

## Tourism industry worries over impact on nature, local culture

With the number of travellers expected to reach 1.6 billion by 2020, the world's tourism industry has begun to worry about its impacts on nature and local culture, according to industry watchers.

Take a walk in the rainforest of Costa Rica, stay in huts in the bush in Senegal - tourists are increasingly looking for total solitude in the midst of nature.

'The concept of sustainable tourism, which respects nature and the local people, has slowly and timidly begun to gain currency across the globe,' one Paris-based tourism analyst has said.

The dominant players in the world tourism industry have begun to exploit the theme of sustainable tourism.

'Over the recent past, the leading players have moved to increase marketing of this kind of tourism,' according to one industry insider.

'As for the travellers, sustainable tourism remains marginal, touching a paltry two percent of all tourists. But there is a strong progression,' Pascal Aguilon, founder of the French Association for ecotourism, was quoted as saying recently.

The tourism industry is likely to 'cut the tree branch on which it is seated' if it does not limit the devastating effects of mass travel on the planet, experts from the World Tourism Organization (WTO) warned in a recent report.

'Tourism is both a victim and responsible for global warming. It contributes about five percent of the total greenhouse gas emissions currently,' WTO chief Francesco Frangiali said in a recent interview.

The snows on the world famous Mt. Kilimanjaro will have melted away by 2020 and the Maldives islands will be swallowed by sea waves, said the WTO president, adding 'climate change poses a direct threat to the tourism business as we know it.'

The unprecedented growth recorded by the sector, which had only 25 million international tourists in 1950, 'could lead to an increase of 150 percent in its greenhouse gas emissions within the next 30 years,' according to the WTO.

In an era marked by the emergence of low cost airline companies, nearly half the 898 million tourists who travelled the world in 2007 opted for flying 'which is responsible for up to 40 percent of carbon emissions generated by the tourism sector,' said the WTO.

But this is also under threat: 'With the soaring oil prices, flying is slowly becoming a luxury,' according to Jean-Marc Siano, chief executive officer of Nouvelles Frontieres, the French company that began promoting mass tourism decades back.

Depletion of natural resources, child labour, development of prostitution, abandonment of traditional culture and ways of life, the emergence of mass tourism in the North has wreaked havoc in the South.

Faced with the worrying trend, especially with regard to the over visitation of fragile ecosystems, some countries are taking the bold step by limiting access to certain sites. For example, Peru recently moved to cap the number of annual visitors to world famed Machu Picchu, also referred as to 'Lost City of the Incas.'

In the face of the daunting challenges, should the world renounce tourism? 'Sustainable tourism is not the reduction in the number of travelers, which would be a huge step backwards. Rather, it is the promotion of a different kind of tourism,' said Viard.

Further, tourism is also beneficial to boost local economies, where it creates jobs and is often the main source of foreign currency in developing countries, said an observer.

However, the wealth being generated from the current tourism bonanza is not distributed fairly, according to figures published by non-governmental organizations working in the sector.

'Only one third of the annual revenues (estimated at over \$800 billion) actually benefit the visited countries,' according to WTO figures.

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