

# The meaning of sustainable development

by Auliana Poon\*

**By sustainable development, we mean the use and exploitation of today's resources in such a manner that these resources will be available for use by future generations. In other words, consumption today with tomorrow in mind.**

The tourism industry can be described as the sum of persons, activities, events, places, facilities and businesses that are involved in satisfying or servicing travellers from one geographical region in another. In other words, everything from car rental to sleeping accommodation, currency exchange, safaris, food and drink and much, much more.

Tourism is more dependent on the environment than any other industry (perhaps with the exception of extractive industries such as mining). Tourism depends on the environment for its own sake (it must be clean and safe to attract the interest of travellers). Tourism is also a major user of the environment. Almost all of its activities – walking, diving, rafting, golf, fishing and so on, are based in and around the environment.

Two key forces are driving the development of sustainable tourism: the new tourists, and new private sector initiatives. The new tourists are waking up to the calls of NGOs, local governments and the media, as well as to the hard reality that things cannot go on the way they used to. The private sector, in a new enlightened approach, is heeding the demands of the new tourist for a safer and cleaner environment and more contact with locals.

Both the new tourists and the new private sector are good news for sustainable tourism.

\* Economist and tourism expert. The author led the team that developed the tourism policy and strategy for the new South Africa in 1996.

## New tourists

The demands of the tourists for a quality environment and contact with locals is a major force for sustainable tourism development. The case of the German market clearly bears this out. A 1997 survey by *Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung* found that 40% of Germans are willing to pay €1 per day on holiday to help save the environment in their holiday destinations – giving a potential total of €608 million. The study also found that:

- for 80% of those surveyed, an intact environment is important in choosing their holiday destination;
- Nearly 55% would like to experience nature first hand while on holiday;
- 71% found a desolate landscape a 'turn-off';
- 34% enjoy watching wildlife;
- 32% enjoy nature and visit national parks;
- 17% are angered by environmental destruction; and,
- 67% would like to receive environment information through travel companies.

The travel preferences of German tourists increasingly demonstrate that travellers in the future will be won over by clean, healthy and intact environments. German visitors to the Maldives

are so environmentally-conscious that they take their rubbish back home with them! Shortly before landing at Male, LTU's passengers are provided with bin bags in which they deposit their suntan lotion bottles, batteries for walkmans, razors and other refuse that are difficult to dispose of in the Maldives. LTU flies the refuse back to Germany. According to LTU, 80% of its passengers participate in the programme, which was launched in 1994.

Another important development in the German market is the growing interest in local culture and contact with locals. This aspect of German travel behaviour is often not documented. In the same study, 76% of respondents said that respect for the traditions, culture and lifestyle of the local populations was important in their holiday experience. Effective market demand for local culture, and the experience of local traditions and lifestyles, opens an important opportunity for local people to become more involved in the tourism industry.

## New private sector initiatives

New private sector initiatives are also a key driving force in the development of sustainable tourism. Two excellent examples are the *Curtin Bluff Hotel* in Antigua (see box) and the *Umngazi River Bungalows* in South Africa which was featured in issue 171 of the *Courier* (p. 83)

These examples from Africa and the Caribbean shed some light on the issue of sustainable development. This is not only the

## Curtin Bluff Hotel, Antigua

*This is a shining Caribbean example of local community involvement. The hotel is located in the poorest part of Antigua, on two beautiful beaches. Because of the initiatives of the hotel's owners and managers, ensuring that the local community benefits from tourism, there is no need for keys to the guest rooms. Curtin Bluff's clients are free and safe in an environment that is also friendly to the local community. According to the manager, Rob Sherman, 'we take care of the village and they take care of us'. The hotel operates at 85% occupancy annually and is one of the most successful tourist accommodation ventures in the Caribbean. Curtin Bluff financed the overseas education of five local children from its village fund (at a cost of \$100,000). Every year, it sends 15 of its staff abroad for training. Employees are well-paid and, uniquely, have a pension fund. Turnover of staff and management is low (some have been there for more than 30 years) and the hotel has 75% repeat business. Curtin Bluff also encourages the local community to undertake activities that save and beautify their environment. Young people are encouraged and rewarded for every tree they plant. The hotel uses its facilities to train youths from the village to play tennis – many have become tennis coaches at the hotel and the community provides the island's main tennis 'stars'.*



Tough the Wild (Pvt) Ltd., Zimbabwe

government's responsibility; it is not just about the new tourists, national parks and park animals. It is also about the local people and the partnership between the private sector and local communities.

