

## **Travelling with a conscience**

The right to travel, both within a country and across its borders, is a fundamental principle enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The UN's World Tourism Organization has parlayed this into a right to tourism.

The travel and tourism sector has grown considerably over the past decades. But its economic value can be overstated, it can actually raise human rights issues, and its environmental impact is a serious concern, notably as regards climate change when air travel is involved. How should I in good conscience direct my tourism choices? Is there a responsible tourism option?

Common criteria for evaluating a sector are the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental. While the optimal goal is to achieve a "balance" amongst the three, this is in practice an almost impossible task because there is no common or analogous quantitative measure. But there are rational boundaries of the extent to which the benefit of one pillar can outweigh the detriment of another and there can actually be co-benefits.

### **Economic contribution**

As regards the first pillar, travel and tourism is an increasingly important economic sector, amongst the world's largest and probably the biggest service industry. International tourism is one of the fastest ways of transferring income from rich to poor countries and within the latter. True, in many cases much of that income leaks out, for example through the tour operator, hotel ownership and purchase of goods and services deemed essential for the welfare of the tourist. But perhaps mark a plus here, notably where policy and management at the destination are well directed.

### **Social contribution**

As to the social pillar, first let's take a look at the impact of tourism. Tourism is a major job producer, employing millions of people around the world and creating job opportunities for local entrepreneurship, in small and medium sized business. There is a view that tourism, through positive contact between peoples of different nations, is an instrument for world peace. The economic benefits of tourism have certainly been a factor on occasion for moderation of civil strife. And there are surely intangible benefits of increased global awareness.

But again there are downsides. Employment is not always formal, well-paid, steady or year-round, and the darker side of tourism includes travel for commercial sex and drugs. Tourism can enhance or denigrate culture, depending on the circumstance and viewpoint. In practice most tourists in foreign countries are involved with locals at their destination primarily in a client/server relationship rather than engaging in long-term interpersonal communication. There can also be negatives from the impact of tourism on local resources, for example through priority given to food and scarce water supply and electricity. There is moreover a social cost of tourism being perceived as an elitist activity when its functioning does not satisfactorily include local benefits.

Turning to the perspective of the tourist, this can be considered in terms of contribution to well-being. Tourism does contain hedonistic elements, but can also include emotional and ultimately intellectual growth. Bhutan has actually integrated its Gross National Happiness concept into its tourism policy agenda recognizing that the tourism industry could play a major role in advancing the well-being of visitors as well as its own community groups.

All in all, we might have another plus for sustainability - where tourism management is well focused.

### **Environmental impact**

Which brings us to the third pillar, the environment. Here the travel and tourism industry in its broad compass ranks no better and no worse than average. On climate change it represents about 5 per cent directly of global GDP and a similar 5 per cent of manmade carbon dioxide emissions. But the devil lies in the breakdown. Aircraft burn fossil fuels. The air transport component of travel and tourism represents about 1 per cent of GDP, but 2 per cent of human-generated emissions - comparable with the *all-sector* emissions of countries such as Canada and the UK. Taking into account other greenhouse gases such as nitrous oxides and methane, plus cirrus cloud induced from aircraft condensation trails, on which there is admittedly less certainty, aviation's contribution to global warming could be significantly greater, reaching 5 per cent or more. On the basis of the carbon dioxide component, on which there is now strong certainty, air transport's emissions are expected to increase more than threefold by 2035 under business-as-usual. Consequently the air traffic growth from travel and tourism without advanced carbon abatement will bring aviation's carbon footprint in conflict with a global emissions trajectory that will limit the aggregate global temperature increase to below 2 degrees C above pre-industrial levels.

While efforts to reduce emissions at tourism destinations may be both commendable and effective, the elephant in the room is the transport to these destinations, and notably air transport. Air transport represents 60% of the greenhouse gas emissions from international tourism worldwide on average and a much higher proportion for many long-haul destinations. Changing towels in the hotel bathroom less frequently, or even having a 100% renewable energy supply for the hotel, is simply not going to crack it.

