

Natural Disasters and Tourism

comment from Harold Goodwin, Director of the International Centre for Responsible Tourism, University of Greenwich

The tsunami that struck the coasts of 12 countries in and around the Indian Ocean took the lives of some 200,000 people and left at least 800,000 homeless. This natural disaster moved people around the world to donate generously to humanitarian aid efforts; governments often lagging behind the giving of their citizens. This international outpouring of humanitarian aid and empathy is one of the positive aspects of globalisation. In Europe the language used to describe this humanitarian response is that of social solidarity, language with which the Anglo Saxon world is less comfortable.

This social solidarity results from a sense of common humanity, reinforced by the experience of travel. Many of us in the tourism originating countries have visited the areas devastated by the tsunami and have memories of people we met there. Many more of us knew people who had been there on holiday and we have vicariously shared in their enjoyment of the people and places now devastated by the tsunami. This developing world disaster was closer to us than usual – and for many there was anxiety and the loss of loved ones. Unlike so many developing world disasters this one hit those of us in the developed world too – in very personal ways. This disaster had global impact; it has fostered strong feelings of solidarity

As the Swiss NGO the Working Group on Tourism and Development has argued this solidarity needs to go beyond that expressed by individual tourists and employees in the industry and to inform the relationships between tour operators and hotel groups and the destination communities in which they do their business:

“There is a need for a kind of solidarity which goes beyond the dreams of a "holiday paradise" and the immediate business interests, and which is reflected in a long term interest in the fate of people living in a tourist destination. There is a need for a kind of solidarity that remains alive and continues even when the holidays are over and when disasters do not make headlines.”¹

In the UK Tourism Concern has argued in similar terms

“As long as they are not getting in the way of aid work, the presence [of tourists] and the money they spend is even more important now than before to local people. For us, if there are any lessons to be learned from this dreadful disaster, it is to demonstrate how dependent some local communities are on tourism. The hope is that as tourist facilities are gradually rebuilt, this awareness will inspire the tourism industry to ensure that more of the benefits go to local people to help them in the reconstruction they so desperately need”.²

Some operators and hotel groups have develop partnership approaches; there is plenty of scope for more to do so.

The coastal zone is increasingly hazardous for tourism and local communities

The tsunami demonstrated the impact that serious flooding and wave inundation can have in the coastal zone. Whilst major tsunamis are relatively rare, there have been three or four Pacific-wide tsunamis in each of the past five centuries, there were deaths in Hilo in 1946,

¹ www.akte.ch/pages/en/4_news/_aktion/Tsunamicpluss.pdf

² The Independent 01/01/2005 http://travel.independent.co.uk/news_and_advice/story.jsp?story=597146

Chile and Japan in 1960.³ Global warming does not increase the frequency of tsunamis but global warming may be increasing the intensity of hurricanes. Whilst scientific opinion remains divided some reputable laboratories expect that the anticipated enhancement of energy available to storms due to higher tropical sea surface temperatures will mean that hurricanes will become stronger and deliver significantly higher rainfall,⁴ increasing risk to life and livelihood.

In 2004 the hurricane season saw four hurricanes and four tropical storms in August, with four of them hitting the Caribbean or the US. Hurricane Jeanne in October killed 1,500 people and made homeless thousands in Puerto Rico, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Tourism is often concentrated in the coastal zone and the sea has potentially devastating effects on the industry and those employed in it, as well as other coastal communities. A number of major destinations including the Maldives and the Seychelles are threatened by rises in sea level caused by global warming. . Development in the coastal zones of developing countries looks increasingly vulnerable to natural forces – whether that development is for tourism or fisheries.

Developing countries need large volumes of air seats to bring consumers to their resorts, for many developing countries tourism is of major national economic importance. If petroleum industry exports are discounted, and they are only significant in 3 of the 49 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), tourism is the primary source of foreign exchange earnings in 46 of the 49 LDCs.⁵ The consensus of opinion now is that flights contribute to global warming and make the coastal zone significantly more vulnerable – but for the worlds Least Developed Countries and for many developing countries any reduction in visitor numbers leads to an immediate and significant reduction in livelihoods for local communities. The overwhelming majority of the Least Developed Countries and many developing countries are heavily dependent on air transportation for the viability of their tourism industries, industries upon which significant numbers of the world’s poor depend for their livelihood.

