

# Sustainable tourism development in the Caribbean: practical challenges

**Lynn C. Harrison**

School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Ryerson University,  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

**Chandana Jayawardena**

The University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies

**Anthony Clayton**

The University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies

## Keywords

Tourism,  
Sustainable development,  
Caribbean, Research

## Abstract

The 2003 Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Trends (WHATT) roundtable discussion, held at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, focused on the issues affecting the development of tourism in the Caribbean. Fourteen industry practitioners and academics from the hospitality and tourism sector discussed the definitions of "sustainable tourism development" and debated the key development issues in Caribbean tourism and related education and research needs. The meeting agreed that there was a lack of research and intellectual focus on Caribbean tourism, although many Caribbean governments are in clear need of policy guidance. The meeting therefore identified a few achievable action points with the aim of addressing this problem.

## Introduction

The Department of Management Studies, The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona Campus, Jamaica hosted the Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Trends (WHATT) roundtable discussion, on 8 January 2003.

Professor Anthony Clayton, the Alcan Professor of Caribbean Sustainable Development at UWI, chaired the roundtable and moderated the discussions.

Professor Lynn C. Harrison from the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Ryerson University, Canada (currently spending her sabbatical leave at UWI) was the discussant and recorder.

The participants, from a total of eight countries, were chosen for their seniority, experience and expertise. They comprised six industry participants, representing five sub-sectors of the hospitality and tourism sector, and six academic participants representing four universities.

The industry participants were:

- Eldon Bremner, MHCIMA, General Manager, Jamaica Pegasus Hotel and Chairman HCIMA – Jamaica;
- Robert Stephens, President, Pragma Consultants Ltd and Managing Director, Port Royal Development Ltd, Jamaica;
- Simone McCulloch, Physical Planner, National Environmental and Planning Agency, Jamaica;
- Joy Douglas, Urban and Regional Planning Consultant;
- Carolyn Hayle, Senior Programme Officer, UWI and former Director of Tourism Product Development Company, Jamaica; and
- Antonio Fernandes MHCIMA, Manager, Alpha Food Services, UK.

The other academic participants were:

- Dr Eric Sandelands, Dean, Canadian School of Management and Professor, University of Action Learning at Boulder, Colorado, USA;
- Dr Godfrey Pratt, Co-Director, Hospitality Management Program, Morgan State University, USA;
- Michael J. Flagg, FHCIMA, Senior Lecturer, London Metropolitan University, UK;
- Dr Hopeton Dunn, Senior Lecturer, UWI;
- Dr Hilton McDavid, Lecturer, UWI; and
- Dr Chandni Jayawardena, FHCIMA, Academic Director, MSc in Tourism and Hospitality Management, UWI.

The theme for the discussion was "Sustainable Tourism Development: The Role of Researchers in the Caribbean". The regional team leader introduced the concept of WHATT (Jayawardena, 2003), and identified the goal of the WHATT roundtable discussions as being to:

- ... improve the dialogue between academics and practitioners and to make research more relevant to industry needs.

## Defining sustainable tourism development

The discussant presented summarized versions of some of the main definitions of sustainable tourism development. For example, according to the WCED (1987), sustainable development:

- ... implies meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Among the critical objectives for environment and development policies espoused by the WCED (1987) are:



International Journal of  
Contemporary Hospitality  
Management  
15/5 [2003] 294-298

© MCB UP Limited  
[ISSN 0959-6119]  
[DOI 10.1108/09596110310482227]

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at  
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister>



The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at  
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0959-6119.htm>

... preserving peace, reviving growth and changing its quality, remedying the problems of poverty and satisfying human needs, addressing the problems of population growth and of conserving and enhancing the resource base, reorienting technology and managing risk, and merging environment and economics in decision making.

Following the WSSD summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the World Tourism Organization, and the Earth Council prepared a report titled *Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry*. *Agenda 21* is now considered to be the primary framework for establishing tourism development plans around the globe. In its resolution for the approval of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism in Santiago, Chile (1999), the World Tourism Organization acknowledges the:

... swift and continued growth ... of tourism activity ... and its powerful effects, both positive and negative, on the environment, the economy, and the society ... .

