REDEFINING THE TOURISM PRODUCT
THE ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERIENCE

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Welcome to the session entitled, "Tourism and the Environment--Partners, Not Adversaries." This title was not chosen lightly. In fact, a good subtitle might be, "Redefining the Tourism Product." In our panel, today, we want to put forward the argument that environmentalism is essential to tourism, not its adversary. And, that it is time for the business sector to take a much stronger proactive stand for its own preservation.

As I continue to work with tourism planning and development, here and abroad, I find the greatest obstacle to development is environmental. This has two dimensions.

First, is the reduction of resource quality, not just by tourism but by many other sources. This is threatening the success of many destinations: contaminated water, polluted air, eroded soil, loss of animal habitat, destruction of archeological assets, and reduction of landscape beauty.

Second, is the lack of creative planning and development of resources for tourism. Many opportunities are being missed--opportunities for attraction development based on natural and cultural resources. The surge in environmentalism has created a new and growing travel market demand interested in the environment. Even in areas where the quality of these resources remains high, tourism developers usually focus only on the service business side, ignoring the potential around them. When properly designed and managed, resource areas can provide enriching experiences to visitors without damage to the environment.

And so, our panel, today, is directing its attention to some of the issues that relate to tourism and the environment. In keeping with the theme of this conference, "Building Credibility for a Credible Industry," we have two very highly qualified individuals to address this issue. One, a research specialist, will describe some valuable recent research he has performed proving the relationship between environmental protection and tourism. The other, a land planner, will then follow with specific tourism development cases that demonstrate how good design and planning can protect as well as develop resources.

But, before I put them on, I would like to lay a brief foundation.

Today, we are beginning to see some awakening of the importance of environmentalism by the travel and hospitality businesses. Trade magazines are carrying many new articles on how hotels, restaurants, and convention centers are not only recycling waste; they are making money doing it.

For example, a 2000-delegate five-day conference produces about 600 pounds of
aluminum cans. The average exposition leaves behind in paper waste the equivalent of about 170 trees. In many locations, aluminum, paper, and plastics are being recycled. Environmentalism is being expressed in other ways by some tourist businesses. For every bottle of wine served in the restaurants of a hotel in Virginia, a dollar is donated to the Arlington County Department of Parks and Recreation. A resort hotel with golf course in Alabama is now composting its grounds clippings and leaves--some 3 1/2 tons each week--instead of paying to haul them away to the local landfill which is already overburdened. Northwest Airlines now recycles 15 tons a month of solid waste and hopes this year to recycle food waste as well. Seattle-based Recreational Equipment, Inc. donated $300,000 to environmental organizations in 1990.

These are commendable environmental efforts and show new sensitivity to the environment by tourist businesses. But, in my opinion, they are but the proverbial "tip of the iceberg." Hidden is the huge credibility gap between environmentalism and tourism.

There is a prevailing belief that the principal tourism products are hotel rooms and airline seats. Even though these are important facilitators and show greatest economic impact, they are not the dominant tourism products. Market research continues to tell us that the real tourism product is the visitor's experience. And, in spite of increased popularity of man-made attractions, such as theme parks, the bulk of visitor experiences at destinations is oriented toward natural and cultural resource development. For example, our National Park Service tells us that visits have increased by one-third in the last decade--96.5 million visits took place to NPS cultural areas alone in 1989.

We are beginning to see research of this issue at many locations. On our campus at Texas A & M University, one researcher has listed over 200 items in an ecotourism bibliography. From Murdoch University, Perth, Australia, comes the report "Tourism and the Environment in the Gascoyne Region of Western Australia." From India comes the report, "Integrating Tourism and Conservation." The University of the West Indies, Jamaica, has published a study entitled, "Use of Wetlands for Tourism in the Insular Caribbean." The University of Montana has issued a paper entitled, "The Natural Connection: Creating a Special Sense of Place through Nature-Based Tourism." And, I just completed, with Price Waterhouse, a study of tourism opportunities in Delaware based on natural resources.

Just a few months ago, I was invited to participate in a task force to analyze tourism issues and opportunities for a small island in the South Pacific. The task force included specialists in hotels, resorts, and tourism development and was sponsored by the Pacific Asia Tourist Association and the French Polynesian Government.

The first impression is of the typically fantasized tropical paradise. A 3,000-foot mountain range, beautifully green with vegetation, dominates the center of the island. A narrow coastal zone with outstanding beaches is surrounded by crystal clear lagoons enclosed by protective coral reefs. The island is easily accessible by ferry boats and air shuttle just seven miles from Tahiti. About 7,000 people, French and Polynesian, live on this tranquil island.
Market studies show the top three most appealing aspects of the island are the sea, beautiful scenery, and uncongested development. Sounds like all is well in Paradise?

They wish it were so. Hotel occupancy is less than 50% and less than 10% of visitors ever come back. Sewage is seeping into the lagoons creating algae growth, odor and pollution problems. There is no protection against erosion and destruction of the beauty of the fragile mountainsides. Resort hotel development is dominated by such myopic vision that the abundant natural and cultural resources are virtually ignored and unavailable to visitors.

A major current controversy has arisen between the local people and a proposed megaresort by a Japanese investor. It is supported by the French government and strongly opposed by the local residents. This development would destroy a pristine valley and disrupt ancient Polynesian archeological sites. And, in our opinion, would further glut the travel market with hotel rooms.

Experiences such as this are frustrating and repeated everywhere I go. They are especially frustrating because the very leaders of tourism and the tourism business sector not only are apathetic but frequently oppose environmental protection.

This is today's challenge—for those who benefit the most from tourism (the tourism businesses) to support active protection of the resources that put them in business. This is not an emotional issue nor should it be left to the fanatics of environmentalism. It is hard-nosed tourism economics.

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Now, let me introduce my first speaker.

Dr. Gary Machlis is a professor of the Departments of Forest Resources and Sociology, University of Idaho. In addition, he is sociology project leader for the National Park Service Cooperative Park Studies Unit for northwestern United States. Gary has done extensive research of travel to our national parks. This has been directed toward both sides--tourist impact on the environment and the importance of environmental assets to tourism. He has published extensively on these topics as well as on the value of interpretation programs and facilities. He has performed extensive research on tourism systems, conducted visitor studies in over 40 national parks and written many papers on conservation. Please help me welcome Dr. Machlis.

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And now, it is my privilege to introduce our next speaker. The firm of Edward D. Stone, Jr. and Associates of Florida is one of the most prominent planning and landscape architectural firms in the tourism field. The resort hotels, parks, and nature centers designed by his firm have clearly demonstrated sensitivity to environmental assets at the same time masses of tourists are provided for. Our speaker today, Mr. Perry Burr of the San Francisco office has been involved
in design projects for tourism in Greece, Mexico, Japan and Malaysia as well as the United States. Please help me welcome Perry Burr.
REFERENCES