Tourism creates a sense of solidarity between “hosts” and “guests”

The immediacy and the drama of the events and the news coverage of them contributed to the scale of the humanitarian response by individuals. The mobilisation of people to donate, and to encourage others to do so, results from the heightened engagement of people in the tourism generating countries because they had friends or family on holiday, or working in the devastated areas; or as a result of their first hand knowledge of the places hit by the tsunami and the people who live there. This tragedy revealed the significance of tourism in creating feelings of affinity between tourists and their families and friends with individuals and communities in destinations. The experience of visiting other people’s places increases the feeling of solidarity and the strength of the impulse to contribute.

Tourism is an important part of the local economy in many developing countries.

The governments and tourism industry associations in the affected countries, as well as the individual businesses, worked quickly to encourage people to visit – pointing out that the tourism industry is essential to the livelihoods of large parts of the population in Indonesia

³ Tsunami The Great Waves (2002) International Tsunami Information Centre

⁴ Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory, Princeton

⁵ World Tourism Organisation (2002) **Tourism and Poverty Alleviation** WTO, Madrid <http://www.world-tourism.org/isroot/wto/pdf/1267-1.pdf>

(9.8% of GDP⁶), Sri Lanka (8.8%), India (4.9%), Thailand (13.2%), the Maldives (71%) and the other countries hit. In the Maldives almost 40% of the workforce is employed in the tourism industry. The tsunami demonstrated the importance of tourism to national governments and international agencies alike. In December the Maldives, like Botswana before it, graduated from being one of the Least Developed Countries, a move attributed to the success of its tourism industry.

Originating country tour operators and governments have sought to encourage people to visit wherever it is safe to do so and where there are facilities available. This crisis has raised awareness of the importance of tourism to the economies of developing countries; the economic consequences of people not travelling are serious and the tsunami has drawn attention to the extent to which many developing countries rely upon exports of tourism services for the livelihoods of their people.

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) has drawn up the Phuket Action Plan⁷ for Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Thailand and Indonesia. The objective is to speed up recovery of the tourism sector in the affected destinations, by restoring traveller confidence in the region so that visitor flows resume as quickly as possible and to help destinations resume normal operations and to assist small tourism-related businesses and employees to survive the recovery period. Community relief is one of the priority action areas of the WTO plan

Community Relief

“Small and medium-sized tourism businesses in the affected destinations, such as restaurants, handicraft producers and boat hire, have less access to recovery funds than large corporations, so assistance is urgently needed. In addition, many of these enterprises are family-based and may have lost family members in the tsunami. Technical and financial support is needed to help them resume business and increase competitiveness.”

The plan identifies grants and micro-credit as important to the regeneration of the local tourism economy and the need for training – further details of the action plans remain to be developed.

Tourism and Local Communities

From a tourism perspective most of the focus has been on encouraging people to continue to travel to areas in not devastated by the tsunami in the affected countries in order, so far as possible, to ensure the maintenance of tourism earnings. The mainstream tourism is likely to recover quickly because the formal industry carries various levels of insurance and will largely be able to raise funds for the reconstruction of hotels and resorts. Demand will rapidly be restored, but how quickly will the local colour and experiences provided by the informal sector be restored and the livelihoods regained. The individuals and micro businesses which provide local food and beverages, the cafes, restaurants and stalls, the local markets, craft centres and local guides are uninsured and they will find it much more difficult to raise, and repay, the funds essential to beginning to operate again and to earn their livelihood. .