Moreover, the World Tourism Organization is: ... also firmly convinced that ... responsible and sustainable tourism is by no means incompatible with the growing liberalization of the conditions governing trade in services and ... that it is possible to reconcile in this sector economy and ecology, environment and development, openness to international trade, and protection of social and cultural identities (WTO, 1999).

The definition employed by the World Tourism Organization is that:

... sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems (WTO, 1999).

Husbands and Harrison (1996) suggest that: ... responsible tourism represents a way of doing tourism planning, policy, and development to ensure that benefits are optimally distributed among impacted populations, governments, tourists and investors. Furthermore, responsible tourism practices require strong leadership and involve ways of managing tourism resources to achieve optimum benefits ... responsible tourism is not a tourism product or brand. It is a way of doing tourism.

Husbands and Harrison (1996) further state that:

... the term encompasses a framework and set of practices that chart a sensible course between the fuzziness of ecotourism and the well-known negative externalities associated

with conventional mass tourism ... there is a place for well-conceived ecotourism products, but ... mass tourism itself can be practiced in ways that minimize and mitigate its obvious disbenefits. Product development, policy, and planning can all be instituted in ways to ensure that tourists, host populations, and investors reap the long-term benefits of a vibrant and healthy tourism industry.

The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States has defined sustainable tourism as:

... the optimal use of natural, cultural, social, and financial resources for national development on an equitable and self-sustaining basis to provide a unique visitor experience and an improved quality of life through partnerships among government, the private sector, and communities (CTO, 1999).

Historically, the Caribbean Tourism Organization has adopted a broader perspective, taking into account:

... the regional ability to maintain product quality, increase profitability, promote the region effectively, provide air access at competitive rates ... gain the acceptance of the local populations ... provide a secure environment ... strengthen linkages between tourism and other economic sectors, and combine regional efforts to create a competitive force (Holder, 1996; CTO, 1999).

Acknowledging that the emphasis has traditionally been on issues relating to economic sustainability, the Board of Directors of the CTO:

... has mandated that environmental and sociocultural considerations be given a higher priority (CTO, 1999).

## **Sustainable development issues in the Caribbean**

The participants in the WHATT roundtable discussion identified a number of issues that have implications for the sustainable development of tourism in the region, particularly in Jamaica.

It is important to note that the Caribbean has a higher proportion of total employment and percentage of GDP derived from tourism than any other region in the world, and is therefore particularly dependent on this industry.

### **The exclusive nature of tourism**

Tourism in Jamaica has developed primarily in the form of resort enclaves. As a result, although local people have considerable opportunity for employment in the industry, their participation in tourism development and investment activities as well as in accessing the product (issues of affordability and availability were raised) appears to have

been limited. For example, in Jamaica two organizations – although indigenous – dominate the hotel sector and, in many Caribbean destinations, ownership and control of the hotel sector is in the hands of foreign investors, which are increasingly likely to be large multinational corporations. It was further suggested that the all-inclusive product, which tends to encourage visitors to remain on property, has implications for restraining tourist spending, the attendant multiplier effect, and the numbers of persons who actually benefit from tourism. Moreover, it was stated that the “homogenization” of the tourism product and image are real concerns that must be addressed if the benefits from tourism activity are to be optimized.

#### **External influence on tourism**

A number of the RTD participants were concerned about the role of the foreign investors. One noted that:

... confidence in our ability to do things ourselves has been lost ... Major destination development cannot be done in a sustainable manner by outside investors – at least it cannot be led by outside investors. Their interests are not the same as those of the local communities.

#### **Disconnect between policy and practice**

Several participants were concerned that although government policy documents articulate the need for sustainable tourism development, community participation, and a more equitable distribution of the benefits arising from tourism, this has not been realized in practice. The problem appeared to reflect, at least in part, a general lack of understanding of the principles underlying responsible or sustainable tourism development.

#### **Narrow definition of tourism**

Concern was expressed that hotels are the primary focus of tourism policy. Consequently, the interests of this sector are better represented, and development incentives seem to be aimed primarily at this sector. Several RTD participants felt that it was important to adopt a broader definition of the tourism product to include the creation of experiences. This re-definition would move the focus to attractions, culture, heritage, events, and festivals as the vital demand generators, and thereby re-position the hotels as support services. One of the RTD participants said, for example, that:

... people visit a destination because of what we have to offer. We fail to recognize the depth of our art, history and culture. When it comes to understanding how to package this

and sell it worldwide we still have a problem. The depth of the product goes beyond just the beaches. The policies do not support this.

