



Réunion Island Declaration on Sustainable Tourism in Islands

The UNWTO/Government of France Conference on Sustainable Tourism Development in Islands held in St Denis, Réunion (11-12 September 2013), was aimed at sharing recent knowledge on tourism in island destinations, paying special attention to Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and devising ways of enhancing tourism's contribution to their sustainable development.

The Conference highlighted a few key issues:

1. ***Tourism as a key driver of sustainable development in islands***

For many islands, tourism is the single most important economic activity, with clear opportunities for future growth. Therefore tourism must feature strongly on the sustainable development agenda of islands and be given high priority in programmes to support SIDS and other island territories.

2. ***Natural and cultural heritage as primary assets for island tourism***

Tourism is well placed to generate awareness and support for the unique biodiversity and rich cultural heritage of islands, on which it depends. Tourism development must be carefully planned and managed so that it has a positive impact on island resources, environments and communities and responds to the challenges of climate change.

3. ***Partnerships as a basis for achieving more together***

Groups of islands can be more effective if they work together on the promotion of sustainable tourism. The Vanilla Islands initiative linking seven Indian Ocean island territories – Comoros, Réunion, Madagascar, Maldives, Mayotte, Mauritius and Seychelles – is welcomed as an example of the partnership approach.

4. ***Connectivity of islands as a prerequisite for success in tourism***

Island destinations are dependent on air transport to provide effective access to source markets. Tourism and transport policies must be coordinated to pursue optimal growth in connectivity and secure economic benefits for island communities.

5. ***Réunion***, the host island of the Conference has followed a tourism model based on the valorisation of its exceptional resources, human and natural, recognised by UNESCO on 2010. Réunion has also played a valuable role in the creation of the concept of Vanilla Islands, enabling a model for the mutual development of tourism policy and a brand promoting seven islands in the Indian Ocean, based on cooperation rather than competition.



The conference programme was shaped around six sessions covering the following topics: tourism development and the conservation of island resources; sustainable economic development; connectivity and transport; the impacts of climate change; regional initiatives and international cooperation; and putting islands on the map.

The main findings and conclusions from the conference are presented below. These will be transmitted by UNWTO as part of the contribution of the tourism sector to the Third International Conference on SIDS, scheduled for September 2014 in Samoa.

The importance of tourism to islands

Tourism is a major activity on hundreds of islands in all parts of the world. These include those within the 52 Small Island Developing States as well as the many islands that are part of other nation states.

Tourism is a dominant force in the economy of many SIDS and provides one of only a few sources of foreign exchange earnings for most of them. In half of the SIDS, tourism expenditure accounts for over 40% of all their exports of goods and services. Moreover, it equates to more than 20% of GDP in two fifths of SIDS where data are available. These significant levels of contribution are also evident in the local economies of other island territories.

The importance of tourism in island economies is demonstrated by the recent graduation of Cape Verde and the Maldives from Least Developed Country status due to their levels of income from tourism. At least two further SIDS are on course for a similar transition on the strength of their tourism sector.

A further reason why tourism is so important for islands is the projected growth of the sector worldwide, with international tourism arrivals forecasted to reach 1.8 billion by 2030. The popularity of islands as destinations and the kinds of experience that they offer should enable them to see at least an equivalent amount of growth. Tourism has also proven to be a resilient sector, with tourism income to SIDS as well as other states recovering strongly after the global recession.

The importance of tourism for islands should not just be seen from a macroeconomic perspective. Tourism income can support livelihoods in many island communities. It is also uniquely placed to benefit from, and provide support for, the special cultural and natural heritage assets which are a feature of so many of the world's islands.



Challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism in islands

The overarching challenge and opportunity for tourism in islands is to support further economic growth while also protecting and benefitting island environments and communities. The principles of sustainable tourism are highly relevant to islands.

Particular characteristics of islands include small size, relative isolation and inaccessibility and a maritime environment. For these reasons many islands face challenging trading conditions and a limited resource base. These characteristics also make islands vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks.

Islands, by their very nature, are distinctive places to visit, often with a unique character and appeal. There are great opportunities to use this strength to develop and project distinctive island brands, which in turn should guide the products and messages that shape the tourism offer.