⁶ Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership Working Paper No. 16 (2004) Tourism and the Poor: Analysing and Interpreting Tourism Statistics from a Poverty Perspective, by Dilys Roe, Caroline Ashley, Sheila Page and Dorothea Meyer

⁷ www.world-tourism.org/tsunami/Phuket/Draft%20Phuket%20Action%20Plan-A%20Rev.3.pdf
International Centre for Responsible Tourism Occasional Paper 1

In The Gambia survey evidence demonstrates that British tourists spend £25 per day in the destination contributing directly to the local economy, one third of that is spend in the informal sector, directly benefiting the craft sellers, fruit sellers, juice pressers and local guides. The average British tourist in 2001 was spending £8.27 per day in the informal sector in The Gambia⁸. The experience in the communities hit by the tsunami will vary but these informal sector micro-enterprises are a key part of the experience for many tourists and a significant source of livelihood for many households. As Megan Epler Wood has pointed out integrated coastal development which includes opportunities to mingle with local communities is more attractive to many tourists than isolated enclaves⁹.

Opportunities for Pro-Poor Tourism

The flavour of a destination is a function of the natural environment and the culture of the people who live, and have lived there. The living culture of the people, the opportunity to engage with local people who live and work in the destinations is an important part of the travel and holiday experience for many tourists.

The principles and practice of Pro-Poor Tourism have something to offer in the context of the reconstruction of resorts and communities in the affected areas to benefit local communities and in particular the poor. In the areas damaged by the tsunami all of the local community survivors are poor and they will need grants and support to redevelop their livelihood strategies. It is important that international and national assistance enables them to restore the local economy and to contribute to the industry whilst rebuilding their communities. This is a long term process.

Pro-Poor Tourism is **tourism that results in increased net benefits for poor people**. PPT is not a specific product or niche sector but an approach to tourism development and management. It enhances the linkages between tourism businesses and poor people; so that tourism's contribution to poverty reduction is increased and poor people are able to participate more effectively in product development.

Whilst local communities and the poor will benefit from the use that they will make of renewed infrastructure it is important to consider how in the restoration of hotels and resorts the local community benefits can be maximised through improved infrastructure in roads and paths, sewage and solid waste disposal, electricity and communications; and how the access of the local community to the tourism industry can be enhanced so as to secure enhanced livelihood opportunities – “to create better places for people to live in and for people to visit.”¹⁰

The strategies identified by the Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership apply in the tsunami hit areas for example:

Increase economic benefits

- Take the opportunity with new training programmes to maximise local employment;
- Regenerate and expand local enterprise opportunities – including those that provide services to tourism operations (food suppliers etc.) and those that sell to tourists (craft producers, handicrafts, guides etc.).

⁸ Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership Working Paper No. 15 (2003) Improving Access for the Informal Sector to Tourism in The Gambia, by Adama Bah and Harold Goodwin

⁹ Megan Epler Wood (2005) Sustainable Tourism in the Face of Tragedy
<http://www.eplerwood.com/reports.php>

¹⁰ Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations 2002 www.icrtourism.org/capetown.html
International Centre for Responsible Tourism Occasional Paper 1

Enhance non-financial livelihood impacts

- Increase local access to infrastructure and services provided for tourists – roads, flood and storm defences, communications, healthcare, transport, water, electricity.
- Where appropriate develop collective income sources – fees, revenue shares, equity dividends, donations, etc.
- Undertake capacity building and training for employment and career progression and for informal sector self-employment and micro-enterprises, .

Enhance participation and partnership

- Increase the participation of the poor in decision-making by government and the private sector about reconstruction
- Mitigate the environmental impacts and provide environmental protection
- Address the degradation of natural resources.
- Take the opportunity to improve social and cultural impacts of tourism.
- Create a more supportive policy/planning framework that enables participation by the poor.

These strategies will be relevant in different situations and should be applied in ways appropriate to particular destinations and the communities to which they belong. There has been a great deal of general advice, the urgent need is for the regeneration of local economies, including where appropriate tourism to assist in sustaining the livelihoods of people in the destinations.

