

European Hearing on INSTRUMENTS favouring Sustainable Tourism and GREEN PURCHASING, April 19-20, 1999 Athens, Greece

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The topic of today is in fact a challenging one.

3 main items in my presentation

1) Why is tourism such a key activity for Sustainable Development from a European standpoint?

2) Where are the main EU initiatives to promote Sustainable Tourism?

3) What do we expect from the seminar?

1. WHY IS TOURISM SUCH A KEY ACTIVITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

On a global basis tourism is likely to become the largest economic activity. in the European Union, currently accounting for more than 5,5 % of the EU's GNP.

At the same time, a big part of all tourist activities taking part in Europe often occur in very sensitive areas, as also mentioned in the progress report on the 5.EAP in particular in the Mediterranean basin, the Baltic region, the Alps as well as other coastal areas.

If we are here in Athens, it seems to be appropriate mentioning the larger region bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

The Mediterranean basin is the world's leading tourist area accounting for 30 % of international arrivals. Tourism here is characterised by 3 basic features relevant also with some amendments to tourism in general:

- (1) Heavily and increasingly concentrated on the coast or on very limited areas
- (2) Heavily seasonal, high season of about 3 months, culminating in 4 weeks
- (3) Key activity for certain regions within some Member States

WHY IS ECO-TOURISM AN OPPORTUNITY ?

Since 1992 the significance of tourism has been well documented in particular in the 5th EAP, the equivalent strategy to Agenda 21 selecting tourism as one of its 5 target sectors (the other 4 being transport, industry, energy and agriculture).

With regard to tourism, certain objectives such as the promotion of new forms of tourism which care for environment, changes in favour of a broader consumer choice and a careful selection of accommodation as well as the building of environmental awareness were explicitly mentioned.

The progress report on the 5th EAP, completed in 1997, has shown that “evidence of some progress in integrating environment and tourism can be seen, but the objectives of the programme and the measures and instruments have not yet been implemented thoroughly or on time.”

It is essential to perceive the 5th EAP as the urgent need for collective action. Therefore it seems necessary to keep an eye on all activities on the supply side, as well as taking a closer look at the role of the consumer in deciding upon the aim, distance, duration, route and frequency of travel as well as activities undertaken in the region.

Given the right political signals, eco-tourism could gradually become a more integral part of the Commission's activities (all EU policies should now integrate environmental considerations as confirmed by the Cardiff and Vienna summits) as it is an economic and environmental opportunity for all stakeholders, but especially for small and medium enterprises in rural areas.

WHY IS TOURISM DIFFERENT?

Due to the broad range of activities involved in tourism and the nature of tourism leading to the misallocation of resources, it is an oversimplification to speak of tourism as a sector.

Attaining further developments in sustainable tourism has to be recognised as being a very complex process of enhancing individual and institutional approaches to stewardship.

By stewardship, I mean a sincere and due regard to the protection and appropriate economic use of the natural and human environment in host areas.

It is essential that, in parallel with the role of the stakeholders, consumers are given reliable and understandable information on the real impacts of pressures. The European Environment Agency/EEA is currently working on the establishment of indicators for sustainable tourism. By the end of this year, the final setting of the indicators will be achieved.

In fact, the European Commission is well aware of the crucial importance of tourism for southern countries, in economic terms and in particular to their (*i.e. the southern countries*) commitment to Sustainable Development and the process of A 21. More than 6 million people in the Mediterranean regions are employed directly or indirectly in the tourist and leisure industry or the cultural sector. It is expected that the tourist sector will employ 8 million people in 2010.

Bearing this in mind it seems impossible to imagine the long term development of tourism without at the same time preserving and enhancing the quality of the environment, as the relationship between tourism and environment is both far reaching and interdependent.

Sound forms of tourism have led to greater diversification within the tourism industry, both from the consumer's and "supplier's" point of view, creating decentralised employment opportunities, in particular in rural areas as well as the setting up of enhanced recreation facilities in bordering areas and the greening of urban tourism.

It is essential to recognise one of the many dimensions of Sustainable Tourism as being monitoring, assessing and managing the impacts of tourism, while at the same time developing reliable methods of environmental accountability and countering negative effects.

