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Transforming Tourism

Many tourists would like to travel in an eco-friendly and socially responsible manner. What can policy makers, the travel and tourism industry and customers do in order to get tourism on track to become more sustainable? We spoke with Harald Zeiss, Professor for Tourism and Sustainability at Harz University of Applied Sciences.

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries – but it is running the risk of growing beyond its limits. There are already 1.3 billion international tourist arrivals recorded today. According to forecasts by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), it will be 1.8 billion by 2030. More and more people travel more and more often and over longer distances – this general trend has consequences: Global mobility does not only increase carbon emissions (according to the Aviation Report by the German Aerospace Center aviation alone contributes five percent; by 2050 its share may increase to an estimated 22 percent). In the destinations, more and more land is used for tourism infrastructure. Water becomes a scarce resource and the increasing amounts of waste become difficult to dispose of. Facts which can no longer be overlooked: spoilt landscapes, beaches full of garbage, tourism bans imposed on islands, neighbours protesting. And perhaps often visible only at a second glance: precarious working conditions of hotel staff, child labour, the dominance of foreigners in local settings, and a loss of cultural identity in destinations.

All of this makes quite a few tourists rethink, triggering an awareness of sustainability and fair travel. According to the Reiseanalyse (travel analysis) 2018 by the German Forschungsgemeinschaft Urlaub und Reisen e.V. (FUR), 52 percent of the Germans would like to spend their holidays in ways that benefit the environment and 60 percent would like to travel in a socially responsible manner – two essential aspects of sustainability. But what are the key characteristics of sustainable tourism? According to the UNWTO, it has to equally take into account economic, social, and ecological aspects while considering both the present and future needs of all: the guests, the industry, the environment, and the local population. Sustainability is a holistic approach and includes several dimensions simultaneously – which makes it so complex. While an emission intensive tourism features on the negative side, for a country's economy and society the tourism sector generally holds much potential: It may give monetary value to natural and cultural resources, and may provide people

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with jobs and livelihood options. This shows the dilemma. Actually we should refrain from taking a flight to go on a holiday, but especially for structurally weak countries of the Global South tourism can be a major opportunity.

So the challenge is not to avoid travelling at all, but to conceptualise travel in such a way that negative impacts will be minimised and positive effects will come to bear. Where do we stand today? ”Quite a lot has already been achieved in the past few years,“ says Harald Zeiss, professor at Harz University of Applied Sciences in Wernigerode, where he is in charge of research on international tourism and sustainability. Aviation has become more efficient, hotels save water and energy, the ecological footprint of an individual trip has reduced. “However, all these savings are rendered void by the growing consumption, so that we continue to be on the wrong track.“ But how can we change direction, how can we transform tourism in such a way that it becomes sustainable? “The tourism industry has already reacted in many areas“, says Zeiss, pointing out that there are now quite a few tour operators focussing on sustainability who have created differentiated products for interested customers. A market for these products exists. However, in order to regulate the uncontrolled growth of the entire sector, the primary challenge, in his opinion, is the one for policy makers to define the rules of the game.

Zeiss sees the main responsibility with the states themselves. “Tourism is an export product, with services being rendered in the respective destinations. Only if the governments of these countries pass the respective political frameworks and laws will the international tourism sector respect them. Effective voluntary self-restriction can and will not happen“. The more countries introduce binding rules on social, environmental and labour standards, the easier it will be – for the industry will then have to go along if it does not want to violate laws. According to the tourism expert, the reason why things have partly been moving so slowly in the sector is that its players are waiting for a global solution which will not be enforceable, though. “It is a matter of national sovereignty.” With the exception of international aviation and shipping. In these areas Zeiss emphasises the need for transnational regulation, e.g. in the form of a carbon tax. State subsidies for aviation should also be phased out, as they do not only affect the climate, but also contribute to market distortions at the expense of road and rail transport.

