

International Symposium

“Advancing Sustainable Tourism in a Changing Climate”

A side-event within the framework of UNFCCC COP22

11 November 2016, Marrakech, Morocco

Main Takeaways

The International Symposium of the 10YFP Sustainable Tourism Programme brought together experts and business leaders dedicated to advancing sustainable tourism in a changing climate. The following takeaways highlight areas of consensus and guiding elements for the tourism sector to demonstrate its contributions to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the Paris Agreement:

1. The tourism sector is vulnerable to climate change. Threats include more extreme weather events, increasing insurance costs and safety concerns, water shortages and biodiversity loss and damage to assets and attractions at destinations. Continued climate-driven degradation and disruption to cultural and natural heritage will negatively affect the tourism sector, reduce the attractiveness of destinations and lessen economic opportunities for local communities. Natural and cultural resources are the foundation for the tourism sector’s competitiveness.
2. The tourism sector is contributing to climate change. Unequivocal scientific evidence shows that concentration of the most abundant greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide (CO₂), in the atmosphere has reached unprecedented levels. Tourism associated greenhouse gas emissions were estimated to be around 5% of global emissions in 2005¹. With international tourism arrivals expected to continue growing significantly, so is the responsibility of the tourism sector with regards to decoupling economic growth from increasing use of natural resources.
3. Climate risks are a major challenge, but should also become an opportunity for the tourism sector to further engage in the adoption and implementation of adaptation and mitigation measures and strategies, which will bring opportunities to mainstream sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and accelerate the shift to a low carbon and climate resilient economy.
4. Approximately 40% of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)² acknowledge tourism either as a country priority, as part of their mitigation and adaptation strategies, or as a sector vulnerable to climate change, demonstrating the relevant role that the tourism sector can play in advancing the climate agenda. The transversal nature and extended value chain of the tourism sector can lead to multiplier effects and thus position the sector as an agent of change. Tourism and climate policies and strategies which are consistent and encompass each other need to be in place for efficiency measures to be long lasting.

¹ UNWTO, UNEP, & WMO (2008). Climate change and tourism: Responding to Global Challenges.

² UNWTO research (2016) looked at 128 NDCs submitted before November 2016.

5. A variety of approaches are used for carbon reporting in the tourism sector, making it challenging to aggregate the results and calling for harmonization, as better measurement will lead to better management. Lack of consistent methodologies is also observed across carbon measurement tools created for the consumers. Consistent and transparent communication to customers, like disclosure of environmental footprint of activities, will increase their trust, engagement and uptake of sustainable tourism products and services.
6. The level of emissions information available varies across modes of transportation, with aviation being the most detailed. Comparison across modes of transport is an urgent and important area of work which remains challenging given the lack of a common assessment framework for carbon emissions.
7. Enhanced measurement of the environmental impacts of tourism, the application of GIS solutions and linking these data with the economic dimension of sustainable development have the potential to support destinations in a meaningful manner. While further engagement of both policy makers and the finance community is needed to support the transition to low-carbon tourism, local knowledge is crucial to analyze and interpret environmental data within the right context and can support better management and resilience strategies.
8. The use of technological solutions has the potential to advance the harmonization of data on the environmental impacts of tourism. In general, technological advances, if deployed purposefully, have the potential to reduce negative environmental impacts and to activate the end-consumer significantly. They can result in win-win-win solutions in terms of awareness, efficiency and compliance with increasing pressure on environmental regulations.
9. While the climate impact of many tourism operations are likely to be regulated at the national level, the international sphere of tourism provides opportunities for increased efficiency and acceleration of climate action. Addressing climate change from a sectoral perspective could create links between the contribution of tourism industries to the INDCs/NDCs and the efforts being undertaken by tourism stakeholders operating internationally, thus leading to a holistic approach that encompasses existing climate efforts, mechanisms and policies.
10. A reflection on a potential strategy of the tourism sector to advance towards clear evidence-based targets with regards to emission reductions could further enhance the role of the sector to advance the implementation of the SDGs, notably SDGs 13 and 12 on climate action and SCP. Moreover, such strategy could stimulate the scaling up of existing efforts within the tourism sector to create a larger positive impact.