Theme D

Alison Johnston, Director
INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM
sustour@axionet.com

The Meeting of Peoples Through Ecotourism
IS THE SACRED FOR SALE?

Submission of The International Support Centre for Sustainable Tourism
to the World Summit on Ecotourism
Quebec City, 2002

Ladies and Gentlemen,
We are the International Support Centre for Sustainable Tourism. Our goal is to facilitate respectful relationships between Indigenous Peoples and the private sector. The bottom line is relationships built on the solid foundation of prior informed consent. We are here today to share with you some of the major challenges all parties will face towards achieving this goal. We also wish to share with you what we have learned, working at both the community and United Nations levels, about bringing such principles into the equation of “sustainable” tourism.

Over the last seven years we have organized a series of dialogue forums on “Indigenous Peoples & Ecotourism” at the United Nations. We hosted these sessions at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights and U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development, as well as within the U.N. negotiations on biodiversity conservation. There has been one predictable theme throughout these debates. Industry and government people in attendance have expressed a high level of anxiety, protectionism and fear about the concerns and proposals raised by Indigenous Peoples.

The polarization of discussions on Indigenous Peoples’ rightful role in ecotourism development will build over the next decade, if the barriers to productive talks are not addressed in a meaningful way during this World Summit on Ecotourism. The traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples are the biodiversity hotspots of the world, due to the application of customary practices over millennia. There is high interest on the part of industry to gain access to these territories, for ecotourism purposes. As a result, the lands and cultures of Indigenous Peoples now figure prominently in ecotourism brochures. This commercialization has been rapid and is seldom authorized by authentic Indigenous authorities. Therefore, ecotourism as promoted and practised by industry today is not gaining the support or genuine involvement of Indigenous Peoples. In fact, in many areas globally, Indigenous communities are planning legal, political and direct action - such as road blockades, information campaigns and court injunctions - to stop ecotourism development.

Worldwide, community testimonies from Indigenous Peoples tell of the culture loss, environmental destruction, economic exploitation and human rights abuses associated with the ecotourism industry. The temptation is to refute this by citing the rare exceptions which exist. But fundamentally the
lessons for tourism management are being ignored. Most professionals examining ecotourism do not look at the issues underlying Indigenous Peoples' grievances. They are not seeking to understand the impacts of the ecotourism industry on Indigenous rights. Nor have they acknowledged the limits of their expertise, concerning (1) international law with respect to Indigenous Peoples, and (2) appropriate protocols for working with Indigenous Peoples.

In 1997 the Berlin Declaration on Sustainable Tourism - which was signed by the Secretariat of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity, U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP) and other parties - gave an important baseline for ecotourism. Point #16 of this declaration stated: “Tourism should be restricted, and where necessary prevented, in ecologically and culturally sensitive areas.” This identified a critical area for proper development of protocols with Indigenous Peoples. The question of what is culturally sustainable needs to be defined.

Five years later no work has been undertaken yet in the international arena to implement this provision of the Berlin Declaration. Negotiations are proceeding within various United Nations bodies on both “traditional knowledge” and guidelines for sustainable tourism, including tourism within the territories of Indigenous Peoples. But this type of policy development is going nowhere because of the style of consultation. Government appointed experts, instead of Indigenous Peoples themselves, are being relied upon to shape the debate. Many of these experts have expressed impatience toward the topic of cultural sustainability. Meanwhile, Indigenous Peoples' land, sacred sites, customary practices and ceremonies are being seriously impacted by the ecotourism industry.

There are four major issues requiring our attention if these negative ecotourism trends involving Indigenous Peoples are to be reversed, allowing sustainable tourism over the long term:

(1) International Law -
In international law Indigenous Peoples have two tiers of rights. They have collective rights as peoples, called Indigenous rights, which are derived from their historical occupancy and use of traditional lands. They also have individual rights known as human rights. Both categories of rights are inalienable. It is therefore incorrect to categorize Indigenous Peoples' submissions on tourism development as interests or demands. Self-determination and prior informed consent are recognized rights, not political statements or a negotiating position. Sustainable ecotourism will respect and support the full body of international law concerning Indigenous Peoples.

(2) Land Title -
Land title is a fundamental element of Indigenous rights. Considerable misinformation exists concerning Indigenous title to traditional lands. Within Indigenous cultures the land is considered a sacred trust from the Creator. There is a sacred duty to protect it for future generations. The United Nations has recognized Indigenous Peoples' relationship with the land as central to their cultural survival. Yet a number of initiatives are underway which compromise this relationship, including protected areas. Sustainable ecotourism will reinforce Indigenous title, and accommodate co-existing title with other private and public deeds to the land.

(3) Customary Laws -
Customary laws are an expression of Indigenous title to their ancestral lands. These laws create a balance with the land, with one another as human beings, and with all aspects of Creation. Today, this system for governance is referred to as “traditional knowledge.” It involves personal accountability, on all levels including spiritual. Sustainable ecotourism will comply with applicable customary laws.

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(4) **Protocol** -
Cultural protocol underlies the implementation of customary laws. It is governed by the Elders, who obtained this knowledge from their ancestors, and provides a clear framework for decision making now and into the future. **Sustainable ecotourism will strengthen rather than undermine Indigenous protocol.**
These four issues raise an area of technical inquiry that still remains to be addressed in relation to the ecotourism industry. There is an urgent need for criteria, indicators and early warning systems for sustainable tourism which operationalize Point #16 of the Berlin Declaration, concerning cultural sustainability. Collective problem solving in this regard must genuinely involve Indigenous Peoples, on terms consistent with international law. Otherwise, the ecotourism industry will be the frontrunner internationally, among the various globalized industries, in accelerating the infringement of Indigenous Peoples’ rights.

Our message to you today is that it is possible to develop these types of management tools for the ecotourism industry, in effective and mutually respectful ways. There are precedents to build on in this regard, which Indigenous Peoples themselves are evaluating for their value as ‘best practices’. These precedents are not the same tired and ineffective models of community participation normally associated with ecotourism, but concrete examples of communities leading the way to build new relationships with respect to economics. They draw from a spectrum of community experiences, not limited to tourism, and thus provide a rich array of options for structuring constructive dialogue.

The ecotourism industry cannot escape doing an inventory of its ‘community relations’ toolbox, if its claim of ‘sustainable’ tourism is to have any credibility among Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous leadership are better able to share and analyze information about industry practices today, than ten years ago. It is no longer ‘business as usual’ - new forms of accommodation, consultation, negotiations and relationship building are on the horizon. Are you ready for this change?

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