

Greener Tourism – Fact Or Fantasy?

Written by Helen Turnbull – Responsible Travel Writer & Consultant

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries, providing jobs and income to both developed and developing nations, but it is a highly consumptive business. While we welcome the thousands of arriving tourists each year, eager to show them what a fantastic place South Africa is, we must be mindful that tourism can have both a positive and negative impact on the destination.

Words like 'conservation and sustainability' are becoming commonplace. But how will the tourism industry be able to manage the delicate balance of attracting increasing numbers of tourists while conserving our unique environment? More important, how can South Africa work towards a profitable future in tourism, while effectively protecting its natural resources?

The story begins thirteen years ago, in the early days of our fledgling democracy when tourism was identified as an economic catalyst to create employment opportunities and to generate income for the country. The government wrote a visionary policy on tourism, which categorically stated that the future of the industry in South Africa could not be 'any old tourism', it had to offer a new framework that would facilitate conservation and provide a platform for poverty alleviation.

As a legacy of the World Summit For Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in South Africa, government representatives and tourism policy makers from a number of countries came together in the Mother city to sign a landmark agreement, known as the *2002 Cape Town Declaration*. This document made South Africa the pioneer country to formalise guidelines for what has become known as '*responsible tourism*'. Initiated by the International Union For Conservation (IUCN), South Africa then became the first country to offer a *fair trade* label that would specifically recognise tourism businesses committed to the three principles of 'sustainable development'. The ideal business model would include *economic*,

environmental and *social* best practice, its aim to create positive benefits for the people and the area around the business.

Fair Trade Tourism South Africa (FTTSA) helped to raise vital awareness in the travel industry and with it came the realisation that tourism can make a difference to the lives of others if managed sustainably.

The mindset of international tourists has changed too and gradually demand has increased for more meaningful holiday experiences, where visitors could choose a destination with a clear intention to support poor communities in the places they visited. So began the travellers philanthropy movement with a growing interest for volunteer holidays and the desire to contribute positively to the host country.

Other tourism destinations around the world have begun to follow suit, and many of them are using the 2002 Cape Town Declaration as a benchmark to compile their own tourism policies. At one of the world's biggest annual tourism trade shows, World Travel Market, London, the Cape Town Declaration supplies the foundation for the highly respected 'World Responsible Tourism Awards'. Each year the best examples of sustainable tourism businesses from all over the globe are showcased. In 2004, Calabash Tours from Port Elizabeth scooped top honours from over 2000 individual nominations worldwide for its poverty alleviation work and community tours.

Such progressive decisions now enable South Africa to harness its full potential. Fortunately we still have a growing tourism market, and hence the opportunity to learn from tourism destinations that have already lost their precious natural resources through overdevelopment.

All over the country we find examples of how companies have faced various challenges and 'gone green'. One is Table Mountain Aerial Cableway. Situated in a National Park, it is a renowned World Heritage Site, a biodiversity hotspot, and also one of our most popular tourist attractions. Here the pressure is definitely on to ensure that high tourism traffic does not damage the natural ecological balance. A strict environmental management strategy has been put in place to limit, as far as possible, any negative impacts. With the

emphasis heavily on resource management, measures put in place include the use of compostable eating utensils to reduce water consumption at the top of the mountain, sensor activated taps and pressurised toilets that use only 0.75l of water per flush as opposed to 11l per flush as well as water free urinals. Visitors are encouraged to recycle by using designated containers and waste disposal is managed sensitively. Aesthetically pleasing pathways and fences have been put in place to protect the indigenous vegetation and wildlife. As a result of these changes, the cableway company was recognised in 2008 for its efforts in our home grown 'Imvelo' responsible tourism awards.

While many have welcomed a *responsible approach* to tourism, there are some who remain sceptical about the higher costs of 'doing good'. Financial outlay would certainly be involved if the decision is taken to implement solar water heating, or install grey water recycling methods, but some of the simplest steps can make positive changes and save money, thus making good business sense. Finding a way to limit electricity usage will benefit everyone's pocket and reduce fossil fuel reliance. Considering worm farming as part of a waste management plan can provide excellent compost for gardens and reduce municipal costs. Taking care of those less fortunate than ourselves is something we should all consider as a priority, and there are easy ways to do this without having to commit to hands on involvement. Greater Good South Africa is a website that offers advice and guidance on managing social responsibility.

Food security is a major concern for the future. Establishing a small vegetable garden will not only promote good health, but also provide fresh produce that can supply a restaurant. Such a project can also work well in partnership with a local community. Selling products that are ethical is another way to support responsible tourism, using local suppliers and goods that are from sustainable sources shows a willingness to commit to fair business practice.

Some companies have achieved incredible things with conservation. The Dunes Country Lodge and Nature Reserve in St. Francis Bay, has revived a wetland by removing an area of alien vegetation. Their action has encouraged the return of many frog and toad species and is so successful that the experience is now shared with their guests

by taking them on a novel evening frog safari. The owner of Dyer Island Cruises, a boat based whale watching company, was so concerned about the plight of the African penguin, that he designed an artificial penguin home. By encouraging passengers on his boat trips to sponsor the nests, over 2000 new homes have been provided to vulnerable penguin families and captured the attention of the world. It can often be the smallest idea that has the biggest effect.

Even next years World Cup will not escape its environmental responsibility, and the 'Green Goal 2010' campaign will ensure that effective initiatives are put in place all over the country to keep the events carbon footprint to a minimum.

Despite the recent economic downturn, tourism globally is one of the few industries predicted to grow even further. The power of utilising tourism as a way to make South Africa a better place is one of the things we can all participate in, by simply choosing to take a holiday that doesn't cost the earth.

www.fairtourismsa.org.za

www.tablemountain.net

www.duneestfrancis.com

www.dict.org.za

www.wtmwrtd.com

www.imveloawards.co.za

www.myggsa.co.za

www.calabashtours.co.za