

Global Warming and the Future of Travel

THE RECENT report by the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change provides irrefutable proof that global warming is well and truly under way. Over the next few years, this is going to have a significant impact on travel and tourism by striking at some of the most critical areas, in particular the gas-hungry transportation business. By extension, it will fundamentally change the way the entire industry does business.

The issue is simple: With all economic theories designed around MORE AND MORE growth, how will it be possible to meet demands to consume LESS AND LESS? In other words, the travel industry wants more visitors and higher expenditures, even while environmentalists want less consumption and reduced usage of natural resources.

These were some of the issues on the table when the Greening of Industry Network (GIN) met in January 2001 in Bangkok, its first meeting in Asia, bringing together scientists, academics, environmentalists and company executives from around the world. An analysis of the many presentations quickly showed the obvious:

The short-term rush to produce quarterly financial results (economics) and adapt to the onslaught of IT (e-commerce) is taking far more priority over the long-term need to produce environmental accountability (ecology). As global warming heats up, those priorities are facing a sharp reversal.

Worse is still to come. In pursuit of economic growth, which is necessary to alleviate poverty, the developing countries of the PATA region will need to use more fossil fuels, not less. Forest cover in some of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region countries – today ranging between 40 percent and 70 percent – is set to fall markedly in the next few years as they sell more of their natural resources to raise funds for infrastructure to drive industrialisation.

Industrialisation exacts a huge environmental toll which, in turn, will impact on the weather, which in turn will affect travel

and tourism. If the scientists at the GIN conference are to be believed, global warming will lead to submerged islands, floods, deforestation, earthquakes, typhoons, forest fires and El Niño and El Niña. Add to that: depletion of resources, acid rain, desertification, species decimation, marine pollution, etc.

The sum total is a looming calamity of gargantuan proportion. It does not even begin to account for man-made disasters like oil spills, such as the recent one in the Galapagos.

Alleviating the potential disaster strikes at the root of economic theories and requires a fundamental rethink of the rules of conducting business. The world's biggest companies – which sell cars, aircraft, ships and oil – are the biggest energy consumers, specifically of fossil fuels. Any move to new technology and alternative forms of transportation directly hurts their profitability.

At the GIN conference, there was no shortage of studies and scientific research with serious implications for travel and tourism. Here are some of the issues and questions that emerged:

The Price of Bigness: Over the last few years, the travel industry has had a torrid love affair with bigness – huge convention centres, huge cruise ships, huge hotels with high ceilings that guzzle pots of energy just for air-conditioning alone. Everything has been geared towards becoming bigger and bigger as if there would be eternally infinite natural resources to run them. The backlash is now setting in. The bigger will suffer more than others.

The Water Shortage: Tourism is a massive water-guzzler. In many parts of the world now, fresh water is a precious commodity. The average tourist has no incentive to save water. The guest pays for a hotel room and earns the right to fill up the bathtub. Does the little sign urging guests to save water make any difference? Probably not.

SAVE THE PLANET – CUT BUSINESS TRAVEL

Researchers from universities and environmental institutes in Finland and Sweden are suggesting that one way environmentally conscious companies can help both their financial bottom-line and the environment is by reducing business travel. After all, they note, air travel is a major cause of carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide emissions which would be drastically reduced if fewer road-warriors took to the road.

Yes, they say, some business travel is necessary and unavoidable. Many executives need to get away from the office for a while, to meet people and conduct business in different parts of the world. But after a while, business travel can become a drag, affect health, productivity and family life and it can also be a major expense item – something which many companies are themselves looking into.

The researchers' suggestion to globalising conglomerates: Review the business travel plan and start preparing serious alternatives, such as:

- Increased use of video-conferencing, which the researchers say is becoming easier with advances in information and communications technology
- Better planning of routes to combine several different functions into one trip
- Take trains instead of planes for flights of less than one hour. If air travel is necessary, avoid zig-zagging
- Reduce the number of people who really need to go – are five people really necessary when two can do just as well?
- When selecting hotels or tour operators for business meetings, go for those with a dedicated commitment to the environment, such as those which may have converted vehicle fleets to alternative fuels like ethanol or biogas

Not exactly music to the ears of the industry, but that is the kind of thinking that is emerging these days.

