SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

AS TOLD BY WTTC’S TOURISM FOR TOMORROW AWARDS

Since 2005 the World Travel & Tourism Council’s Tourism for Tomorrow Awards have sought out, recognised, and promoted best practice in sustainable tourism from across the globe. Over these 13 years we have received nearly 2,000 applications, recognised 156 finalists, and awarded 52 category winners. As the UN’s International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development will shine a spotlight throughout 2017 on tourism’s role in driving sustainable growth, WTTC has undertaken a review of all our Tourism for Tomorrow award finalists and winners over the past 13 years to see how the sustainable tourism landscape is evolving.

Over the years there has been a gradual rise in the quality and quantity of applications from urban destinations. This reflects not only the growth in urban tourism around the world, but the increasing focus on tourism as an economic development tool by city and town authorities with its inherent requirement for a more sustainable approach. In 2012 we recognised our first urban finalist in the Destination Category – Tanabe City Japan - but it wasn’t until 2015, with Ljubljana, capital of Slovenia, that an urban destination won the category. The trend continued in 2016 when Cape Town’s V&A Waterfront was shortlisted and Parkstad Limburg in the Netherlands, a coal mining community that regenerated through tourism, won.

Addressing carbon emissions is now a critical part of any sustainable tourism initiative. Whereas it featured as part of specific applications in the early days, by 2016 any credible application, across all categories, is expected to consider the impact of their carbon emissions. This of course reflects the increasing prioritisation of climate change at a global level. For example, Wilderness Safaris, which won the 2016 Environment Award for their pioneering work in saving rhinos in Botswana, also has a robust climate programme, and CO2 emissions have reduced by 16% since 2012. Ilunion Hotels (formerly Conforteles) won the 2015 People Award for their leadership in accessible tourism, but had also reduced CO2 emission by 14% in a year. Feynan Ecolodge in Jordan, finalist in the 2015 Community category, recognised for its integration of the local community, is run on 100% sustainable power. The importance of reducing carbon emissions in travel is also reflected in the 2016 Innovation Award winner Carmacal Carbon Calculator, which allows consumers to compare the carbon impact of different travel options and make booking decisions accordingly.

THE AUTHORITY ON WORLD TRAVEL & TOURISM
Mirroring the growth in social entrepreneurship around the world, we have also seen an increase in applications from social enterprises engaging in tourism activities. This is partly driven by the opportunities offered by mobile technology and social media in terms of connecting people and making mainstream markets more accessible, as well as being a result of NGOs and charities needing to find new and sustainable income streams. We have seen an evolution from government and NGO driven community-based tourism projects, such as the Sunderband Jungle Camp in Bengal, India (2007) and Namibia’s Communal Conservancy Tourism Sector (2010), and community initiatives within privately owned companies such as 10 Knots in the Philippines (2007) and Virgin’s Pride ‘n Purpose (2011) to social enterprises such as Ecosphere bringing tourism to the remotest communities in the Indian Himalayas (2014), Reality Tours and Travel offering slum tours which benefit the people who live there in Mumbai, India (2015), and Sapa O’Chau, Vietnam’s first minority owned tour operator (2016).

Sustainable tourism has always been about balancing the needs of people, the environment, and businesses. Interaction with local communities has been recognised in the Community Award over the years, with excellent examples of how tourism can engage and directly benefit those who live around and work in destinations, hotels, and other businesses. However, as time passed it became apparent that encouraging people to work in tourism and training them appropriately is vital for sustainable tourism development. Therefore, in 2014, WTTC introduced the People Award to encourage awareness of those initiatives that are leading the way in opening up the sector to new workforces. In 2014, LANITH was recognised for its work to promote tourism careers and skills in Laos; in 2015, Ilunion Hotels were recognised for providing opportunities to people with disabilities; and in 2016, the Youth Career Initiative was recognised for its global programme of training schemes to bring young people into the hospitality sector.

Despite the wide diversity of applications over the years, one constant has remained – the high number of entries from organisations who are conserving and protecting biodiversity. Some examples over the years: Wilderness Safaris were recognised in 2016 for having re-established viable breeding populations of both black and white rhino in the Okavango Delta; Jetwing Vil Uyana hotel in Sri Lanka (2014) regenerated three habitats, providing a home to 80 species of birds, 17 species of mammals, 36 species of butterflies, and 21 species of amphibians, as well as a growing population of Grey Slender Loris; 2010 winner Al Maha Desert Resort in Dubai facilitated the reintroduction of the Arabian Oryx; and in 2007 the Caiman Ecological reserve was recognised for its work in protecting the Hyacinth Macaw, the Blue-fronted Parrot and the Jaguar.
Measuring, monitoring, and reporting impact has become one of the most important ways for companies that are committed to sustainability targets to win over sceptical stakeholders and enhance their global reputation. Just doing the basics or having a general sustainability goal is simply not enough anymore; data driven evidence with targets and monitoring is now embedded into the activities of those at the forefront of sustainable tourism. Tourism for Tomorrow winners and finalists are now expected to show measurable impact, and as a result the standard is increasingly high.

