SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A REACHABLE TOURISM OBJECTIVE

A Presentation by
Dr. Clare A. Gunn, Professor Emeritus
TTRA-Canada Chapter Annual Conference
Hull, Quebec, October 28, 1991

I. MAN-EARTH--HUMAN ECOLOGY

My approach to addressing the theme of this conference, "Tourism-Environment -- Sustainable Development," is to confirm the position that this is a reachable objective. My thesis is that tourism is the wrong "whipping boy"--that our environmental problems arise from the inability of institutions and their policies to cope with environmental issues.

Scientists keep reminding us that all animal life, including mankind, is shaped by the environment and conversely, organisms shape the environment. But, as Sargent explains in his book on human ecology, (Sargent, 1974, 1) man is dramatically different from other organisms because he has taken control over not only his own destiny but that of all other organisms. Whereas other animals are limited to their environmental niches, we have taken over the entire world as our niche. Originally, when the separate races were being formed, they were more closely confined to certain areas of the globe. This is no more.

We regularly engage in environmental modification that is both extreme and intensive. In other organisms, "the natural ecosystems organismic detritus is fed back into the environment and recycled." (Sargent, 1974, 16) Not so with man.

It has taken us several generations to understand the difference between balanced development and wanton development. Historically, we in the United States did not know that our push westward was heavily laced with wanton destruction of resources--decimation of forests, erosion of soil by cotton production, and killing of buffalo. (Sargent, 1974, 29)

The position put forward here is that sustainable development of tourism is not only possible but may represent the best hope for economic development as well. The major environmental issues around the globe are not caused by tourism but by the lack of understanding of the limits of the world's ecosystem, especially the limits of consumption of physical resources.

One need not research the topic very deeply to discover many alarming facts about global environmental threats. For this, I turn to one of the most comprehensive and reliable sources, The Worldwatch Institute and particularly its 1991 Report of Progress Toward a Sustainable Society.

For example, we are told that since the first Earth Day, in 1970, as many as 200 million hectares of tree cover have been lost. (Brown, 1991, 3) Deserts have expanded some 120 million hectares, utilizing more land than is currently planted to crops in China. Water pollution
continues to threaten man as well as waterlife. It was reported just recently that Texas was losing 2.5 million a day in seafood and tourist dollars because half of the state's industrial and municipal wastewater flows into Galveston Bay. Included are acids, arsenic, oil, grease and other toxic waste as well as sewage. (Galveston, 1991, 5B)

Farmers have lost an estimated 480 billion tons of topsoil. (Brown, 1991, 3) Carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas in the atmosphere, is now rising 0.4 percent per year. Air pollution is at health-threatening levels in hundreds of cities. The stratospheric ozone layer continues to thin; the number of plant and animal species is diminishing and damage from acid rain is seen on every continent. And throughout the world governmental policies of pesticide subsidies have greatly increased the threats from toxic chemicals. (Postel and Flavin, 1991, 178)

All this evidence of environmentally unsustainable growth cannot be laid at the door of tourism.

II. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FAILURES?

Within the theme of this conference is the term, "sustainable development." This new buzz word is intended to imply that there is hope for avoiding wanton utilization of our environmental resources. To guide me in my position, I turn to a comprehensive definition of sustainable development prepared by one of your own countrymen at the University of British Columbia in 1989.

Sustainable development is positive socioeconomic change that does not undermine the ecological and social systems upon which communities and society are dependent. Its successful implementation requires integrated policy, planning, and social learning processes; its political viability depends on the full support of the people it affects through their governments, their social institutions, and their private activities. (Rees, 1989, 3)

Let's look at some key words in this definition.

First, the basic premise is "positive socioeconomic change." It is not denying change that is bound to accompany economic development. It implies that such change must provide social and economic good.

Second, it then qualifies change by stating that it "does not undermine the ecological and social systems. This again is human ecology, avoiding wanton--that is, useless, reckless, undisciplined--utilization of resources. It states further that these ecological and social systems are the foundations upon which communities and societies depend.
Then, it goes on to state that successful implementation requires several public and private policies and actions, such as "integrated policy, planning, and social learning processes." For me, this is the heart of the entire issue of impact on the environment, from all economic development, including tourism.

Most tourism development is positive and does not undermine the ecological and social systems upon which communities and society are dependent. But, even when it does demonstrate environmental stress, tourism is not the cause. I argue that in these instances, any economic development would cause problems.

The problem is our failure to place sustainable development and the necessary strategies high enough in our priorities. And so, our public and private institutions continue to take action with such myopic vision that important consequences are ignored.

Yes, I can cite examples where it might appear that tourism has had a detrimental impact on the environment. But, let's look at them more closely.

**Santa Catalina Island.** This small island, a few miles wide and 22 miles long and a 25-minute ferry ride from Long Beach California, has been an excellent example of sustainable development for many years. Most of it is a beautiful nature preserve with a tiny community nestled in a small valley, originally developed by William Wrigley, Jr. in the 1920s. For all these years a limited water supply kept development in balance. Just recently, however, a huge condominium development has been plastered against the verdant hillside, destroying much of its rustic character. But, I cannot blame tourism. It was an unjustified public-private decision to build a desalinization plant that was at fault.