The Low-Importance Given to Railway: There has been virtually no promotion of railways in the PATA region, perhaps because it does not help sell cars and buses. Yet, railways are among the most ecologically efficient means of transportation for both the poor as well as tourists. International donor organisations have poured billions of dollars into roads and airports. Railtracks and railway stations have been almost sidelined. About time for a rethink?

Brands: Travel and tourism companies are being bombarded with marketing pitches by ISO and one or another “green” brand or label. But the jury is out. There is much suspicion about what results these brands deliver relative to the money they charge, year after year. Global tour operators aligned with these brands are requiring suppliers to sign up with the same brands as a measure of certification. Is this a threat?

Role of the Energy Companies: After years of vigorous lobbying and propaganda describing global warming as a myth, energy companies are beginning to position themselves for the post-oil era. Most of the patents and technological expertise for that era are in their hands. Having long paid for oil imports, developing countries will, in the post-oil era, be paying more money for licensing fees, copyrights and patents for usage of energy-saving machinery and techniques. What can be done about this?

An Environmental Satellite Account: The travel industry has worked hard over the years to do its share for environmental protection. Is there a way of quantifying in total how much of an impact – if any – these efforts have had. The economic impact of travel and tourism is today measurable via Tourism Satellite Accounts. Is it possible to develop a global standard for an environmental satellite account (ESA)? Can we develop a system that says “tourism last year reduced consumption of fossil fuels by XX amount”? Or used XX much less detergent and chemicals? Nothing like this exists. Should one be set up? And if so, by whom?

In many destinations, hotels share information about their occupancy and average room rates. As a potential step towards an ESA, should they now start sharing information on water usage, energy consumption and garbage disposal and set up a time frame over which to achieve quantifiable results? These should be real reductions, not based on per-capita cuts in consumption and waste-generation. Should governments set up incentives and pour more funds for marketing and development into those destinations that deliver results?

Environmental Audits: Should the entire industry begin conducting environmental audits? Airlines like British Airways, Lufthansa and Scandinavian Airlines have shown that a clear-cut methodology exists for running an environmental audit within

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FORCES OF CHANGE

In 1998, the Greening of Industry Network began a multi-year cooperative envisioning project with the automotive giant General Motors to develop a shared understanding of the forces of global environment change.

A survey was circulated asking scientists and environmental thought leaders to list the forces of change that will positively or negatively impact the global environment by the year 2025. The following 35 forces were identified.

Table 1. Forces of Environmental Change by Category

Biosphere

- Heightened awareness stimulated by environmental disasters
- Growing concerns for water supply and air quality
- Growing concern for the loss of biodiversity stemming from diminishing natural resource reserves
- Growing belief that an accelerated rate of global warming is occurring
- Growing benefits of ecotourism
- Increasing varieties of new health risks

Business Cooperation

- Increasing use of green business practices
- Changing business operating and management philosophies
- Increasing business collaboration and networking

Economics

- Changes in economic conditions
- Increasing levels of consumption
- Growing consumer interest in greener products and processes

- The impact of the rising status of women on the environment

Education/Awareness

- Expanding awareness of the changing environment
- Education's increasing role in the environmental movement
- Emerging world view of people and their place in the environment

Energy

- Concern is growing as to the value and viability of alternative sources of energy
- Changing fossil fuel prices affect its use

Human Settlement

- Changing population size
- Changing population demography
- Growing urban population and urban sprawl
- Changes in where work is located
- Change in emphasis on planning for urban and rural land use

Mobility

- Increasing interest in mobility and the resultant increase in environmental degradation
- Improving environmental performance of automotive vehicles

- Shifts to alternative forms of transportation

Non-Government Organisations (NGOs)

- Expanding influence of non government organisations(NGOs)

Politics

- Growing need for global environmental collaboration
- The impact regional alliances have on environmental legislation
- Emerging need for increases and improvements in environmental legislation
- Changes in political interest in environmental issues
- Emerging need for market-based environmental policies
- Threats of war

Technology

- The expanding information age is having a positive impact on the environment
- Technology advances are improving the greenness of products and processes

Table 2. Significantly Different Themes for Less and Fully Developed Countries

Higher Importance for Less Developed Countries

- Concern for Water and Air
- Growing Urban Population/Sprawl
- Need for Improved Environmental Legislation
- Changes in Political Interest in Environmental Issues
- Heightened Awareness Stimulated by Environmental Disasters
- Changing Population Size
- Increasing Benefits of Ecotourism