Islands, overall, are hugely important for global biodiversity, with many containing unique species on account of their relative isolation. Similarly, this partly explains the rich cultural heritage that can be found on many islands. These assets provide a significant tourism resource but also place a strong responsibility on tourism to support their conservation.

Pressure on land and other resources creates considerable challenges for tourism development and operations, requiring sound planning and environmental management. The availability of fresh water and the levels of water consumption for tourism uses are a particular concern, now and in the future. Island tourism also faces specific challenges in waste handling and energy provision. Opportunities include better management and investment in green technology.

Many issues affect the competitiveness of island destinations, including connectivity and levels of investment. Many SIDS depend on foreign direct investment. Opportunities exist to strengthen local economic investment and engagement in tourism, including strengthening local capacity and provision of necessary skills training.

Islands are particularly vulnerable to climate change which is already affecting their environments and livelihoods. While small islands only generate less than 1% of Greenhouse Gas Emissions, they face particular damage from global warming impacts such as storm surges, sea level rise, beach erosion and coral bleaching, that will directly and indirectly affect their tourism. These challenges need to be faced without delay.



Outcome and recommendations

In recognition of the importance of tourism to the economy and sustainable development of many Small Island Developing States and other islands, and the specific opportunities and challenges for islands in pursuing sustainable tourism, the Conference calls on UN bodies and other international agencies, the governments of SIDS and the national and local authorities of other islands, representatives of the tourism industry, as appropriate, to:

1. Ensure that full attention is paid to the role of tourism in the further shaping of policies and programmes to support SIDS and other islands in their sustainable development and that tourism is placed as a priority in the development agenda of islands.
2. Establish and maintain governance and management structures for tourism, including within each island destination, which bring together tourism, environment, culture, transport, planning and development responsibilities and expertise, and enable a partnership approach between the public and private sector and local community interests.
3. Engage in the preparation of strategies and action plans for the development of sustainable tourism, reflecting the particular circumstances of different islands and considering their long term position as well as their short term needs, while also making available sufficient financial and human resources for their successful implementation.
4. Provide clear, research-based information and guidance to SIDS and other island governments on the impact of climate change on tourism; act now to implement and support practical climate change adaptation measures, and establish and pursue low carbon strategies for tourism development.
5. Ensure that future tourism development is guided by, and complies with, spatial and physical plans that take full account of the current and future capacity of an island's resources (especially land, water, coastline, energy and social capital).
6. Take further measures to protect the cultural and natural heritage and biodiversity of islands and their marine environments, including establishing further protected areas if necessary, and engaging the tourism sector in supporting the conservation of these precious assets by raising awareness of them and providing a source of income for their conservation and management.
7. Encourage all tourism businesses and visitors to minimise any negative impacts on island environments and communities, through appropriate regulations, incentives, voluntary codes and certification and the identification, recognition and promotion of good practice.



8. Recognise the dependency of much island tourism on air access, with the presence of sufficient routes and competitive services, and ensure that any future policies on regulation and taxation of air services take account the special circumstances of islands.
9. Undertake a thorough analysis of the tourism value chain in all islands, to identify how the local island economy and communities can gain maximum advantage from tourism and to design and implement measures to strengthen local employment and engagement in the sector, including access to training.
10. Promote investment in tourism in islands, including appropriate foreign investment, while taking measures to protect local interests and establish financial partnerships, to achieve mutual benefits.
11. Identify and creatively build upon the special qualities and distinctiveness of individual islands as a basis for active, targeted promotion of them as tourism destinations.
12. Support and encourage regional partnerships, such as the Vanilla Islands in the Indian Ocean, which stand to benefit from the complementarity of their tourism offer and joint promotion.
13. Support international and regional tourism bodies in promoting and providing expertise in the sustainable development of tourism, and encourage all SIDS and island territories to participate in them.
14. Consider these conclusions at the Third International Conference on SIDS in 2014, disseminate them in other forums and encourage their further development and implementation.

Sincere appreciation was extended to the Government of France and the Regional Council of Réunion for their warm hospitality and the excellent arrangements for the conference, as well as their contribution to advance the agenda of sustainable tourism development in islands.