Sustainable Tourism requires a clear vision from us, the development of which will take up more time than is currently used.

This is not achievable without the second element previously mentioned of involvement of local and regional communities, and a steady commitment from decision-makers. Sustainable Tourism also means tourism of a higher quality and expectations from consumers will certainly increase in this respect in the near future.

HOW COULD VOLUNTARY APPROACHES HELP?

If we look at the current situation, it must first be said that networking with regard to tourism at European level has so far received little support from Member States and some other stakeholders.

For certain individuals and decision makers, the role of tourism is still mainly seen as an entirely local or regional one, whereas the impact of tourism, in our opinion, is by no means simply local and limited, for example transport in general, the loss or endangering of habitats of European value (NATURA 2000 sites), significant misallocations of resources within various regions, and impacts within Member States, or at cross border level.

Increased awareness of these impacts has given rise to some environmental measures which are mainly voluntary. Private partners like e.g. the I.H.E.I., the International Hotels Environmental Initiative, Green Globe and many others have taken the initiative, followed by governments such as in Austria, Catalonia, Sweden and Finland etc.

Other stakeholders e.g. hotel chains like Accor, Hilton, Novotel, Greotel SA and tour operators like TUI, NUR Touristic etc. have also launched their own specific approaches. These initiatives are excellent. But *private labels are private labels!* They can not be compared with official ones. It is important to underline that some stakeholders like Accor are already also partners of the EU Eco-label Scheme, a scheme that can indeed reinforce credibility and reliability of green commitment.

European Tourism is largely an SME-dominated sector with over 99% of firms employing less than 250 individuals, among them 94 % enterprises employing fewer than 10 individuals. 6,5 % of the total turnover of European SMEs is generated by tourism. Strategies to better address the needs of all the stakeholders mentioned are required for the success of ecolabelling and EMAS.

The reasons behind all these private and governmental initiatives may be very different, but in general it may be said that the perception of several stakeholders towards increased

responsibility, the development of promotion schemes and the specific experiences of tourism (e.g. in the northern Member States) as well as negative experiences, (e.g. problems with transport and noise in the Alps and problems in the Adriatic Sea) have brought about a gradual change in views.

A side remark: companies are sometimes afraid that Brussels may produce too many legislative texts. Therefore, they are invited to keep their eyes open for active participation in the voluntary initiatives we are developing at the EU level, such as EMAS, Eco-label and Environmental Agreements.

Despite this, there is still more to achieve.

2. WHAT ARE THE EU VOLUNTARY INITIATIVES WHICH MAY PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM? - ECOLABEL AND EMAS.

From the European standpoint, we are in the middle of 2 very processes of revision with regard to EMAS and the Ecolabelling scheme.

Furthermore, we are also in the first explorative phase of assessing the possibility of a European labelling scheme in tourism. We have not found all the answers yet, however we are willing to make serious efforts to look for them in conjunction with the Member States and all other stakeholders.

A FEW WORDS ON THE REVISION OF THE EU ECOLABEL SCHEME

The 1992 Eco-label Regulation, which is still in force, has as one of its objectives the promotion of “ *the design, production, marketing and use of products which have a reduced environmental impact during their entire life cycle*”. No reference is made to the promotion of services such as tourism.

However, in the framework of the revision of the Eco-label Regulation, currently under discussion, the European Parliament strongly supported the possibility of considering services as eligible for the award of the EU Eco-label.

This amendment has been warmly welcomed, and is being discussed inside the Environment Council, as some Member States do already have a national (Austria) or regional (Catalonia, in Spain) Eco-label for tourism or tourist activities or are in the process of doing so (northern MS).

A FEW WORDS ON THE REVISION OF THE EMAS SCHEME

The Community Eco-Management and Audit Scheme does also play an essential role in the context of sustainable development, and more particular in the follow-up of the 5. EAP. EMAS is currently only available to sites in the industrial/manufacturing sector.

However, it is important to point out that several experimental applications of EMAS have taken place outside industry, including an application in Spain related to tourism. On the Balearic islands, the environmental evaluation of some 30 facilities including hotels, golf courses, harbours and restaurants led to the identification of related problems and the development of a formal Evaluation Manual, as well as several other printed guides.

