Time to Become a Real Force for Peace

Can the travel and tourism industry 'walk the talk' to become a proactive advocate of peace?

The theme of the 55th PATA Annual Conference, "Changing Lifestyles – New Opportunities", is designed to focus on how travel and tourism can take advantage of the opportunities posed by fast-changing lifestyles and values. These include changing demographics, health and wellness, travel by the young, the ageing, and female travellers, technological issues, the low-cost airline phenomenon, and growth in short city-break holidays.

But wider forces of change, although not on the immediate agenda, are also impacting the industry. At the moment, these are classified as threats, but within them lie the seeds of opportunities that could set the stage for travel and tourism to become a real force for peace, a self-proclaimed adage that it has long preached but seldom practised.

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

For the last 20 years, the travel and tourism industry has focused increasingly on protecting the environment, which has largely meant the natural assets that comprise the earth's ecosystem. There is significant awareness that these assets are inherent to the survival of not just travel and tourism but humanity at large.

As they have all been designed to live, survive and thrive in a mutually compatible way, extinction of one species invariably has an impact on another.

Hence, the industry has gone out of its way to show how environmentally friendly it is. The number of conferences, seminars and symposiums organised on environmental issues is mind-boggling. Companies have made it an intrinsic part of their communications and corporate social responsibility strategies. Huge amounts have been expended on writing training manuals and codes of ethics to make environmental concern a part of corporate culture.

Many destinations have paid the price for harming their environments through sewage dumping, deforestation and poor garbage disposal facilities, among others. A study on the future of leisure travel released by the European tour operator Kuoni at ITB Berlin put it succinctly: "Unspoilt nature will become scarcer and, therefore, more valuable."

THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

If nature is now getting so much attention, what about culture? Isn't culture, too, one of the assets the industry sells?

The estimated three billion people of the PATA region are arguably the most culturally diverse on earth. The region's rainbow of religions, nationalities, ethnic communities and indigenous peoples are a veritable 'rainforest' in their own right.

Indeed, these cultural resources are just as important as the region's natural resources.

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ISSUES&TRENDS

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Just as 'nature' refers to the mosaic of flora and fauna, wildlife and marine treasures, a 'culture' is the sum total of the values, beliefs, traditions and ways of life of its people. The travel and tourism industry, more than any other, is a people industry. Its real assets are its people.

Take trade shows such as ITB Berlin, for example. While other trade shows are full of machinery, equipment and products, travel shows are full of music, dance, costumes, customs and cuisine, all assets that enrich and enliven the world.

Here are just a few examples of how culture, religion and ethnic diversity are important to travel and tourism:

When Cambodia, one of the poorest countries in the world, embarked upon the path of economic development and identified travel and tourism as one of its priority industries, the most important draw-card was a centuries-old temple complex known as Angkor Wat, said to be "one of humankind's most astonishing and enduring architectural achievements" and also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In India, where the majority of people are followers of the Hindu faith, one of the primary tourism attractions is a magnificent monument built by a Muslim Mughal emperor, the Taj Mahal, another UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In Indonesia, where the majority of people are followers of the Muslim faith, one of the primary tourist sites is the Hindu temple of Borobudur, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Another Indonesian tourism icon is the idyllic island of Bali, where the majority of people are Hindus.

Malaysia's tourism promotion campaign slogan is "Malaysia– Truly Asia," designed specifically to reflect that country's composite of Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures.

The 2000 Olympics Games in Australia were showcased almost entirely on its multi-culturalism and 21st-century status as a 'melting pot' of ethnic communities of immigrants from all around the world.

The traditions and cultures of Indigenous people are well-recognised, increasingly so in places such as Canada, Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and many more. These include the Aborigines, Maoris, the Orang Asli, etc. The December 2004 tsunami awoke the world to the presence on the Andaman Islands of the Jarawas, claimed to be the last 'primitive' tribe on earth. There is increasing concern now about the impact of tourism promotion of the Andamans on their survival.

As pilgrimages become an increasingly important part of travel, the Buddhist circuit is being used as a primary plank of Indian tourism promotion as it seeks to boost visitor arrivals from Southeast and Northeast Asia, home to millions of Buddhists.