But what about countries which depend on foreign exchange earnings from international tourism or struggle with corruption? “The leverage of tourism lies in the wages of the people working in this sector,“ concedes Zeiss. Many countries also have problems enforcing certain norms, because their legal structures are relatively weak or because they have different concepts of what environmental

protection means. Nevertheless, there are quite a few tools that help to get tourism on track towards sustainability: taxes, fees, regulation of products and services, bans, incentives, communication. Many countries have already introduced clear rules on resource consumption and baulk at privatising their beaches or at selling land to big foreign investors. In Spain, for example, restaurants on the beaches have been banned and demolished. Amsterdam, a city suffering from “overtourism“, charges a tourist tax on overnight stays, making it more expensive to stay in Amsterdam. It is aimed at reducing demand. In Mallorca an eco-tax to be paid by every tourist is used to expand water supplies, improve public transport, and restore hiking trails. All this works well, says Zeiss, and above all it also benefits the local population. Furthermore, it helps to raise awareness. “Tourists need to get a clear message telling them what is environmentally and socially sustainable and what is not“. This also helps against undeliberate or wilful ignorance.

And what can tourists themselves contribute in order to travel in a fair manner? “Of course, the individual tourist also has a responsibility and should accept it“. Tourists can choose a mode of travel where transport is in acceptable proportion to the duration of stay. For do I really need to fly to Dubai over the weekend to go shopping? And shouldn’t I refrain from taking domestic flights on my next long haul trip? Many tour operators provide detailed information in their catalogues and/or online booking portals on the transport energy balance of every mode of travel – and offer the respective offsetting mechanisms. This provides important guidance, but if tourists want to take all aspects of sustainability into account in a comprehensive manner, they need to consider much more: Does tourism infrastructure lead to environmental destruction, does it displace people? Do local people benefit from tourism or are they exploited? What about the human rights situation? Zeiss believes that for some travellers the complexity of the issues may make things too complicated.

Meanwhile, we have more than 100 different labels and certificates worldwide which are to provide information on these questions. “Certificates show that tourism service providers do more in environmental and social terms than just respect legal standards“, says Zeiss. It is very important for hotels or tour operators to accept their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and to improve upon it voluntarily. ”Ideally, I would like to see a world in which labels are no longer needed because all players operate at a high standard“. In the ‘label jungle’ many people lack clarity anyway. In fact, there is a major gap between wanting to travel sustainably and actually doing so – a conclusion by the Reiseanalyse (travel analysis) 2014 of FUR, commissioned by the German

Federal Environmental Agency. While for 42 percent of the German population it is important that tour operators work towards sustainability by supporting educational projects, environmental protection, and conservation of species, only 12 percent are ready to pay a bit more for it. The barriers are manifold: It is not only the often higher costs that act as a deterrent. Many people feel that their requirements associated with the holiday they would like to experience are not met in a sufficiently flexible manner. If more consumers are to decide on a sustainable travel product, their additional work and expense needs to be in an attractive proportion to the benefit, according to the study. Many customers would also like to see more meaningful labels, professional advice by travel agents, and comprehensive products and services.

“There are many good approaches and products and services offered by the tourism sector, but we cannot rely on all consumers voluntarily choosing a sustainable path“, the tourism expert points out. It may be disillusioning, but eventually this path must be taken based on economic principles: on the price, which must reflect the true ecological and social costs of touristic products and services. In this logic, a product that damages the environment and negatively affects society must be more expensive than a sustainable one. “In this way, demand can be controlled, consumption patterns can be changed, and a transformation of the global mass tourism market can be achieved“.

The Institute for Tourism and Development (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.) endorsed the Berlin Declaration on “Transforming Tourism”, aimed at sustainable tourism development and at a renunciation of purely growth oriented strategies.

What is the role of sustainability and CSR in the tourism industry? In an interview with an international provider of consulting and certification systems, we will be addressing this topic in our news portal.

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