Airlines are doing all they can to reduce emissions where there is saving in operating costs, particularly as fuel represents around 30% of these costs. The results are impressive, producing an ongoing average 1.5% reduction per annum *per unit of traffic* globally, but these represent improvements in efficiency rather than sustainability *per se*. Air transport traffic continues to grow at 4.5% to 5.0% per annum globally. There is thus a very significant gap which needs to be plugged even before we talk about actually *reducing* emissions from air transport.

There is much hyped promise - and publicity stunts - regarding biofuels for aviation. The feasibility of many feedstocks and pathways for "drop-in" fuel - using existing delivery channels and aircraft engines - is well established. But costs are high and realistically available scale up volume is limited, especially following full lifecycle assessment given the conflict many biofuels have with land for food crops and water usage. Indeed, when indirect land use is taken into account, some biofuels have been shown actually to increase greenhouse gases. Beyond conventional biofuels, solar-to-liquid "drop-in" fuels are mooted as a truly sustainable solution for aviation; but development is at a very early stage and they

would require immense solar arrays, for example an estimated 21km by 21km to serve the needs of Manchester airport in the UK.

As for other alternatives to fossil fuels, liquid natural gas has its own lifecycle costs and risks and, as with liquid hydrogen, would require major aircraft design changes. There is no radically improved aircraft design beyond the drawing board even on the long-term horizon, in a manufacturing industry where the investments are massive and the timelines are measured in decades.

### **Mitigation of aircraft emissions**

Even accepting that biofuels will provide some alleviative effect, this will by no means be enough. There is a fundamental need for some kind of cap or market-based measure to apply to aircraft emissions, right now and for the foreseeable future.

Given the transborder and “over high seas” features of international air transport, global responsibility to “pursue limitation or reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases” from aviation fuels was handed off in 1997 through the Kyoto Protocol to the UN’s International Civil Aviation Organization, expecting that Organization to become firefighter as well as fire burner. ICAO has reflected and even enhanced airline progress on the technical and operational front, but has repeatedly failed to deliver on a cap or any market-based measure. Indeed, the Organization’s global mandate pending achievement has actually been used to halt national or regional action, notably for European countries. And ICAO continues to promote exemption from fuel tax for international flights, an indemnity still applied uniquely to this specific sector and almost universally. Never mind that international flights are also exempt from VAT.

So far the best ICAO can do, 17 years after being given its Kyoto mandate, is to propose a framework of carbon offsetting aimed at “carbon neutral growth from 2020”. The Organization and some of its members, along with industry, are now devoting a great deal of resources to this critically misplaced objective. Aside from the necessity to *reduce* rather than to neutralize emissions, offsetting is a flawed instrument. Offsetting is essentially an excuse by a polluter to continue to churn out emissions on the grounds that someone else will neutralize them. Offsetting also lacks due diligence on effectiveness. The atmosphere only understands one language and that is net reduced tonnes of carbon. Apart from this offsetting also requires costly management and paperwork. Furthermore, the ICAO framework would include a range of exemptions and not be legally binding or by any means universally applied in practice.

Thus, despite advances in technology, the unbridled growth of aviation - when considered in isolation - is now and for the foreseeable future definitively unsustainable.

### **To fly or not to fly?**

In 1996, the Bishop of London famously stated the silo-based view that flying on holidays is a sin because of the climate change consequences and George Monbiot in his book *Heat: How to stop the planet from burning* concluded that aviation was the one sector in which the only solution was to cut operations dramatically. The conscientious tourist can perhaps take a broader perspective by looking beyond aviation in isolation and consider the balance of benefits against climate costs.

When set against the collectivity of its travel and tourism context, air transport can be more sustainably justified. Take Seychelles for example. Tourism is the principal economic sector, predominantly dependent on long-haul international air transport. Tourism has enhanced the establishment of nature parks and marine protection areas. Partly in consequence the country claims to be a *net absorber* of greenhouse gases. Costa Rica, Iceland, Maldives and New Zealand are each aiming for national carbon neutrality, although this concept is flawed to an extent that it is operational rather than unconditional, excluding the GHGs from imports – of which air transport is one. Cape Verde has turned its economy around in recent years through investment in sustainable tourism projects, if again sidestepping the imports and air transport emissions contribution.

