# Tourism development and Biological Diversity

Statement by

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En primer lugar, quisiera agradecer a los organizadores del Foro por darme la oportunidad de participar en este diálogo, en la maravillosa ciudad de Barcelona. El tema del impacto del turismo sobre diversidad biológica y su papel en el desarrollo sostenible es uno de gran actualidad y transcandencia. Es un tema que los gobiernos estan examinando en particular en el marco del Convenio sobre Diversidad Biológica.

Based on current trends, scientists estimate that 34,000 plant and 5,200 animal species face extinction. Forests, wetlands, coral reefs, and other ecosystems are being lost at unprecedented rates and efforts to reverse this trend, including under the Convention on Biological Diversity, have been, thus far, largely ineffective. Those adverse changes to the world ecosystems are generally human-induced. Short–term economic gains often take precedence over long-term environmental considerations. We tend to loose sight of the big picture: that biodiversity provides the very foundation of our own lives. It provides health (drugs), shelter, air and water purification, climate stabilization, soil fertility, moderation of floods and drought, cultural and esthetic values, to name only a few. We take all of these for granted. Yet, each time a species becomes extinct, we erode our life support systems a little more.

It is against this backdrop that tourism is developing. Indeed, it is one of the world's fastest growing industries. According to the World Tourism Organization, nature-based tourism is the most rapidly growing segment of the market, generating approximately 8 per cent of all international travel expenditures. This constitutes an additional source of stress on fragile ecosystems.

## Adverse impact of tourism on biodiversity

The adverse impact of tourism on biodiversity takes various forms. Let's take a quick look at some of them:

- First, direct – and in some cases unsustainable - *use of natural resources*, both renewable and non-renewable, to support tourist facilities. The generally preferred "attractive sites", such as sandy beaches, lakes and riversides, and mountains are often transitional zones characterized by species-rich ecosystems. The construction of tourism facilities in these areas destroys habitats and can lead to the destruction or severe impairment of these ecosystems.

- Second, growth in tourism facilities leads to *excessive uses of water resources* for hotels, golf courses, swimming pools, etc, leading to degradation of water supplies, as well as a much greater volume of waste water. The disposal of untreated effluents into surrounding rivers and seas can cause eutrophication and introduce a large amount of

pathogens into the water body. The extraction of groundwater can cause desiccation and saline intrusion into groundwater. Consider, for example, that an average golf course in a tropical country uses as much water as thousands of rural villages, not to mention the 1500 kilograms of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides per year.

- Third, increasing human presence in natural areas leads to *destruction of habitats,* one of the main causes of species' loss. Trampling, access by vehicles, plant-picking all lead to loss of species. Furthermore, human presence disrupts normal behaviour of wild animals affecting mortality and reproduction.

- Fourth, tourism also has a major impact on the *marine and coastal environment*. Resort sewage systems and the lack of treatment of waste water lead to eutrophication. Cruise ships have been found to cause pollution due to intentional release. Coral reefs have been damaged by anchors and sewage, by individual tourists breaking off corals, and by commercial harvesting in 90 countries out of 109. Consider that the Caribbean region, alone, receives 63,000 ship-visits per year, generating 82,000 tons of garbage. About 77 per cent of all ship waste in the region comes from cruise vessels.

- Fifth, transportation to and from international tourist destinations also causes release of "greenhouse" gases. Passenger jets are the fastest growing source of greenhouse emissions. The number of international travellers is expected to increase from 594 million in 1996 to 1.6 billion by 2020. Tourism accounts for no less than 60 per cent of such travel.

- Tourism also leads to significant and well-documented *social and cultural* impact on societies, including increase of social problems such as crime, drug abuse, and prostitution. Moreover, the economic benefits of tourism are often limited and unequally distributed among members of local communities. Much of the profit may actually be transferred back to the home country. Therefore, tourism can lead to increased inequalities, and thus relative poverty.

- Finally, tourism may also threaten the traditional lifestyles of indigenous and local populations, due to increasing visits to sacred sites and lands and waters traditionally occupied by these populations.

## Opportunities for sustainable development

As you can appreciate, this overview of the "downsides" of tourism paints a bleak picture. Fortunately, there is also a "bright side" because tourism brings with it significant opportunities, in particular for developing countries.

Tourism contributes to economic growth. Indeed, in many developing countries, it is the number one industry. It generates foreign-exchange earnings, as well as employment and business opportunities. It contributes to a stronger economy and can stimulate the investment necessary to finance growth in other sectors.

If wisely managed, tourism can also provide strong incentives to alleviate these adverse impacts, and contribute to biodiversity conservation. Thanks to tourism, the value of a natural area – such as a forest - as a tourist attraction may be greater than the value of the wood it contains, thus creating an incentive to conserve the forest. In other words, pristine areas acquire new, added value. The successful development of a strong eco-tourism industry in Costa Rica is a testimony of this trend.

Tourism can also serve educational purposes, disseminating knowledge of natural ecosystems and local communities. It can also encourage the maintenance or revitalization of traditional practices that would otherwise be threatened with extinction.

### *The way forward*

In a number of biodiversity-rich developing countries such as Madagascar, Costa Rica, and Belize, biodiversity is now the major tourist attraction. In these countries and elsewhere, the very natural ecosystems and biological resources that are threatened by tourism development provide the goods and services that underpin the tourism industry in the first place. It is therefore in the local governments' own best interest to preserve these ecosystems. The challenge for governments is to develop an overall strategy to ensure that tourism development is in harmony with sound environmental considerations. Tourism has the potential to reconcile economic and environmental concerns and give a practical meaning to sustainable development.

There are reasons for optimism. Under the Convention on Biological Diversity, governments have developed policies to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. They have agreed on a set of Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Development, which are intended to provide technical guidance to policy makers, decision makers and managers on ways of working together with key stakeholders to foster sustainable tourism.

The main thrust of the guidelines is that tourism management should be based on a consultative process involving industry and other stakeholders, and should consist of a number of steps, including

- the development of an overall vision for tourism;
- the setting of short terms objectives to implement the vision and review of standards;
- the assessment and monitoring of the potential impact of projects;
- the implementation of adaptive management techniques.

The Guidelines are a contribution of the Convention on Biological Diversity to this important issue. They represent, I believe, an enlightened and balanced approach to sustainable tourism development.

Finally, I believe that is important that all competent organizations and stakeholders join forces and work together to face this challenge.

I thank you for your attention.