The Role of Tour Operators

The major tours operators have reassured holidaymakers about the importance of travelling to tsunami affected countries and encouraged them to donate to the Disasters Emergency Committee.¹¹ The Travel Foundation has suggested that companies interested in fundraising don't necessarily need to donate themselves, but ask customers for a voluntary donation averaging around £1 per booking as the booking is confirmed; the Association of Independent Tour Operators is managing the initial Sri Lanka programme with funding from the Travel Foundation.¹²

Exodus:¹³ “are mindful of the appalling affect on our partners in those countries, some of whom lost family members, and all of whom will suffer hardship from the loss of tourism in the immediate future. No sums of money can ever compensate or repair what has been lost, but we can all do something to help a little. It is our wish to make a definite and tangible contribution in a way that directly targets those in need that are closest to us. We are therefore making a direct contribution of £10,000 to our partners in Sri Lanka, without strings, to aid in the rebuilding of the communities of the staff members affected by direct loss, and to mitigate loss of immediate earnings because of the cancellation of groups. In addition, we will make a £20 contribution for every booking we receive for holidays in Sri Lanka, Southern India or Thailand in the first six months of 2005.”

“Human nature naturally means a reluctance for people to travel to areas that have been the scene of natural or manmade disasters whereas, in practice, a return to normality, including the economic benefits of tourism, is usually what is most required. Many of our partners have urged us, after they have had a decent interval to come to terms with their losses, to

¹¹ See for example www.thomson-holidays.com/po/showContent.do?content=special_bulletin.html

¹² www.thetravelfoundation.org.uk/documents/SriLankaprogrammeannouncement.pdf

¹³ www.exodus.co.uk/downloads/asia-letter.pdf

continue to send our clients in the near future. Nature will heal itself and those countries and areas will regain their beauty; the people are resilient and very brave but need our help. We are sure that many of you have already responded, but the best gift you can give them is by planning your next holiday to be in the region, however and with whomever you travel.”¹⁴ Exodus are encouraging people to donate through Friends of Conservation

Explore Worldwide immediate concern was for the safety of its travellers and “the local communities, particularly where, for many years, we have had friends and contacts. The lessons we have learned from previous disasters – Gujarat 2001, for instance – gave us no hesitation in, once again, (a) pledging funds that we would channel exactly where they’re needed and (b) reassuring our agents and customers that we would not suspend or re-route any programme unnecessarily.”¹⁵

Saga Holidays: the Saga Charitable Trust, funded by donations from parent group Saga, its staff and customers, has established the Indian Ocean Reconstruction Appeal to aid re-building projects such as schools and hospitals in the tsunami-hit areas. Following the tsunami, the Trust has decided to work to support the massive reconstruction effort in the areas that Saga customers visit. The projects it supports are expected to be of a long-term nature, including the redevelopment of schools and health facilities.

As the immediate relief phase of the international effort draws towards a close and with the Disasters Emergency Committee in the UK closing its appeal having raised £300m¹⁶, it is important to refocus on the issues of sustainable livelihoods for communities in the coastal zones of the Indian Ocean.

In redeveloping the coastal zone governments, hoteliers and planners need to address the issue of what constitutes the best sustainable livelihood strategy, community by community. Tourism and fishing will be a significant part of the answer but the sustainable balance will be different in different places and the role of mangrove and coral reef in defending shore lines should be respected. Too often in the past priority has been given to the development of large scale resorts and fish farming in ways which have degraded the environment and increased the vulnerability of coastal communities.

Tourism will surely continue to be a significant source of livelihood for very large numbers of people in the affected communities. The tourism industry, tour operators and hoteliers in particular need to build on the work which has been begun by a few leading UK operators and to work with their colleagues in the destinations to develop a vibrant informal sector offer – it is the crafters, artists, performers, guides, fruit vendors and the vibrant local community which creates a lot of the holiday experience and which provides livelihoods for very large numbers of households in the coastal communities in addition to the jobs in the hotels and restaurants.

Tour operators and hoteliers, by working in partnership with local communities, can make a big difference, encouraging and supporting the re-establishment of the informal sector tourism products and assisting them to regain and grow their markets.

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¹⁴ www.exodus.co.uk/downloads/asia-letter.pdf

¹⁵ http://www.explore.co.uk/images/Tsunami_Plan_Ahead_WithLogo.pdf

¹⁶ 25th February 2005 www.dec.org.uk/html/asset_1419.shtml