Much of the focus of sustainable tourism development has been on the building of national parks and protected areas (the development of so-called eco-tourism), saving endangered plants and animals, birds, bees and fish. These actions are *necessary*. However, they are not *sufficient* to deliver sustainable tourism. It is vital, in addition, to involve local people. It is important that efforts are placed on ensuring that locals are meaningfully involved in, and benefit from, sustainable tourism initiatives.

A significant proportion of 'new' tourists enjoy watching wildlife

Nature is not destroyed by itself. Much of the destruction is person-made (to use the politically correct expression). Sustainable tourism can only be guaranteed if those who have benefited from the destruction of nature benefit instead from protecting and conserving it. Too often, undue emphasis is placed on the tourists (the beneficiaries of the good, clean environment) and the animals (now they can roam free and their meals are secure as everything they feed on is also protected). Insufficient attention is placed on ensuring that the benefits from conservation flow down to local people and the communities that

are in close proximity to the natural resources exploited for tourism.

Unless this delicate balance is achieved, unfortunately, park animals will remain a good source of protein, valuable trees will still be an important fuel source and tourists a quick source of easy money. Sustainable development, therefore, is as much about the local people as it is about conserving nature. It is also about an equal distribution of the benefits of conservation. In this regard, benefits cannot only be for future generations, but also for the current generation – especially the local people who are often marginalised from the process of sustainable development.

To summarise, Curtin Bluff and Umngazi are examples of the types of initiative that sustainable and responsible tourism are made of. The key mission must be to create a 'new tourism' where the examples cited are not merely examples but indicators of 'best practice'. Partnerships between the public and private sectors, NGOs, local communities and even donor agencies are critical in order to ensure that this new 'best practice' becomes a reality. ■ A.P.

DOSSIER

## Sanddollars and white crystal

by Jacob Langvad\*

Lamu is Kenya's oldest town and one of the historic ports of the slave trade that stopped only 92 years ago. Today, tourism is the only major trade left. So far the exquisite island of Lamu has managed to save its unique Swahili culture. But mass tourism and overpopulation threaten its appeal to the choosy traveller.

Few places on the East African coast breathe history like the island of Lamu. The 14th century town of stone houses with

open drainage running through the narrow streets is Kenya's oldest. Since the 1970s, Lamu has attracted a mixed crowd of tourists, trendy hippies, backpackers and gay men rubbing shoulders with affluent rock stars and deep-sea fishermen attracted by the tasteful luxury of the Peponi Hotel. Some bring their families to savour the deserted beach that stretches for miles, littered with starfish and thousands of *sanddollars*, the flat white sea urchins that resemble the faces of sleepy cats.

Lamu's remoteness, way up north on the coast, has been diminished by the airport on a neighbouring island, but in spite of modernity creeping in here and there, this is still a quiet one-car island, and its unique Swahili culture remains largely intact. Until the arrival of tourism in the 1970s, the island languished as a result of

the belated abolition of slavery in 1907. Back then, the slaves were the basis of a strong economy, humans serving both as objects of commerce and cheap labour. Arabs from Oman ran the business. Having settled on the coast, they controlled the slave trade for centuries, bringing the Muslim faith with them. This past reads like an open book in the faces of the Lamu people with their blend of Arab and African blood. Most women are covered top to bottom in black cloth, but unlike their sisters on the Arabian peninsula, their faces remain unveiled, suggesting the more liberated African version of Islam.

