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The Business of Responsible Tourism

Doing well is the result of doing good. That's what capitalism is all about.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Tourism is about travel, the experiences that travel offers of other people and their places, but fundamentally it is business. It is primarily through business, not only but primarily, that communities benefit from tourism. Some travellers will protest that they are not tourists, that they don't use travel agents and tour operators – but they do use the same tourism services as holidaymakers: aircraft, buses, trains and taxis, and generally they pay for accommodation whether camping, staying in a B&B or booking through Airbnb – they recognise their heritage in the company name.

Facing up to responsibility

Two young women, friends, meet on the concourse at a London station, late in a long, wet British summer, the story quickly told: anticipation of a great holiday, poor hotel, the food, the beach – none of it as she had hoped, and the tears, at Victoria, in the rush hour. The young woman had saved all year for a holiday that had not come close to her expectations, and told her friend it would take her another year to save enough to have the holiday that she deserved. I know because I watched, embarrassed, as she blurted out her story amidst the commuters. For many British people their summer holiday is their most expensive annual purchase, something they save for all year; precious holiday entitlement and money put aside for the annual indulgence, respite from dreary exhausting work, recreation. They need to be able to trust the company to deliver what they purchase.

Tourists aspire for more than they used to, a richer experience and one about which they need not feel guilty. No longer are people automatically satisfied with a clean room, cheap booze and access to a crowded beach – although some do still want only that. Increasing numbers of holidaymakers are defining a real holiday as an authentic experience of somewhere exotic.

They want and expect the operator, the person who puts together and sells them the package, to ensure that it meets their expectations and that they get the most out of their annual indulgence.

More is expected of tourism businesses. This expectation results from broad changes in consumerism. In this chapter, we look first at how tourism businesses have responded to changing expectations among consumers, then we turn to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and how that relates to Responsible Tourism. We then review the business cases (note the plural) for taking responsibility and the chapter concludes with some reflections on opportunities and pitfalls.

Many will contest the quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson at the head of this chapter. It is used to justify the operation of the hidden hand of the market. The objective of ‘doing well by doing good’ is not restricted to individuals or groups working for profit-making companies. Social entrepreneurs often use the same phrase, as do business people more generally, when they are explaining their enlightened self-interest, taking a longer-term perspective and having objectives that include more than short-term commercial gain through maximising profit or shareholder value. There are many examples of the damage that can result from irresponsible business practices, where people have done well by doing bad, and tourism is clearly not a pollution-free industry.

Around the world businesses are taking responsibility for making tourism better, for reducing negative impacts, increasing positive impacts and providing higher quality, more meaningful, experiences for consumers. As Krippendorf concluded, the “great turning point will come when informed tourists take to the road and simply demand a re-orientation of commercial policies”.¹ Responsible travel is no long a niche, as it was in 2001, when Justin Francis and I launched ResponsibleTravel.com.² The company now has 375 tour operator partners, over 1,200 accommodations³; in 2016 it received its 1,000,000th holiday enquiry⁴ and 90% of its 100,000 customers have rated their holiday 4 or 5 out of 5.⁵

The World Responsible Tourism Awards each year attract hundreds of nominations from businesses which have taken responsibility for creating better tourism, improving working conditions, making tourism more inclu-

1 Krippendorf (1987): 148

2 I subsequently sold my shares. In 2001, at launch, there were just 15 holidays on the site.

3 <http://www.responsibletravel.com/copy/marketing-your-tourism-business-through-responsible-travel> accessed 04 August 2016

4 <http://www.responsibletravel.com/copy/our-timeline> accessed 04 August 2016

5 <http://www.responsibletravel.com/copy/about-us> accessed 04 August 2016

sive, reducing negative environmental impacts, contributing to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage. There have been over 15,000 nominations and Awards have been made to just over 400 winners – the competition gets tougher every year.⁶ The World Awards are presented each year at World Travel Market in London on World Responsible Tourism Day. The family of Awards is growing, with sister awards in Africa, India and Ireland.⁷ Amongst the winners of the Awards have been destinations, large hotel groups, TUI, Eurostar, resorts, specialist operators, lodges, hotels and airlines.

Fritz Jousen, CEO of TUI Group, explicitly endorses the principle that with the ability to respond comes the responsibility to act.

TUI is the world's leading tourism business – and leaders have to take responsibility. Our society increasingly expects respected brands and companies like TUI to demonstrate leadership for a sustainable future.... We believe a clear focus on sustainability differentiates us from the competition and generates value.

Our business case is clear. Sustainability delivers a range of benefits: cost efficiencies, quality improvements and the enhanced engagement of our stakeholders, including customers, colleagues, suppliers and destination governments. It future-proofs our business and the global industry.⁸

TUI is not alone amongst large tourism businesses in taking responsibility for an increasing range of the impacts of tourism; we return to these in Part II, where we look in turn at the social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism. The commitment to responsibility, rather than to ethical practice, may be seen by some as a weaker proposition. However, the advantage of the concept of responsibility is that it suggests that businesses need to respond to particular issues, to act, rather than standing, or sitting, on their principles and their ethics. Responsibility implies and requires action. The Association of Independent Tour Operators was the first trade association to commit to Responsible Tourism, and to publicly recognise that sometimes harmful effects outweigh the good.⁹ Critical to creating change are acknowledging and owning up to problems, and taking responsibility for making changes.

6 Past winners can be found online <http://www.responsibletravel.com/awards/winners/> accessed 04 August 2016

7 Weblinks for the Awards <http://haroldgoodwin.info/links/>

8 www.tuigroup.com/en-en/sustainability/statement accessed 04 August 2016

9 Goodwin H. (2016) *The Emergence of Responsible Tourism in the UK Responsible Tourism Partnership* available as a free download <http://haroldgoodwin.info/rt/> This contains the material on the campaign for Responsible Tourism in the UK, which was in the first edition but which has been omitted from the second.