

Making the SUN shine on tourism

Geoffrey Lipman argues the case for Impact Travel



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I was planning to devote this article to the need that exists for a radical new approach to education and training in the dynamic and socio-economically important field of travel and tourism.

The context was to be the agreement last year by the Finance, Sustainability and Climate Summits, finally creating a long-term road-map, with real targets and hundreds of indicators, to hit survivable temperatures by 2050 and sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030. As well as to explore why the complexity, scale and scope of this three-decade multi-trillion-dollar Green Growth transformation is like no challenge we have faced before.

Then to outline how the travel and tourism sector – transport, hospitality, services and infrastructure – has to change itself to respond: balancing its well-recognised benefits to GDP, jobs and trade benefits with an equal action plan on sustainable impacts.

It would conclude with the work we are doing in the Strong Universal Network (SUN) to bring these ideas to the local community level with a focus on education and training.

But one of our known challenges – climate change – is existential and that means if we don't fix it, our grandchildren will freeze or fry. And it also means we have to keep the pressure on that through other mega-challenges such as poverty, hunger and terrorism dealt with in 17 SDGs (with 169 targets and 304 indicators). All are vitally important but secondary if we do not deal with global warming.

The post-industrialisation build-up of greenhouse gases and massive increases in fossil fuel based energy has created rapid warming of the planet, air pollution in major cities, melting ice-caps, significant weather pattern changes, dramatic floods, fires, droughts, strained agricultural and water resources, and, ultimately, a greenhouse gas tipping point where the cycle cannot be reversed.

The Paris Agreement bottom line is for a gradually strengthening mix of voluntary national carbon-reduction targets, diminishing dependence on fossil fuel, a new era of renewable energy

resources, biodiversity conservation and smarter lifestyles. The goal is to keep temperature growth at no more than 2° Celsius by 2050 – more likely 1.5° – and, importantly, a solid platform to ratchet up over time if climactic conditions worsen and as technology driven innovation creates new transformation opportunities.

All of which calls out for increasingly complex yet coherent actions at international, regional, national and local levels with a whole new focus on measurement and management of impacts. Every community will have its own starting point, local socio-economic characteristics, vision and pace of change.

"Impact Travel" was coined by Professor Klaus Schwab, Founder of the World Economic Forum, as a way to describe, simultaneously, the immense socio-economic benefits and serious consequences of human mobility as well as fitting with the Forum's vision of an evolving Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) of hyper-connectivity, 24/7 mobile communications, smart cities with big data, robotics, sensor-driven lifestyles and an increasing kaleidoscope of IOT / human interface.

It fits well, also, with an industry – travel and tourism – that is beginning to grapple with the reality of what it has promoted as "a force for good" – increasingly challenged in the evidenced, Climate / SDG era – to put "eco-tourism" on steroids.

Over the past two decades it has been identified by most states, the G20 and the UN as a major driver of positive change – particularly in poor, emerging and island states. At the same time, much has been done to advance travel sustainability through education, marketing, regulation, standards, certification and CSR with government, industry, academic and NGO engagement.

But it is not enough. Impacts from carbon (transport – particularly, fossil fuel dependent, aviation – and buildings), resource utilisation (water, food, and waste) and "people congestion" will now need to be more effectively measured, managed and controlled. The challenge will escalate progressively as the sector grows.

Three major structural shifts would help:

To apply “green” and “growth”, coherently, to both sides of the policy equation.

Seamlessly meshing economic and environment accounting as well as embedding the hybrid results in core corporate and government strategies with one balance sheet. We have had 25 years of promoting the real benefits of growth. Now we must deal with consequences in the same way. The climate clock ticks louder every day.

To deliver balanced policy at community level.

Fragmentation of the sector means that effective policy depends on a myriad of political and industry decision makers – tourism, transport, environment, finance, land use, infrastructure, immigration, security and so on. Too many decisions get lost in silos, bogged down in bureaucracy or watered down by lobbying as they devolve locally. Moreover, 80% of the industry supply chain is SMEs. How do you get them and global players on the same page when their interests and impacts are so different?

