**Embarking on a new era of tourism**




The Caribbean is physically blessed with a plenitude of natural resources ranging from beautifully nestled tropical rainforests to brilliant sun cast, white sandy coastlines surrounded by serene waters. It is no surprise that this region has been one of the world's leading tourism destinations. Tourism is without question, the foremost export sector in the Caribbean and possesses the inherent ability to diversify the Caribbean economy, stimulate entrepreneurship, catalyse investment, create large numbers of sustainable jobs and help social development in local communities.

Throughout the English-speaking Caribbean, the tourism industry provides the main source of revenue for these Small-island Developing States (SIDS). For this reason it is considered as 'the engine of economic growth' in the region. Currently, tourism accounts for 14.8% of the gross domestic product and 15.5% of employment (World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2012). Given the statistical data, it is evident that tourism plays a vital role in sustaining the development of Caribbean islands. Tourism not only generates income for the countries and their peoples, but it also leads to the development of other sectors within these economies because of its multi-sector nature in terms of the numerous forward and backward linkages with other income generating sectors of these countries' economies.

The development and sustenance of the Caribbean tourism product is a combined effort of not only the most obvious tourism components like tour operators, travel agencies and lodging, but also involving other sectors such as agriculture, financial services, transportation, food, culture and other technical services and material products (machinery, equipment, instruments) required to support travel activities and tourism attractions. It means that tourism generally generates revenue in the form of foreign exchange earnings, increased income, employment and development of infrastructures.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned importance that the tourism industry serves to the region, Caribbean leaders are directing their countries towards developing sustainable tourism initiatives and practices in order to safeguard the future survival of their economies and natural treasures.

In an effort to preserve the region's prime income generating sector, the Association of Caribbean States' (ACS) Directorate of Sustainable Tourism has developed several projects that can yield immense proportions of benefits for the region and guarantee its longevity as one of the world's leading tourism players. One of the most notable proposed initiatives is the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Greater Caribbean (STZC). The STZC seeks to deal with three further challenges affecting tourism in the Greater Caribbean Region, which are: the premature ageing of tourist

destinations, changes in consumer preference for the tourism product, and the major factors negatively affecting the atmosphere on land and in the sea due to inevitable and catalysed climatic changes.

The STZC is a viable response to these challenges, and therefore aims to:

Maintain the competitiveness and sustainability of destinations by the generation of foreign exchange-jobs-products by tourism, which is the driving force for our economies.

Guarantee community participation in tourism planning and the benefits of this activity. Tourism transforms societies and spaces, and citizens must accept this and help to define and control tourist areas through mechanisms introduced by the state and those generated by civil society itself.

Conserve the environment and culture, which are the fundamental patrimony of the Caribbean countries and which plays an important role in the development of tourism.

The ACS is advocating through the Member Countries of the region, to achieve the ratification of this instrument under the terms of sustainable tourism, as this would be establishing the first Sustainable Tourism declared Zone in the world, allowing the Greater Caribbean region to develop marketing strategies, that would give the region a competitive advantage in order to more effectively compete with other destinations and regions.

The establishment of the Sustainable Tourism Zone can become a powerful tool for the mobilisation of funds for the development of new sustainable tourism projects in the region, and for the strengthening of human resource capacity, in order to achieve the conservation of natural and cultural resources for future generations through the implementation of tourism sustainability indicators.

On another note, the ACS is supportive of the diversification of the traditional tourism product offered by the Caribbean. Tourism product diversification for the region can be accomplished by the establishment of niche markets which complement the sustainable development of the industry.

The ‘experimental’ or niche tourism market incorporates equal parts of natural and cultural resources and community involvement, and is the fastest growing tourism market segment. Niche markets such as eco-tourism, adventure tourism and cultural-heritage tourism, offer an opportunity for market diversification and have created opportunities for countries in the Greater Caribbean outside of the former sun, sea and sand Tourism model. With careful planning and source market diversification such as tapping into new markets throughout Latin America, the aforementioned can yield high profits for the region. The added benefits being that properly developed and managed niche tourism segments can enhance countries tourism product offerings, while also increasing their competitiveness as locations to live, visit, work and invest in. The efforts of the ACS in this regard are to increase dialogue and co-operation to enhance the opportunity for countries to benefit from these new and emerging market segments.

It is important at this juncture that the region adopts a collective approach and that Tourism actors align their activities to a common goal and understanding of the concept and practice of sustainable tourism. For that reason, the leadership and active engagement of the public and private sector to include, Regional Tourism Authorities, Tourism businesses, the Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) community and Regional and International stakeholders related to the development and promotion of Tourism are needed to propel and enhance the sustainability of the sector.

The implementation of sustainable tourism practices will no doubt lead to this region being declared as the first official Sustainable Tourism Zone in the world; thus positioning the Greater Caribbean as a premium destination in the new era of tourism. Countries can then rest assured that their tourism industries and products will long extend into the future for generations to come.

Country

GDP

Employment

Total

Direct

Direct

Total

Antigua & Barbuda

77.4% (USD$884mn)

18.5% (USD$211mn)

18.8%

(5,000 jobs)

71.5%

(20,000 jobs)

Bahamas

48.4%

(USD$3,975mn)

22% (USD$1,809mn)

30.6% (52,000 jobs)

57.4% (97,000 jobs)

Barbados

39.4% (USD$1,836mn)

11.9% (USD$553mn)

12.1% (15,000 jobs)

38.8% (49,000 jobs)

Belize

34.2% (USD$523mn)

12.5% (USD$200mn)

11.3% (15,500 jobs)

31%

(42,500 jobs)

Dominica

30%

(USD$150mn)

9.5%

(USD$54mn)

8.8%

(3,000 jobs)

27.7%

(9,500 jobs)

Grenada

21.8% (USD$184mn)

6.4%

(USD$54mn)

5.9%

(2,500 jobs)

20.2%

(9,500 jobs)

Guyana

10.1% (USD$2,680mn)

4.1% (USD$1,080mn)

3.6%

(10,500 jobs)

9%

(25,500 jobs)

Haiti

5.7% (USD$427mn)

1.9% (USD$140mn)

1.6%

(56,500 jobs)

4.9%

(177,000 jobs)

Jamaica

27.4% (USD$3.6bn)

8.4%

(USD$1.1bn)

7.8%

(89,500 jobs)

25.4%

(292,000 jobs)

St.Kitts and Nevis

25.9% (USD$186mn)

7.5%

(USD$54mn)

7.3%

(2,000 jobs)

24.6%

(6,000 jobs)

St.Lucia

39%

(USD$496mn)

13.3%

(USD$169mn)

18.6%

(13,500 jobs)

42.3%

(31,000 jobs)

St. Vincent & the Grenadines

21.8% (USD$157mn)

6%

(USD$43mn)

5.5%

(2,500 jobs)

19.9%

(8,500 jobs)

Suriname

3.1% (USD$127mn)

1.2%

(USD$49mn)

1.1%

(2,000 jobs)

2.8%

(5,000 jobs)

Trinidad and Tobago

8.4%

(USD$2,004mn)

4.4%

(USD$1,060mn)

6.2%

(38,000 jobs)

11.2%

(68,000 jobs)