Even the latest trend towards health and wellness can trace its roots back to ancient wisdoms and therapies which are garnering higher levels of appreciation and respect, in spite of modern medical technologies.

THE PRICE OF LOOKING THE OTHER WAY

Just like the natural environment, the region's cultural ecosystem of religion and ethnic resources is also under siege. An increasingly tense geopolitical world is leading to a resurgence of nationalism, chauvinism and ethnocentrism, which is exacerbating long-simmering conflicts caused by conquests, colonisation and the pursuit of economic domination.

The historic and cultural causes of these factors are beyond the scope of this discussion. But they are all rooted in a desire to create and feed a sense of superiority amongst those seeking to divide rather than unite.

Such are the new realities in a new world of "problems without passports."

Although they have affected a large swathe of PATA member countries, and communities of all castes and creeds, the industry has so far generally avoided public discussion about such factors on the grounds that they are too "sensitive". But there is ample evidence of how the industry has been impacted by critical issues which were initially ignored or camouflaged because they, too, were considered "sensitive". For example:

- When the AIDS crisis erupted in the 1980s, a number of countries tried to sweep it under the rug, fearing an impact on their national image as well as local night-spots.
- When the SARS crisis broke in 2003, a number of countries were accused of trying to cover up the presence of the virus in order to avoid affecting investment and economic development. They were then blamed for indirectly worsening the problem by preventing it from being contained early on in the outbreak.

Now, the industry has become more aware in its handling of health-related crises. The threat of bird flu has made it apparent that transparency and full disclosure is critical. The H5N1 strain of this virus has been reported in Europe, Africa and Asia.

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Today, the management of issues considered "politically sensitive" is following a head-in-the-sand approach similar to the initial reaction to health risks. While there may be differences about the causes and solutions, there can be no disagreement that problems do in fact exist, and, similar to the health issues, they first have to be recognised in order to then be addressed.

BRINGING ISSUES OUT INTO THE OPEN

The industry survey conducted by PATA in 2005, known as "The Industry Speaks", clearly indicated that many in the travel and tourism industry, especially the small- and medium-sized enterprises, see these socio-political issues as having a direct impact on their businesses and livelihoods and want them publicly debated.

Gradually, other more powerful voices of concern are emerging. Such socio-political issues were prominently in focus at ITB Berlin, the first global travel show to be organised in the wake of the controversy over depictions of the Islamic prophet Mohammed in the European press. World Tourism Organization Regional Representative for the Middle East Amr Abdul Ghaffar said that there appeared to have been a decline in European travel to the Islamic countries, though it was too early to gauge the full impact until final figures were tallied.

In the opening press conference at ITB, Klaus Laepple, President of Deutscher ReiseVerband (German Travel Agents Association) also referred to the issue. He said, "The cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in a newspaper have resulted in many protests by Muslims and have also led to some excesses in individual cases. That is a fact. But claiming that we are in a conflict or even a war is going too far. The travel industry disassociates itself from this polarisation.

"I appeal to everyone not to generalise this dispute about the cartoons. Each year, millions of Germans visit countries with an Islamic culture. They are aware of this culture, and there is no doubt that we all benefit from the fact that travel enables us to acquaint and familiarise ourselves with other countries and cultures."

In his presentation on Aviation Day at the ITB Convention on Market Trends and Innovations, Adam Pilarski, Senior Vice President of the aviation consultancy Avitas, mentioned the "West/Muslim conflict" as the top "present danger", ahead of nuclear proliferation and bird flu.

A day before ITB opened, the International Hotel Investment Forum featured a keynote speaker on the subject of a "Clash of Civilisations", arguably the first time this topic has been featured at a travel conference. Iranian-born Oxford Professor Farhang Jahanpour imparted what he called some "unpleasant facts" about the issue, but also had some strong messages for the travel and tourism industry.

