

Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism development aims at a balance between the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects. For tourism development to be sustainable, there must be optimal use of environmental resources and the sector must help conserve natural heritage and biodiversity, respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, and provide socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders. Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience for the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them. J. Swarbrooke has defined sustainable tourism as ‘mass tourism which is economically viable but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical, environmental, and the social fabric of the host community.’³

The concept of sustainability emerged from the Brundtland Report (Our Common Future, World Commission on Environment and Development) in 1987. It defined sustainability as ‘meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their need’. The subject was further discussed and debated at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. It spelt out the strategies and measures required to halt and reverse the effects of environmental degradation and usher in an era of sustainable and environmentally sound development. The World Travel and Tourism Council has laid down the framework for sustainable development to be established by the travel and tourism industry based on the Rio de Janeiro declaration on the environment and development (see Box A).

There have been several initiatives to lay down standards for good practices, such as WTO’s sustainability indicators or WTTC’s Green Globe Corporate Destination and certification criteria. The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) provides guidance for organizations to disclose their sustainability performance. It facilitates transparency and accountability by organizations and provides stakeholders a universally applicable, comparable framework from which to understand disclosed information. It attempts to set world standards on environmental reporting for public and private organizations. Based on the GRI, the Tour Operators Initiative – a network of tour operators committed to sustainable development – has elaborated guidelines for sustainability reporting through performance indicators for tour operators.⁴ WTO’s guidebook, entitled ‘Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations’ focuses on the use of indicators for improved planning and management in a manner that leads to better decision-making.

The philosophy of sustainability has been an essential component of the ancient Indian civilization where man and nature were viewed not as two separate entities but as part of the same organic entity, the same divine spirit. It was best summed up in one of the earliest Vedic hymns:

‘Whatever I dig of you, O Earth,
May you of that have quick replenishment
O purifying one, may your thrust never
Reach right into your vital points, your heart!’

In India, the basic elements of nature constituted the Cosmic Being – the mountains His Bones, the earth His Flesh, the sea His Blood, the air His Breath and the fire His Energy. The earth was viewed as our

Guiding Principles for Sustainable Tourism

The guiding principles for sustainable tourism based on the Rio de Janeiro Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992 are:

- Travel and tourism should assist people in leading healthy and productive lives in harmony with nature;
- Travel and tourism should contribute to the conservation, protection and restoration of the earth’s ecosystem;
- Travel and tourism should be based upon sustainable patterns of production and consumption;
- Travel and tourism, peace, development and environmental protection are independent;
- Protectionism in trade in travel and tourism services should be halted or reversed;
- Environmental protection should constitute an integral part of the tourism development process;
- Tourism development issues should be handled with the participation of concerned citizens, with planning decisions being adopted at the local level;
- Nations should warn one another of natural disasters that could affect tourists or tourist areas;
- Travel and tourism should use its capacity to create employment for women and indigenous people to fullest extent;
- Tourism development should recognize and support the identity, culture and interests of indigenous people;
- International laws protecting the environment should be respected by the travel and tourism industry.

For travel and tourism companies, the main aim is to establish systems and procedures to incorporate sustainable development issues as part of the core management function and to identify actions needed to bring sustainable tourism into being. The ten areas for action are:

- Waste minimization, reuse and recycling;
- Energy efficiency, conservation and management;
- Management of fresh water resources;
- Waste water management;
- Hazardous substances;
- Transport;
- Land-use planning and management;
- Involving staff, customers, communities in environmental issues;
- Design for sustainability;
- Partnerships for sustainable development.

mother and we were its children. This was best expressed in the following Sanskrit shloka:

‘Moola Bramharoopaya Madhyalo Vishnuroopaiae Agarato
Shivaroopay Vraksharayay te Namah.’

(‘From root to stem to crown/Thou art the incarnation of Brahma/
Vishnu and Shiva/ My Salutations to thee/ Oh noble tree.’)

India is richly endowed by nature in terms of diversity. Myriad climatic situations have given rise to countless habitats across the length and breadth of the country. These rich ecosystems not only harbour a rich biodiversity, including a stunning variety of plant and animal forms, but also form the cradle of our rivers and soil, which assure our food security. The geographical diversity of India is the wealth of the ecosystem. There are seven biosphere reserves (the Nilgiris, Nanda Devi, Nokrahs, Nicobar, Gulf of Mannar, Manas and Sunderbans), which are multipurpose protected areas for preserving the diversity and integrity of plants, animals and macro-organisms in representative ecosystems. India also boasts mangroves, coral reefs, deserts, mountains and forests, flora and fauna, sea, lakes and rivers and caves.

Traditionally, India has sought to protect its biodiversity through a network consisting of 572 protected areas, including 89 national parks and 482 wildlife sanctuaries spread over 4.68 percent of the geographical area. Various agencies, including the private sector, have participated in preserving India’s cultural and natural heritage.

At the same time, eco-tourism activities occur not only in and