The problem is also seen in the way that the region is usually advertised. Marketing agencies acknowledge the need to create value through the provision of life enriching experiences, but, as one participant pointed out:

... advertisements that appear in major generating markets still tend to emphasize half naked people lying on the beach.

Underscoring the lack of creativity and inability to capitalize on opportunities, one of the RTD participants argued that:

... the academics and practitioners need to impress upon government the need for policy change.

It was therefore recommended that more emphasis be placed on “quality experience” development, the creation of packages to provide value, and enhancing access to points of interest within destinations.

#### **Lack of integrated tourism planning**

The economic dependence of the Caribbean on tourism is a serious policy issue. As one of the RTD participants noted:

... this partly reflects the success of the tourism industry but also reflects the underperformance of other sectors of the economy.

Other participants concurred that there was need for more comprehensive plans for national development because, to this point:

... tourism and economic development in general have tended to occur in a haphazard manner.

Illustrating the consequences of failing to take a comprehensive approach, one of the RTD participants noted that:

... Jamaica now has one of the world’s highest homicide rates. Even though tourists are rarely the victims of violent crime, there is a growing perception of risk. What does impact directly on tourists is the issue of harassment, which, in part, reflects our general economic under-performance. This also supports the further development of enclave tourism, which may have the long-term effect of further widening the gulf – and the potential tension – between tourists and residents.

With respect to the issue of harassment, one of the RTD participants cautioned that it is critical not to use this as an excuse for underperformance in the global tourism arena indicating that we need to understand:

... what harassment is and why it occurs.

An additional comment was that:

... the policy framework ... could be [the basis for] an interesting research agenda – how the

government could have a more coherent set of policy positions. Are there potential conflicts among government agencies? For example, the government's policies for fishing may not appear to be related directly to tourism but they are – if we do not control over-fishing, we will continue to lose our coral reefs. If this happens, we will eventually lose some of our best beaches. There is often a complete absence of policy linkages.

### **Resource management**

This is a particularly important issue, given the small size of most Caribbean destinations. It is important to understand the pressures that tourism places on water supply, waste disposal and other infrastructure, and the need for sound resource management practices. As stated by one of the RTD participants:

... what I see in the total Caribbean area is fairly dismaying ... there is amazing degradation of the environment by tourism development ... the private sector is not necessarily interested in maintaining the tourist product for the local people ... there is a high leakage of tourist revenue. There is a need for policies to ensure that indigenous people participate in the ownership of tourist facilities. How do we manage tourism so that it does not damage the place? Look at the killing of the reefs – cruise ships, diving, turbidity, etc. that degrade the coral. There is still not a policy in place for waste disposal. The government, knowing all of this, must act to prevent high economic leakage and to facilitate the responsible development of the industry.

### **Lack of a common vision**

Most participants agreed that the core questions related to issues such as: What type of tourist? How many tourists do we want? What type of tourism do we want to develop? What we expect to come from tourism?

### **Lack of visible intellectual leadership**

It was noted that:

... we have not dealt with fundamentals when it comes to this industry. Quite frankly, researchers have not thought that tourism was sexy or interesting enough to put in the sweat equity to determine whether the policy context is appropriate. The reality is that Caribbean governments are constantly struggling with this industry. There needs to be a lot of intellectual introspection within the institution. Academia should operate at a different level from consulting. Until that is done, you will not have the level of research required. Masters students should be plugged into a research agenda.

Further to this, one of the RTD participants indicated that at her agency:

... we do have some contribution from academics, particularly in the biodiversity

area. When we found there were gaps in baseline data, we used the UWI students. Even in the tourism area when we do not have baseline data, we get the UWI students to do this for us.

Responding to these comments another of the RTD participants suggested that there are: ... two problems – human capacity level (UWI is predominantly a teaching institution as opposed to a research institution) and the focus ... Most of our colleagues in the social sciences have not been focused on this industry. Many people have a rather introverted focus. Much of our focus is historical rather than looking at current events.