Higher Importance for Fully Developed Countries

- Shifts to Alternative Transportation
- Increasing Levels of Consumption
- Increasing Rate of Global Warming

ANTARCTICA EXPLORERS FIND CLEAR EVIDENCE OF GLOBAL WARMING

Nairobi – Ministers meeting at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, in early February 2001, received a satellite phone call from yachtsman and adventurer Sir Peter Blake in Antarctica. At anchor among icebergs and sheltering from gale-force katabatic winds, Sir Peter reported:

"We are in an area that normally is solid ice at this time of year. Now it has many bergs in it, but is essentially a free waterway, an almost unheard of occurrence. The captain of a cruise ship that has been coming to the Antarctic Peninsula every year since the mid-1970s told us he has never seen the area so free of ice, and that the average temperature in that time has increased by about 1.4 degrees Celsius."

UNEP Executive Director Mr. Klaus Toepfer told the adventurer that the most recent assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) showed that global warming over the next century is likely to be between 1.4 to 5.8 degrees Celsius.

He said that recent IPCC reports had confirmed a spectacular retreat and collapse of ice shelves in the Antarctic Peninsula, which is related to a southerly migration of the January zero degrees Celsius isotherm.

Projected warming is likely to break up ice shelves further south on the Antarctic Peninsula, exposing more bare ground and triggering biological changes in the terrestrial and marine environments.

Mr. Toepfer also told Sir Peter and the crew of his expedition yacht *Seamaster* that analysis of whaling records and modeling studies indicate that Antarctic sea ice retreated south by 2.8 degrees of latitude between the mid 1950s and early 1970s, as atmospheric carbon dioxide levels from industrial emissions rose.

"Climate change in polar regions is expected to be among the greatest of any region on the Earth and will cause major physical, ecological, sociological and economic impacts," Mr. Toepfer said.

Sir Peter said they had sailed through areas that would not have been navigable in the era of early explorers like Sir Ernest Shackleton, whose leadership of difficult geographical and scientific expeditions provides Sir Peter with inspiration.

"Today we went to see what has happened to the King George VI ice shelf that normally fills the channel between Alexander Island and the mainland at the base of the Antarctic Peninsula. Indications are that it has receded dramatically, especially over the past eight to 10 years. We weren't able to make it to the face of the ice shelf, because it is dropping so much old ice into the sea as it recedes. The channel is full of it," Sir Peter said.

Sir Peter heads "blakexpeditions" and, in the 36-metre polar sea exploration yacht *Seamaster*, has embarked on a five-year schedule of expeditions to areas of the world that are key to the earth's ecosystem. His aim is to build public awareness of the threats facing the environment, particularly water, because of human activity.

"Earth is a water planet on which the quality of water defines quality of life," Sir Peter explained. "Good water, good life. Poor water, poor life. No water, no life."

the complex airline structure. Can hotel chains and tour operators adopt a similar audit? Should they?

Targets: Has the travel industry explored other options? The cost of alternative energy today is high. One way to lower it is to boost usage. Can travel offer itself as a guinea pig to test the most environmentally friendly methods of technology? Should it link up with regional environmental institutes and do a comprehensive study of the most practical and relevant technologies based on genuine local applicability and cost effectiveness, not the need to sell a particular product or line the entire industry up behind one or another brand?

By the year 2005, can we:

- Aim for locally-made and designed solar panels on the rooftops of every hotel in the PATA region?
- Have all tour coaches powered by liquefied natural gas?
- Use composted garbage and/or windmills to generate a high percentage of electricity at our beach resorts?

The Future: More problems await. What will be the industry's stand on topics like genetically modified (GM) foods? Many people are vehemently opposed to these "Frankenfoods." Is a time coming when serving GM foods without informing guests and passengers could be a potentially legal issue?

Today, only those items with prices are felt to have value. Anything free is considered to have none. Water, air, soil, light have been given free to mankind. Over the last few centuries, our overuse, abuse and misuse of these free elements has been mind-boggling. Those days are coming to an end. In time, we are set to discover the true price of such "priceless" items. There is no such thing as a free lunch.

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