Jahanpour began by noting the role of people contact between the East and West, dating back to the days of Marco Polo's travels to China (PRC) and ancient Persia, also acknowledging the role of missionaries and traders. Today, he said, "tourism plays a very important role in globalisation. You bring people together. Opinion polls in Britain show that in 'Euro-sceptic' Britain, those who have travelled to Europe were much more strongly pro-European than those who had not. And I think the same is true about the world at large. Those who are worried about the clash of civilisations are scared of other people without really knowing them. They despise them without having had first-hand knowledge about them."

He reminded the hoteliers that "hotel investment is not just about making money but about service and hospitality. It can change the experience of alienation to one of friendship and familiarity. Many people do not know that economists since the time of Plato to Adam Smith to John Stuart Mill did not just talk about economics – all their theories had a very strong moral element. The father of modern economics, Adam Smith, was a professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University before writing his *Wealth of Nations*.

"Now, people fault his 'invisible hand' theory that the market will take care of everything. This is not really what he said. If you read his work carefully, he says that the pursuit of wealth should not take precedence over social and moral obligations that give us the greater quantity of happiness. So it is economy for a purpose, making money for the purpose of producing obligations and rights which produce the greatest amount of happiness."

INDUSTRY OF PEACE?

Prof Jahanpour's views have long been voiced within the travel and tourism industry, which has itself long claimed to be an industry of peace. However, if that is genuinely the case, then logically, more global travel should mean more peace, stability and security. But quite the opposite seems to be happening.

This raises a corollary question regarding the industry's credibility. If the industry fiddles while Rome burns, the very products it sells begin to disintegrate and its very assets threaten to become liabilities, its credibility – and level of respect in the wider economic community – comes under question.

This is similar to the views of the industry's environmental critics, who have long alleged that while travel and tourism claims to be a protector of the environment, in reality, it does exactly the opposite.

HEADING TOWARDS UNCHARTED WATERS

Clearly, travel and tourism is set to venture into uncharted waters. But as outlined above, in the last decade or so, it has already ventured into many such waters – economic crises, health issues and environmental problems.

These issues strike at some of the things the industry has long believed in as a matter of principle. Indeed, a closer look will show that many factors the industry has taken for granted as being part of the solution may in fact be part of the problem:

Globalisation: While much has been made about the advantages of globalisation, there is growing concern about the world becoming increasingly homogenised in terms of culture, languages, music and art.

Democracy: Democracy, too, has been touted as a panacea and a prerequisite for peace and stability. While that may be true for well-intentioned leaders, democratic freedoms have also been exploited by unscrupulous politicians to divide and rule.

Economic development: As part and parcel of national agendas, economic development is vital for job creation, but it is leading to major redistribution of land use as vast swathes of property are taken over for development into factories, golf courses and townships.

Proselytisation: The practise of religious conversion in many parts of Asia is creating social frictions as people see an invasion of their indigenous cultures by foreign forces armed with smarter marketing techniques to spread their beliefs.

CONCLUSION

Like maintaining good health, nothing can be taken for granted. It is preserved through discipline and conscientious active effort.

Just as the industry claims to be a protector of the environment, it has to work at it.

Just as the industry claims to be a job-creator, it has to work at it.

Hence, just as it claims to be an industry of peace and a bridge-builder between peoples and cultures, it may now have to work harder at it.

There is perhaps no greater desire among peoples than to live in peace, security and stability. However, there is a growing feeling worldwide that the peacemakers and bridge-builders are being out-shouted by those seeking to let loose the dogs of war.

Sardar Dyal Singh Majithia, the Indian political reformist, said, "The masses do not want to fight, if the leaders do not."

Given the forecasts that future conflicts will occur over natural resources such as land and water, the time may be nigh for the industry to decide that avoiding conflicts over cultural resources such as religious, communal and ethnic values and beliefs is absolutely imperative.

This is at once a threat, a challenge and an opportunity – one that the industry will sooner or later need to come to grips with, just as it had to with AIDS and SARS.

Hopefully, sooner rather than later.

This is an abstract of a presentation to be made by the PATA Strategic Intelligence Centre to the PATA Industry Council at the upcoming Board of Directors Meeting in Pattaya, Thailand at the request of Council chairperson Ms Margaret Wilson.