

UNWTO ALGARVE FORUM

TOURISM AND SCIENCE: BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Tourism, Climate Change and Sustainability

Understanding climate change and sustainability

Climate change refers to any long-term significant change in average temperature, precipitation and/or wind patterns. The earth's climate has always varied naturally but it is anticipated that the earth's climate is changing as a result of human activities. Human induced greenhouse gases may arise from such activities as: burning fossil fuels (oil, coal, gas), using energy generated from the burning of fossil fuels, land clearing and logging, and some aspects of farming, among others. The impacts of climate change include increases in global air and ocean temperatures, decreasing snow and ice cover, global sea level rise, coral bleaching, water shortages and/or supply restrictions, changing rainfall patterns, greater dry season severity and higher summer temperatures, as well as increased frequency and severity of storms, cyclones, floods, fires, and droughts. Up to a third of the world's flora and fauna species could be lost due to climate change. Tourism is both a contributor to these issues and will be a casualty of climate change.

Climate change adaptation and mitigation

Portfolios of adaptation and mitigation strategies are required to reduce the impacts of climate change and enhance adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity can be enhanced by integrating climate change issues into broader development planning such as land use and infrastructure design. This is a highly appropriate approach for tourism. It must be acknowledged that the adaptive capacity of countries, states and regions will increasingly be challenged through the increased incidence of natural events, crises and other disasters.

Developing countries are the most vulnerable to climate change impacts as they have fewer resources to adapt: socially, technologically and financially. As such, concerted global action is needed to enable developing countries to adapt to the effects of climate change that are happening now and will worsen in the future. Certainly the ability of developing countries, particularly LDCs and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), achievement of the Millennium Development Goals will be compromised. There is a need for development strategies to be climate resilient.

Tourism, climate change and sustainability nexus

Climate change is one of the most significant issues facing the global tourism industries due to the fact that the environment and climate conditions of a destination are often the key attraction and basic resource for the tourism industry. Tourism as a contributor to the Millennium Development Goals and as a vehicle for poverty alleviation is similarly threatened.

However, there is still much scope for action in terms of tourism and climate policy and strategy; business practices and products and changed consumer behaviour. Tourism researchers have noted that environmental and sustainable tourism policies still have relatively little influence on the workings of the tourism market. This has been attributed to short-term, profit driven decision-making and scepticism regarding climate change which is holding back investment. This reinforces the importance of proactive, dynamic and compelling public policy, broader governance models to stimulate change, and research to underpin government and business decision making and planning. Yet governments cannot act alone to address climate change; individuals, communities, and businesses must cooperate and collaborate via transparent, functioning and effective governance systems.

The tourism, climate change and sustainable development research agenda for UNWTO.Know is considerable. There is already much research and a first objective of the network will be to identify, codify and disseminate this research for the benefit of member countries. Similarly sharing of best practice and good exemplars of governments, businesses and other organisations is needed. This applies both to climate change research per se as well as research in applying sustainable development concepts. It was agreed that knowledge dissemination should be a primary role for UNWTO.Know. Participants in the session also felt that an ambitious framework and pathway for tourism and climate change was established at Davos. The group agreed that this should be used as a starting point for exploring further research.