The key to the island's history is the monsoon winds that permitted long distance commerce in humans, ivory and mangrove poles. The *dhow* is the vessel that brought Lamu in touch with places as distant as India and China. This low wooden boat, distinguished by its proud sand coloured sail in the shape of a shark's fin, is still made on Lamu today.

\* Brussels correspondent for the Danish newspaper, 'Berlingske Tidende'.

From Lamu down to Zanzibar, the trade in humans lingered for decades after its demise in West Africa. Despite the smaller numbers involved, by a strange twist of fate, the slave trade here was to play a dramatic role in the history of the continent. When the cunning King Leopold II of the Belgians planned his colonisation of the Congo, his first move was to organise the 1876 Geographical Conference in Brussels. Presenting himself as a philanthropist, he invented a noble pretext for the occasion. He proclaimed that a civilised presence was urgently needed to do away with the heinous Arab slave trade that still prevailed on the East African coast. Coming only a decade after the American abolition of slavery, this was an important moral disguise that brought momentum to the Brussels-conference and made it a turning point. It quickly triggered the 'Scramble for Africa', and two decades later, European colonisation of the 'Dark Continent' was complete.

Slavery is a thing of the past, but the dhows still sway on the tide, now carrying another human cargo – romantically-inclined tourists on sunset trips. But all is not well on this side of paradise. Foreign money is buying up small hotels en bloc, opening noisy discos to make way for large scale tourism, and Lamu's population is growing too fast for the old



Rogue Barbosa

city to house its new children. Dependence on tourism is increasing and too much ends up being up for sale. The porcelain from China and spices from India that the dhows brought back in past centuries have been replaced by less innocent goods.

On the square in front of Lamu Fort, the softspoken Yuseef invites tourists to his house for a dish of home-cooked crabs and fish for a few hundred shillings. Once confidence is established over lunch, he pulls out offers like rabbits from a top hat. *How about a visit to the ruins on Paté Island?*

The dhow is the vessel that brought Lamu in touch with places as distant as India and China

*Snorkelling off the coral reef? Or some Banghi? (the local marijuana) Or some White Crystal? (cheap heroin shipped in from Karachi via Mombasa).* There is no major drug scene here, but the readiness to supply the occasional tourist has had a nasty spin-off and you can now find a sad handful of drug-addicted locals.

While queuing to change dollars at Lamu's only bank, you will come across men like *Jean Claude*. The sporty French pensioner has driven all the way here in his old Land Rover, finding spare parts in every corner of the continent, and he is as happy as a clam. By his side is a beautiful, moody young girl, not a day over 18. One might reckon her to be the daughter of an African friend. But when asked if the girl is Kenyan, the short answer vibrates with such enthusiasm, that even a starry-eyed journalist gets the picture: *'Oui, elle est superbe!'* (Yes, she is superb!) The Nike-sneakers and orange coloured shorts place her as a cool city girl from the Christian Highlands around Nairobi, rather than a Moslem from the coast. But sitting deadly quiet on the bench while her *benefactor* gets his cash, she seems immersed in an air of shame. Not letting anybody catch her eye, she knows that anyone, who cares to think twice, will realise that she is a *companion*, on a brief holiday, all expenses paid by the contented Frenchman. It is a very old story, and it's not really romantic. ■ J.L.

## 'Take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints'

Advice found on the Internet – some questions to consider as you are planning your trip:

- Why am I taking this trip?
- What environmental impact will I have on the country I visit?
- What natural resources will I consume getting to and from the country?
- Will I be supporting a repressive regime by travelling to this country?
- Is my tour operator committed to strong ethical and environmental standards?
- Who owns the hotel where I will stay?
- Will my tastes increase the demand for food, goods and services from my homeland?
- What will I leave behind?
- Will my purchases support the local economy?
- Were local people forced out to make room for tourist development?
- Have I educated myself about local customs and culture?
- Does my presence create or improve local jobs?
- How will my presence influence young people?
- Will I have an opportunity to involve myself in the local community?
- After I return home, what will I do with my experience?