



RESPONSIBILITY

Going green is an issue, but it is also about social integrity, writes Erica Webster



THERE is scope for tourism to be a force for good in society provided businesses uphold three precepts for responsible tourism — environmental integrity, social responsibility and economic sustainability.

Jennifer Seif, executive director of Fair Trade in Tourism SA (FTTSA), says that global anxiety around climate change has given rise to many people equating responsible tourism solely with green issues.

"I would not diminish the importance of environmental issues, but we also have to ask questions about who is benefiting from tourism growth and whether poor people are better off because of the way the industry is developing."

By its very nature tourism has a high environmental impact.

Seif says that hotels are the chief offenders, with energy and waste two evils.

"It's a national problem, but if you're able to reduce electricity consumption you're on the way to reducing carbon emissions, while also cutting costs."

While some hotels have embarked on energy-efficiency campaigns, global research indicates that unless they get their message across they are unlikely to get the full co-operation of either their staff or their customers.

"A lot more can be done, especially in educating staff. Managers have great policies, but if employees don't understand why they must switch off lights or why they should not wash a towel unless it's on the floor, you won't get very far. It's a case of educating the consumer, educating the workforce and communicating the positive benefits to everyone."

People need to know the why behind the what, says Seif.

"Their message could be something along the lines of: last month we cut our electricity by 20% resulting in less carbon emissions. Or, the savings on our monthly electricity bill are reinvested in staff training and community projects."

Hotels need to take waste reduction more seriously, she says.

"Guest amenities like little plastic bottles of shampoo and body lotion have a high environmental impact. An alternative is to decant into larger bottles that stay in the room, or to provide only what a customer requests. A lot of these extras just end up getting thrown away and adding to landfill."

Some hotels and lodges in ecosensitive areas opt to send packaging back with suppliers so they don't have to dispose of it in a protected environment. Other waste-saving solutions include processing organic waste

into compost and recycling grey water for irrigation.

Several conferencing venues are going green. It is what Spier calls conscious conferencing — the option of a large drink tank of filtered water rather than bottled water; no paper, pens or sweets in wrappers unless specifically requested; fruit for snacks instead of muffins in plastic packaging, and conference bags, stationery and other items that delegates do not wish to keep are donated to a local school.

Seif says that carbon neutrality is not only about offsetting.

"You first need to reduce as much as you can and when you reach a point where you can't reduce any more, then you offset."

"For instance, you can't stop running your safari vehicles if that's your business, but you can reduce electricity consumption in your kitchen, guest rooms and staff accommodation, and then offset by investing in accredited initiatives."

She says tourism businesses need to develop a culture of measuring consumption. Spier weighs its waste every day and has monthly and annual targets for waste reduction. Each area of the business is rated on how much waste it generates: it is part of their performance management system.

"That may seem quite extreme to some,

but there's no reason why operators can't at least measure their energy consumption — it's there in black and white on their electricity bill. It is also relatively simple to keep tabs on fuel consumption, and businesses should consider ways to cut down on fuel."

Not only is tourism high impact, it is also people intensive. Responsible tourism means minimising the potentially negative social impact — things like inequality and child labour — and enhancing the positive social elements.

"Tourism can be a positive force for social change, bringing people together from different cultures, different backgrounds, different races and different languages, but it can also create conflict if not handled correctly."

She says the way tourists engage with communities is critical.

"People on a bus driving through Soweto with cameras, never getting off the bus, never engaging with locals — voyeurism like this is disempowering to the community."

"Tour operators engaging with communities in a responsible manner will brief tourists beforehand on how to behave and will pay their community-based suppliers properly. Tourism can be very empowering for communities that feel their culture or way of life is interesting to other people,



BENEFITING PEOPLE

A positive conscience

provided it is handled correctly."

Staff development also has a positive social effect as it boosts people's perception of themselves. "Customers know when they're being served by happy people. If staff have a stake in the business it enhances the customer's experience.

"Empowering staff has a multiplier effect because it gives people life skills."

Sadly, many businesses still have their heads in the sand with regard to HIV/AIDS.

"FTTSA has found that tourism and hospitality businesses are either doing nothing to manage HIV/AIDS in the workplace or they're doing it all; there's very little in-between. It's a huge challenge in our sector. Skilled people are being lost to employers through the pandemic. Besides being the right thing to do, it's good business practice to have a sound HIV/AIDS strategy. But employers need help; they can't always do it on their own."

One way of looking at the economic dimension of tourism is through BBBEE. Ownership is important, especially in rural areas where communities have a financial stake in the business.

However, the importance of ownership

is sometimes overstated, says Seif.

"It takes tourism businesses a while to get to the point where they're profitable. If you start a new hotel you probably won't make money in the first five to seven years.

"Research shows that the easiest way to have a positive economic impact is to pay your staff a decent wage. It's common sense, although many employers still do not comply with the minimum wage set by the Department of Labour."

Tourism businesses need to take a critical look at their supply chains and try to invest in local businesses, she says.

"Not only will that reduce their environmental footprint, but more money will circulate in the local economy. Giving guests information so that they can spend money in the local area also gets the tourist rand circulating. The alternative, enclave tourism — a lovely lodge surrounded by a sea of poverty — is simply not sustainable.

"Small business development — investing in local projects and looking at economic justice issues — makes business sense. It's about creating relationships with people in your environment and showing them how they can benefit from tourism."

Tourism businesses can enhance economic sustainability by helping other new businesses.

"Instead of seeing a new business as a threat — which it probably isn't — consider how you can work together.

"Times are tight and new operators probably feel the pain fastest and hardest, while established businesses have brands and assets they can fall back on. Now more than ever we have to help newcomers by investing some time and goodwill."

Globally, the industry lags behind others in terms of responsible practices when, in fact, it should be leading the trend. SA, however, is setting new trends — it has a good national policy on responsible tourism and is the only country in the world to have a fair-trade label for tourism.

Others are following suit and the world fair trade body that regulates trade in commodities has asked FTTSA to assist in developing a global label for fair trade in tourism.

"As consumers become increasingly wary of green-washing tactics, businesses will need to provide proof of their status.

"The customer who's concerned about

the environment doesn't believe everything they read in a brochure; they want proof. They want to see some kind of certification mark or stamp of approval from a reputable organisation."

In 2003 FTTSA started running a voluntary certification programme that provides a framework for companies interested in responsible tourism and wishing to be evaluated against a set of standards.

If they perform above a certain level they qualify to use the FTTSA certification mark, which indicates sound environmental practice, minimal negative social impact and positive economic outcomes.

To date, 55 businesses have qualified for FTTSA certification.

"We would like to have more members, but it's still a new concept. As the market changes and as customers start to become more concerned about climate, poverty and inequality, so more businesses will strive to acquire the FTTSA label.

"A lot of people are interested in FTTSA until they realise how high the standards are. We don't want certification to be impossible to attain, but it needs to have a certain prestige," Seif says.