To revamp supporting tourism education and training

Tourism is not taught in many schools; it tends to get shifted to vocational trade disciplines such as catering or cross-sector training like ICT with limited university positioning around the world. We need to add cyberspace, home learning, transferable workplaces, MOOCs, webinars and the like to our traditional books and bricks- and mortar-based systems. And now we need to find innovative ways to advance Impact Travel when education structures worldwide are confronting massive financial austerity and new-tech information disruption.

SUN is a legacy programme of Maurice Strong, one of the founding fathers of the sustainability movement and Secretary General of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. It operates globally under a Belgian, not-for-profit Green Growth and Travelism Institute. Its core goal is to help communities become climate resilient through Impact Travel, with relevant SDG support.

It will do this by providing a linked network of prefabricated solar-powered SUN Centres, delivered world-wide in a single container and erected in less than a week, without heavy equipment. Connected instantly over the internet and with academically trained support

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staff, they will provide “4IR sensitive” space for analysis of global and local data, strategies and good practice, in-house and digital learning, capacity building, entrepreneurship incubation, skills training and so on.

Each centre will link to a cloud-based, web platform that will encourage Impact Travel support services from around the world to engage directly with local community stakeholders. We have already established partnerships in such areas as roadmaps, visioning, certification, and modelling, impact investment and promotion. More are in the works.

SUN Centres will be very versatile:

- As a primary contact point for the Impact Travel sector, governance and environmental/ NGO communities, as well as other interested institutions
- As a distinctive standard bearer for renewable energy, with their solar panels and battery systems
- As a culture and art focal point
- Even as a response node in disaster management systems

Importantly, the centres will serve as learning exchanges that will hook into community schools, business colleges, universities and vocational systems with integrated training and skills development. We have built-in academic linkage at the core to focus on green growth, Impact Travel and 4IR trends, targeting new media and mobile delivery.

SUN is not seeking to duplicate evolving tourism or educational strategies but rather to link them in global climate-resilience systems and be a rallying point at community level for the best of both.

We have good support material for stand-alone digitally delivered learning modules at all levels in the education spectrum. As co-author of books on green growth and “travelism”, and related summer schools with Hasselt University

in Limburg, Belgium, and Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, the base is there today. There is already an evolving network of academic partners.

We will also integrate the seminal work on “re-connection” by our partner Ignace Schops, the Goldman Award Winner and Director of the National Park of Belgium, where the first SUN Centre will be placed. We believe that inclusion of this nature-based mindset will be pivotal for mega city and rural integration as well as a decent lifestyle balance. We will also source 4IR material from the World Economic Forum.

SUN will initially establish three centres in 2017, with its global hub in the Hoge Kempen National Park in Belgium, linked to Hasselt University and its Climate Science Research Field Unit, its technology Centre in Ireland and a mobile Centre to promote the concept globally during the International Year of Sustainable Tourism.

Further expansion of the network will incorporate six regional hubs around the world by 2018 and one in every country by 2020, when the Paris Agreement begins to bite. The ultimate goal is a progressively growing global support network to deal with the speed, scale and consistency of grass roots change needed for green growth transformation of such a dynamic, complex, cross-cutting sector.

One thing is for sure, the next generations are the ones who can make the adaptation difference and they will need to be prepared – but it is the current generation who must lay down the foundation stones. SUN can play a key role.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Geoffrey Lipman leads the SUN Program and was responsible for the original vision and making it a reality. He is President of the International Council of Tourism Partners (ICTP) and Director of *greenearth.travel* and the Green Growth Travelism Institute (GGTI), its not-for-profit foundation. He is a Former President of the World Travel & Tourism Council and Assistant Secretary General UN World Tourism Organisation. www.thesunprogram.com