The Commission has also co-financed pilot projects in the tourism sector. The aim of these projects was to test both the interest of the sector and to identify those areas of the existing regulation, which need to be changed to accommodate tourism. Some of these projects could be perceived as having a somewhat “hybrid structure” between labelling and EMAS mechanisms.

All the pilot schemes have shown that there is a demand for EMAS outside the industrial sector.

For this reason, in its 1998 proposal, the Commission suggested opening participation in EMAS to all economic sectors. This idea, which was warmly welcomed, is currently under consideration by the legislative bodies of the European Community (EP and Council).

The extension of the scope of both schemes to services is a great challenge, as it will help to develop synergies between EMAS and the Eco-label.

EMAS and the EU Eco-label are therefore currently in the midst of a gradual process of even tighter integration on an organisational and technical level within DG XI.

It is interesting to point out that joint initiatives for promotion and marketing are already in place, in an effort to make the final consumer understand that both instruments are part of a wide and comprehensive European environmental strategy.

A FEW WORDS ON SOME NATIONAL AND REGIONAL EXPERIENCES ON LABELLING

There are a number of quite promising approaches in MS on labelling.

The Autonomous Government of **Catalonia** has created an official logo guaranteeing environmental quality. Very briefly, it is a system to identify those products and services that possess certain environmentally sound properties or characteristics.

Labelling criteria have been awarded to the environmental quality of camping sites in particular with regard to waste systems, water saving measures (e.g. on shower sprinklers, water flow reducing taps and water saving toilets), energy efficiency (with regards to lighting, hot water etc) as well as noise, scenic integration and environmental information.

In **Austria**, a national label on tourism accommodations came into being in the last few years and is already very successful with more than 50 participants in the scheme. Austrian criteria may be described as being similar in some ways to the Catalanian example in both the obligatory and voluntary categories.

In the **Nordic countries** a brand-new and specific scheme has also been started. It will be particularly interesting for us to follow these ideas more closely and learn from the practical experience of MS.

A last comment: the EU is a Single Market where national/regional labels do not necessarily meet the consumer expectations. Those who are going to Austria in winter may well go to Spain in summer and to Greece the following year. Too many logos may kill the credibility of all of them. This is why there is room for an EU approach.

3. WHAT DO WE EXPECT FROM THE SEMINAR?

We hope that this European Hearing here in Athens will contribute significantly to our efforts and ideas on how to proceed. Indeed, when formulating the questions for discussion on the agenda, the organisers have touched upon almost all the crucial issues in this context.

It is true that any voluntary approach in this field implies a thorough and sometimes tough communication process with all our stakeholders and Competent Bodies. However, it is my strong belief that provided we are able to identify strong commitment from our partners, time spent on this challenging process will be all the more rewarding.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention on DG XI's refreshed labelling initiative as regards tourism which started in March. I can assure you even at this early stage of the discussion process, that we will develop a more strategic and comprehensive form of proposals on our ideas on voluntary instruments. A future more consistent framework addressing ideas on other schemes in tourism is highly desirable.

Having said that, we will also need to examine a wide range of voluntary instruments and adapt them to tourism such as inter alia green purchasing initiatives, private environmental initiatives and voluntary agreements, etc.

The work ahead will only be practicable if combined with the expertise from Member States, and will progress in a step by step process of consultation (which was launched earlier this year).

There is currently a high level of interest among the Member States with regard to the issues we have been discussing. Therefore, any new combined initiatives might be warmly welcomed.

Discussions and dialogue conducted by the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) will also assess and endeavour to develop guidelines for sustainable tourism.

We would like to see the next phase of the EU Commission efforts as an explorative one that should end at the latest in September this year. A feed-back process of all our activities with the corresponding committees, in particular the Competent Bodies is guaranteed in the regular meetings.

It is our intention to organise a workshop on these issues very soon, most probably held in Brussels on July 6, 1999.

Allow me to conclude by advising that at this time we would be extremely glad to build upon our findings of today and tomorrow.