Sustainable tourism has its roots in environmental conservation, but, as our finalists and winners show, it is increasingly incorporating a broader spectrum of initiatives. In 2005 sustainable tourism was still a niche segment of the overall product but increasingly companies are realising that for all tourism to succeed it needs to be sustainable. Some of the emergent trends we are seeing include: a focus on accessibility for both employees and tourists (Sozopol and Ilunion Hotels (formerly Conforteles) – 2015); initiatives to engage consumers (TripAdvisor, 2015 and Carmacal Carbon Calculator, 2016); and use of innovative technology (Chepu Adventures Ecolodge, 2014 and North Sailing, 2016).

LOOKING TOWARD 2017 INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM FOR DEVELOPMENT

Over the years the companies, projects, and destinations showcased by the Tourism for Tomorrow Awards have played a vital role in demonstrating the art of the possible in tourism, inspiring and driving change across the Travel & Tourism sector in all corners of the world. They are, however, still the exceptions rather than the rule. For tourism to make that critical difference, we need, in 2017 International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, to encourage:

1. More innovative initiatives being driven at scale.
2. Projects that cross the different tourism industries, and using the expertise of those outside of Travel & Tourism to deal with issues that companies themselves cannot solve alone.
3. Sustainability that is an intrinsic part of a company’s modus operandi, not simply part of a philanthropic effort.

“I look forward to the day when there is no sustainable tourism. Just tourism.”

Fabien Cousteau, WTTC Global Summit 2016, Dallas, USA
The WTTC Tourism for Tomorrow Awards are aimed at recognising best practice in sustainable tourism within the industry globally, based upon the principles of environmentally friendly operations; support for the protection of cultural and natural heritage; and direct benefits to the social and economic well-being of local people in travel destinations around the world.

The Awards programme has five categories...

COMMUNITY AWARD
Recognises organisations committed to sustainable tourism leadership in local community development, empowerment, and cultural heritage. Organisations must demonstrate a commitment to capacity building for Travel & Tourism in destination areas including fair wages, opportunities for local community input and empowerment on tourism development planning, as well as training and educational opportunities that result in economic and social benefits for local communities, including career advancement.

DESTINATION AWARD
Recognises destinations which show commitment to supporting and delivering sustainable tourism best practices. We welcome any type of destination – country, region, state, or town – which comprises tourism enterprises and organisations working together to support and deliver sustainability at a destination level. This includes multi-stakeholder engagement and tangible social, cultural, environmental, and economic benefits.

ENVIRONMENT AWARD
Recognises organisations achieving environmental best practice through biodiversity conservation, protection of natural habitats, addressing climate change, and green operations. Any tourism business, organisation, or initiative from any sector which demonstrates that the tourism product and its operations have resulted in measured and tangible benefits to the environment is able to submit an entry.

INNOVATION AWARD
Recognises future solutions to current sustainability challenges faced by Travel & Tourism. Organisations must be able to demonstrate the cutting-edge features of their project. The kind of innovation can relate to the process, product, delivery, or financing of the approach and should be new to the world and not simply new to an organisation or destination.

PEOPLE AWARD
Recognises organisations dedicated to the development of capacity building, training, and education to build a skilled tourism workforce for the future. This category is designed for any Travel & Tourism organisation, or partnership of organisations, that are working to enhance the capacity of individuals and groups of people to enter the sector, to aid the recruitment and retention of under-represented groups, to develop skills for those already employed to advance in the sector, and to offer fair employment practices.

Applicants go through a rigorous three-step judging process, which includes on-site evaluations. An international team of some 20 acclaimed sustainable tourism judges decide on the winners after choosing three finalists in each category. Tourism for Tomorrow Awards finalists are hosted at WTTC’s Global Summit when the winners are announced at a prestigious gala ceremony.

APPLY ONLINE AT WTTC.ORG/TOURISM-FOR-TOMORROW-AWARDS/APPLY
The closing date for the 2017 Awards is 14 November 2016.