**Walden Pond.** World-wide, Henry David Thoreau is known and revered for his insightful writings about man and nature. Many of these writings were inspired by his living alongside a small lake in Massachusetts, now known as Walden Pond, completely surrounded by beautiful forest. But, today, because thousands of visitors can boat, fish, and swim the lake and destroy much of the vegetation along the water's edge, one might accuse overuse by tourists as damaging the environment. Yes, it is overuse, but who is at fault? The fault lies in the inept policy decision of the state's park agency that has ignored the area's historic value and over developed it for active recreation. The built-up beach, a marina, a recreation pavilion, and a shoreline trail were bad policy and management decisions. Instead, an interpretive center at the edge, describing Thoreau and his work, would have been more appropriate and avoided the depredation.

**Moorea, French Polynesia.** Just a year ago, I participated in a Task Force to evaluate tourism on the island of Moorea, just a few miles from Tahiti. This spectacularly beautiful tropical island has welcomed tourism as an economic replacement of failing copra production. But, we found erosion of the mountainside, a diminished wildlife habitat, congested traffic circling the island, threat of destruction of ancient archeological sites by a mega resort proposal, and sewage seeping from resort hotels, polluting the crystal clear lagoons around the island. On the surface, one might say that tourism has been destructive. But in our opinion, we concluded
that the environment could be improved and the tourism economy could be doubled by initiating the needed technical, planning, and public-private policies. It was the failure to build the proper sewage treatment plant, the failure to place the mountain into a preserve or national park, the failure to introduce well-designed natural and cultural resource attractions, and, perhaps the greatest problem, the failure of the resort hotel business developers to understand that their tourism product went beyond the site of the hotel. Under these poor public-private policies, any other economic development would have been even more devastating.

Lunenberg County, Nova Scotia. Not long ago, I was invited to participate in "Operation Discovery," a week-long public-involvement project in Lunenberg County, covering over 25 topics, including tourism. The two greatest threats to tourism were not tourism itself but the results of not accepting any public-private policies and controls to develop tourism. A major threat was sewage pollution of the LaHave River and coastal area from the city of Bridgewater and other nearby communities. The other was the threat of German and Japanese investors wishing to purchase waterfront properties for resort and condominium development. Local residents wanted the economic rewards from tourism but had implemented no plans or policies to protect the waterfront zone that they claimed was very important to them for its quality of life. No, it was not tourism; it was the inadequate cooperation, planning, and protective controls by the people themselves at fault.

National Parks. A popular theme today among our journalists and weekend environmentalists is that we are loving our parks to death, that tourism is ruining our parks. In my opinion, we are not loving them enough.

Let me illustrate. Along the Texas Gulf Coast, most of a barrier island has been designated the Padre Island National Seashore, administered by the National Park Service. A management concern is the tons of trash that accumulate for 85 miles along this narrow and sensitive environment. Are the tourists to blame? Hardly. It was the Park Service's lack of planning policies to prohibit automobile and other vehicular use along the majority of the beachfront. I happened to attend the public hearing years ago when I saw a handful of local fishermen with 4-wheel drive jeeps convince the Park Service of their traditional right to drive along this beach.

Even research on tourist impacts on national parks indicates that tourism is not the problem. A 1980 study (Becker, 1986, 243) indicated that about one-half of the environmental threats come from outside the parks, such as acid rain, toxic chemicals, timber harvesting, oil, gas and mineral exploration. And, those inside included soil erosion, air and water pollution, non-native plants and animals—all issues that can be controlled with proper policies and management. Machlis and Tichnell in their study of national parks worldwide (1985, 24) showed that the major threats were not caused by visitors but by poaching, pollution, and erosion.

In recent years we have had in the U.S. National Park Service, a presidential appointment of a tourism director, Priscilla Baker. She has observed that tourism, even at its worst, is relatively benign compared to other economic development. She states,
Problems that have arisen over tourism-related issues such as the location of an airport or the routing of a highway pale in comparison to the effects of acid mine drainage on an entire watershed, subsistence in residential areas, and the destruction of inland waterways by acid rain, for example. (Baker, 1986, 51)

III. ACHIEVABLE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Contrary to the damaging impact of tourism, it can stimulate even better environmental protection of cultural as well as natural resources.

A good case in point is the Aransas Wildlife Refuge along the Texas Gulf Coast. Over the last twenty years, in spite of becoming nearly extinct, the numbers of the rare whooping crane have increased by over 400% due to cooperation between wildlife scientists of the United States and Canada. (Schwindt, 1989) At the same time the number of visitors to this area has almost doubled. By means of policy, design, and management, including an interpretive center, automobile and foot trails, and an observation tower, thousands of tourists are enriched by their visits. Environmental protection of this rare bird has been enhanced, not diminished, because of tourism.

Sustainable tourism development can be achieved. Years ago, a sociologist was sure that tourism was destroying the Amish culture in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. After a long study there, he was surprised to discover that tourism actually fostered their own cultural analysis and identification of what really was important to them. As a result, they established policies that disallowed tourist invasions of privacy and yet fostered the economic benefits and cultural enlightenment by catering to tourists on main street.