Taking a responsible tourism decision is by no means straightforward. For example, travellers staying with friends and relations, in smaller accommodation (as recently demonstrated by Airbnb) or in warmer climates in the winter, may be reducing their carbon footprint from staying at home to the extent of countering at least part of their aviation travel contribution.

There are numerous operators propounding or offering what they define as “responsible tourism” or “fair trade tourism”. They are predominantly concerned with impact on local environments, cultures and communities, but some companies do address the air transport issue. The organization Responsible Travel based in the UK is an umbrella for some 400 tour operators and a recognized leader in its field. The organization suggests taking less frequent holidays and staying at the destination longer – however, this is an option not open to many employees and it is also in conflict with some of the organization’s own category of “short breaks” holidays. Interestingly Responsible Travel was among the first travel organizations to introduce carbon offsets, in 2002, and then in 2009 removed them on the grounds that offsetting distracts from the real issues - that is we all need to be reducing our carbon emissions as much as possible. Offsetting flights has too often been seen as an opportunity to go on flying the same amount or more - of course not paying for offsets leaves more disposable tourism income to do this. And all travel organizations, “responsible” or not, are primarily in the business of making money and expanding their activity.

Ultimately, the decision on what is a sustainable tourism balance lies not in the hands of governments or the travel and tourism industry but in those of individuals. It is individuals who need to be convinced to respond or to be held accountable. And individual consumer decisions perhaps have a more predictable influence on social and economic sustainability in tourism than in the purchase of other goods and services. But, while various surveys have shown that a significant proportion of passengers are aware of the climate change impact of air transport and many are concerned about this, few are prepared to take any corresponding action, even to the extent of purchasing carbon offsets. Why pay a specific price now against a climate benefit which is hard to define?

But surely readers who have reached this point in the present text are bigger than this? So, how should the conscientious reader respond? Take habitual “staycations”? Not necessarily - not travelling at all is of course an option, but may be set against your own welfare and the economic and social contribution of well-directed tourism. But cutting back somewhat on your air travel, including switching destinations, may make sense. And when you do travel, first and foremost try and minimize your carbon footprint. To do this you may well need to do some research to gather data. The carbon offsetting companies publish

relevant information, although this can vary considerably according to the company you use, even for a specific journey. Once you have the data, by all means apply carbon offsets, despite their flaws they can assist to a limited extent in reducing your climate change impact and at least they help in easing your conscience. But make sure that you use a gold standard offset provider and preferably one which uses the UN's Clean Development Mechanism; you will feel significantly greater financial pain but receive greater assurance that your money is better spent. If governments are not prepared to put a price on carbon, do it yourself and at the same time direct the revenue appropriately.

More broadly, find or develop a package where as much of your money as possible is dropped locally at the destination. Consider the view of world leaders at the 2014 Climate Change Summit and take your trip in the context of poverty alleviation and sustainable development, notably in poorer countries. Try for a meaningful connection with the places you travel. By all means use an operator which has earned a "responsible travel" label. This is certainly more sustainable than an alternative of going to an all inclusive resort owned and operated by non-local interests, or of taking a sea cruise with its high emissions and low local spending. And when at the destination, don't forget to buy local and tip generously.

Choose your travel agent or tour operator carefully. Ask them some serious questions on sustainability. Press them to provide some comparable metrics. Why should online travel agents such as Expedia, Priceline or TripAdvisor not publish carbon footprint figures, and indeed a sustainability index, alongside their offers? Booking.com (for hotels) and some tour operators are currently working in this direction. If Unilever, with its much admired Sustainable Living Plan can take a comprehensive, integrated approach to sustainability, why not the travel and tourism industry?

Finally, having done all your homework and taken your travel decisions in advance, just relax and enjoy your well-earned holiday. But re-energise yourself enough to lobby your government to introduce a purposeful and effective price on aviation carbon!

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