



Tourism Industry Association of New Zealand (TIANZ) Annual Conference, August 2007

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Last month (August 2007), the Tourism Industry Association of New Zealand (TIANZ) held its annual conference in Auckland. The focus of the conference was on environmental sustainability in the tourism industry in New Zealand. At the conference last year (2006), delegates (who include operators and other industry participants, government departments, training organizations etc) had declared environmental sustainability as the number one issue for the tourism industry, and the conference this year built on that. In particular, the conference concentrated on delivering on New Zealand's "100% Pure" positioning in order to retain credibility, and on the adoption and encouragement of adoption of sustainable business practices that protect the environment. In addition, discussions around the involvement of local communities and tourism were of interest from an ecotourism point of view.

This country developed a tourism strategy in 2000-2001 called the "New Zealand Tourism Strategy 2010" (NZTS2010). The strategy was a collaborative effort between the private sector and government. Many of the recommendations of the strategy have been implemented, but it was recognized that there had been major global changes since the strategy was first released. Consequently, an updated strategy (NZTS2015) was released in draft form earlier this year for public input, and it was this input that further focused the 2007 TIANZ conference. The final strategy document will be launched later this year.

TIANZ also made the 2007 conference carbon neutral – a good start, even though there were areas for improvement. Such efforts have been a long time in coming, given that it was over 100 years ago that Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius first noted that burning fossil fuels may result in global warming, and given the increasing alarm about this subject, pollution, and other environmental issues in the century since (did you know that Rachel Carson's seminal work, "Silent Spring" is 45 years old?).

As Fiona Luhrs, CEO of TIANZ pointed out in her opening address, our environment and scenery are the primary attractions for international visitors. These visitors are increasingly aware of climate change, carbon emissions, and other environmental issues and of the fact that New Zealand is a long-haul destination. This is particularly true of potential visitors from Germany and the UK. Luhrs urged the industry to ensure international visitors keep coming because “we offer outstanding, world class, ‘responsible travel’ choices.” She pointed out that many tourism operators were already doing a lot to reduce their impact on the environment, but that they do not operate in isolation. Visitors also meet ordinary Kiwis and see ordinary Kiwi lifestyles. She urged local governments and other agencies to provide the infrastructure needed to meet the “100% Pure” challenge. This infrastructure is sadly missing in many areas.

However, the New Zealand government did not look particularly committed when Prime Minister Helen Clark, during her address opening the conference, announced the provision of funds for the placement of a few recycling bins and the operating costs for maintaining these. Clark underwhelmed when she spoke of three test sites – hardly a momentous leap forward. This is in spite of the fact that the government recognizes the urgency of environmental challenges in a world that “cares about sustainability”.

The government was somewhat redeemed by the presence at the conference of representatives from a variety of agencies savvy about sustainability issues, including the Ministry for the Environment, the Department of Conservation, and the Ministry of Transport Environmental Sustainability section. Other agencies represented included Landcare Research, the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority, Green Globe, and Qualmark. Also on site was a Ministry of Tourism stand where operators and others could pick up newly constructed sector-specific Best Practice Sustainability guides. The guides contain ideas and recommendations on ways to make businesses more sustainable, and can also be found on the tourism website (www.tourism.govt.nz/).

The conference also saw the launching of the new Tourism New Zealand advertising campaign. The campaign builds on the very successful “100% Pure New Zealand” promotion by a very clever presentation of this country as the “Youngest Country on Earth” – the last landmass to be inhabited by people. Dramatic opening animation sequences produced by Weta Digital (of “Lord of the Rings” fame) present an interpretation of the legend of Maui (although Maui is not mentioned) by showing New Zealand rising in splendour out of the ocean (http://www.tourismnewzealand.com/tourism_info/about-us/100-pure-campaign/100-pure-campaign_home.cfm#). There follows a series of vignettes of visitors and locals engaged in a number of activities while the theme song “Forever Young” plays. The commercials, created for viewing on screens of all technologies, are aimed at the interactive traveller. By focusing on the “young and untouched” nature of the New Zealand countryside, the new promotion bolsters the “100% Pure New Zealand” representation. While the campaign is to

be applauded, New Zealand should heed the messages of the conference – we must not only actually deliver on that “100% Pure” promise, but we must be seen to do so.

A further problem with the new campaign is, in my view, the focus on the young. Not one face in the commercial appeared over the age of forty-five. As almost half of our international visitors are 45 or older and one quarter are fifty-five or older (Ministry of Economic Development, tourism research dataset), why has promotion to this group of potential visitors been left out? The baby boomers will all have turned fifty by next year, and this group is the largest worldwide and has the most discretionary spending power. The theme song, “Forever Young” would appeal to boomers and ties in nicely with their interest in health and vitality, and with the major theme behind the campaign – that New Zealand is the youngest country on earth. Boomers are also looking for in-depth experiences, something that ecotourism delivers. We ignore this group to our peril.

Highlights of the conference included the presentations made by five tourism operators on how they have incorporated sustainability practices into the everyday running of their businesses. One was Awaroa Lodge in the Abel Tasman National Park. While the lodge produces much of their food needs on site (from their organic garden), a lot of other supplies must be brought in and the waste taken out. To deal with glass, they have purchased an old lime crushing machine to convert wine bottles and the like back to a sand-like material which they then use in maintaining pathways and for other uses. Awaroa Lodge, and the other tourism operators who spoke (White Island Tours, Dive Tutukaka, InterCity Group, and Potiki Adventures) emphasized the importance of involving their staff and the local communities, being environmentally aware, and reducing their carbon footprint.

Keynote speaker, Professor Larry Dwyer (University of New South Wales, Australia) reminded delegates in a presentation called “Megatrends and the implications for tourism 2020” that tourism will be affected by ecological and other factors. On the one hand the natural environment and climate will have an impact on tourism destination choices in a positive way. In addition, tourists will clamour for richer, deeper, and more authentic experiences (something that ecotourism can deliver). On the other hand, tourism, to its detriment, will increasingly be perceived as contributing to the global carbon footprint. This is a particularly important issue for a long-haul destination like New Zealand. Diminishing supplies of non-renewable energy will drive up the cost of transport and thus affect tourism flows. Climate change will affect industry profitability because of the need to adapt to it, the need to comply with changing government policies, and the need for individual operators to not only reduce their carbon footprint but to be seen to be doing so.

Another trend identified by Dwyer is the encouragement of tourism development that benefits communities, small businesses, and local jobs, all ecotourism

tenets. He urged operators to provide quality interpretations of environments and cultural or ethnic attractions. However, he also suggested that future tourism development can not rely too heavily on environmentally and culturally sensitive environments. Because of this, there will be an increased development of artificial environments and other product development will be increasingly targeted and theme-based.

The first day of the two-day conference included an examination of consumer opinions and behaviour around climate change and the value of wider sustainability strategies, implementation and best practices in sustainability in tourism businesses, government help in this arena, and environmental assessment systems (Green Globe and Qualmark). The second day of the conference focused on seasonality issues and domestic tourism, on building partnerships at the local government level, and on the relationship between local communities and tourism and how to build that relationship.

The closing keynote address was given by Sam Morgan, CEO of the highly successful "Trade Me" website. Absolutely engaging, smart, and thoughtful, Morgan at one stage stated the "Trade Me" mission statement is "Don't be a Dick" (i.e., don't be a jerk). A philosophy we could all live by.