Another case in Texas involved severe conflict between environmental protectionists and tourism developers in Comal County, a popular tubing and canoeing area on the Guadalupe River. (Watt, 1988) The riverbanks were being eroded by promiscuous access to the river. The riparian property owners complained of damage to their lawns from visitors parking their cars and throwing out trash. Several locations were known for drugs and violence. By means of a series of community meetings over a period of two years, more tourists are being accommodated, commercial vendors of river floating services are expanding, properties are no longer vandalized and it is a safe and fun place to visit. All this is the result of new cooperation between the public and private sector to develop new policies, planning, and management practices.

Recently, I had the opportunity of visiting an excellent example of sustainable tourism development in Alberta, the "Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump National Monument," located south of Calgary. A rather inconspicuous escarpment west of Fort McLeod has been converted into a major tourist attraction. The resource is being protected at the same time that thousands of visitors are enriched by new understandings of the life of prehistoric man. High quality planning and design principles have been applied to the site and structures. Most parking is provided at
the lower level with shuttle access to the site. The interpretive center is unobtrusively built into the cliff and contains many informative exhibit areas. Self-guided trails lead to the actual sites where buffalo were driven over the cliff. In addition to the social benefits, the lodging, food, and retail businesses of Fort McLeod are getting an economic boost. Sustainable tourism development is possible.

Probably the greatest impact of new tourism development is taking place in Third World countries. Safei Hamed, a designer and scholar of resource development in these regions has observed that the major problem is not tourism but the "inadequacy of the existing agencies to deal with the challenges of growth." (Hamed, 1990, 18) To provide this needed function as tourism grows in Egypt, a special Environmental Affairs Division has been established within the Tourism Development Unit of the Egyptian government.

Generally, throughout the world, progress has been slow in planning parks and surrounding areas together for tourism. At the first conference, "Tourism and Parks," held in the United States, the Chief of Interpretation of Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument, Colorado, gave testimony to sustainable development of tourism there (Rollo, 1988). He reported that in just a few years he has expanded greatly the resource protection and interpretation of these interesting ancient fossil beds of insects, leaves, and seeds of the Oligocene Period. Tourism has multiplied by over four times (95,000 visits in 1990) (Statistical Abstract) stimulating the economies of nearby communities of Woodland Park, Divide, Florissant, Lake George, and Cripple Creek. How did it happen? This resulted from his taking leadership and cooperating with local communities on tourism issues of mutual interest. Together, they have established positive socioeconomic changes—a basic element in our definition of sustainable development.

We are finally learning that tourism can continue to grow at the same time sustainable development takes place. Scholars and practitioners are beginning to identify policies and principles that foster this balance.

For example, the research of your own David Fennell and Paul Eagles (1990, 32) of ecotourism in Costa Rica identified several principles important for sustainable development:

- the mutual agreement between tour operators and visitors regarding levels of crowding;
- tour operator control of visits, spatially and temporally;
- governmental agreements with tour operators on the park entrance allowance and extent of park management assistance;
- agreements on marketing image.

All of these are planning, design, and management policies directed toward sustainable development.
Here in Canada, throughout your history of national parks and tourism, you have demonstrated a high degree of sustainable development due to foresight and leadership by your Park Service. For example, Carruthers (1981, 5), lists the following basic principles for planning new parks in context with the surrounding region:

1. Establish an independent review board or advisory committee.
2. Place a planner in the area to work with local communities.
3. Establish a cooperative planning project involving all interested agencies and groups.
4. Establish a task force to consult with interested parties and carry out necessary background studies.
5. Feed information into regional planning exercises.
6. Feed information into, and participate in comprehensive native land claims/negotiations.

He indicates that most of these have been applied and emphasizes the point that "In the final analysis, park system planners do not create new national parks. They serve as catalysts and do the ground work to guide the evolution of the Parks System. It is the politicians and the people who 'create' new national parks." (Carruthers, 1981, 6)

IV. CONCLUSIONS

My answer to the question posed in the title of this conference, "is sustainable development a reachable tourism objective," has to be a "yes."

No social force in the world today has greater economic impact than has tourism.

No economic activity offers greater social rewards than does tourism.

No economic activity is less disruptive of the environment than is tourism.

In instances where the development of tourism has been disruptive, any other development also would have been, probably even more so. The problem is the failure of public-private policies and planning practices as well as our lack of understanding the complexities of tourism. Where these factors are adequately understood and implemented, any economic development including tourism can meet the desired criteria for sustainable development.
REFERENCES


"Galveston Bay Seafood threatened by Pollution," (Associated Press). *Bryan-College Station Eagle*, 117 (252), Sept. 9, 1991, p.5B.


Watt, Carson E. and Edward McWilliams. 1988. *Assistance to Local Entities in Comal County to Develop a River Corridor Management Assessment and Action Plan*. College Station, Texas: National Park Service Cooperative Park Studies Unit, Texas A&M University.