas where the ways in which development practitioners understand and intervene in a situation can further entrench gender-based inequality, or demonstrate the possibility that such inequalities are open to challenge.

In India, I operate within my own society and culture, and so am an 'insider'. But in my work for gender equity, I have often experienced allegations from different quarters that this is against our culture, violates our traditions, and (the worst criticism of all in the Indian context) that it is 'Westernised'. It is common for gender and development practitioners to be labelled in

this manner, though the precise allegations may differ from one place to another. Gender relations are viewed as among the most intimate aspects of our cultural traditions, and challenging them seems to challenge the very basis of who we are.

In 1984, I published a book concerned with women and development in India, and undertook a publicity tour in the United Kingdom. Among the many presentations I made, the most memorable for me was at the Pakistan Centre in Liverpool. Most of the predominantly male audience were from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh.

The discussion that followed my talk was lively, to say the least, and abusive at its worst. My book criticised the Indian model of development for having worked against women's interests, and Indian society for its treatment of women. I was initially taken aback by the reaction, until it dawned on me what was happening. The Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis had united (leaving aside, for the time being, their bitter differences on the sub-continent) in a vigorous defence of culture and tradition: a tradition which respected its women, a tradition which was protective of its women, a tradition in which women were the centre of families which, in turn, were collectivities of mutual cooperation, love, and sacrifice. In fact, they