---

## **Education and research needs**

Academics are generally concerned with macro issues, while practitioners are usually more interested in policies and practices that make good business sense. This raises a question as to how the two perspectives can be married to facilitate the formulation of responsible tourism policy. It was suggested that consideration must be given to whether the issues that academics have been studying can be translated into models that are relevant to practitioners.

Research and education needs identified by WHATT RTD participants mirrored the issues previously outlined, including:

- Understanding the socioeconomic implications of enclave tourism compared to community tourism.
- Identifying areas where there is a disconnect between policy and practice as well as identifying the means for developing more responsible tourism policy.
- Articulating an argument for comprehensive development of economies to ensure coherency in policy formulation among all stakeholders.
- Building a case for broadening the definition of what constitutes the tourism product.
- Identifying means to diversify the tourist markets targeted, including understanding the value and intricacies of market segmentation and target marketing as tools for improving the yield from tourist visitation.
- Identifying impediments to participation in tourism policy, planning, development, and investment on the part of local peoples as well as determining incentives and other means to encourage greater participation in the future.
- Developing case studies of best practices in responsible tourism policy, planning, and development.

---

Lynn C. Harrison,  
Chandana Jayawardena and  
Anthony Clayton  
*Sustainable tourism  
development in the Caribbean:  
practical challenges*

International Journal of  
Contemporary Hospitality  
Management  
15/5 [2003] 294-298

---

- Clarifying and operationalizing terms and principles related to sustainable or responsible tourism development – in essence, developing a common language within the region to facilitate communication as well as to enhance the evolution of a common vision regarding the future of tourism.
- Developing a dedicated tourism database to facilitate comparative research globally.

---

### What's next?

In bringing this discussion to a close, it was stated that:

... it would be fair to say that there is not necessarily agreement on the institutional framework. There are some real tensions with respect to what the academics should be doing ... We need to decide what we can be good at and focus.

The short list of action points for research and education institutions that emerged includes the need for:

- More dialogue and collaboration between industry practitioners, government policy makers, and academic researchers, educators, and students.
- More policy-oriented and actionable research (i.e. undertaking research with a purpose and asking the right questions).
- Providing all stakeholders with easy access to information that resides within academic institutions.

Although the mechanics of implementation remain to be thought through, there was general agreement that through collaboration among industry stakeholders, it will be possible to develop high-quality policy-relevant research, and thereby actually influence the policy framework for tourism in the Caribbean.

---

### References

- Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) (1999), *Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy and Plan of Action for the Caribbean*, available at: [www.onecaribbean.org](http://www.onecaribbean.org)
- Husbands, W. and Harrison, L.C. (1996), "Practicing responsible tourism: understanding tourism today to prepare for tomorrow", in Harrison, L.C. and Husbands, W. (Eds), *Practicing Responsible Tourism: International Case Studies in Tourism Planning, Policy and Development*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY, pp. 58-79.
- Holder, J. (1996), "Maintaining competitiveness in a new world order: regional solutions to Caribbean tourism sustainability problems", in Harrison, L.C. and Husbands, W. (Eds), *Practicing Responsible Tourism: International Case Studies in Tourism Planning, Policy and Development*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY, pp. 145-71.
- Jayawardena, C. (2003), "Research in sustainable tourism development", *Hospitality*, March, p. 12.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), (1987), *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, available at: [www.un.org/ducdments](http://www.un.org/ducdments)
- World Tourism Organization (WTO) (1999), *Approval of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism: Resolution*, General Assembly, Thirteenth Session, Santiago, 27 September-1 October 1999, available at: [www.world-tourism.org](http://www.world-tourism.org)
- 
- ### Further reading
- Clayton, A. and Radcliffe, N. (1997), *Sustainability: A Systems Approach*, Earthscan, London.
- World Tourism Organization (WTO) (n.d.), *Sustainable Development of Tourism: Concepts and Definitions*, available at: [www.world-tourism.org](http://www.world-tourism.org)
- World Tourism Organization (WTO) (n.d.), *World Tourism in 2002: Better than Expected*, available at: [www.world-tourism.org](http://www.world-tourism.org)