



René van der Duim,
extraordinary professor of Tourism
and Sustainable Development at
Wageningen University



Joke Luttkik,
leader of the Human Factor
research group at Alterra,
part of Wageningen UR

Travelling towards a better world

Sustainable tourism is no longer the preserve of low-budget backpackers in the furthest reaches of the rainforest. But before the natural environment and local populations really share the benefits, there is work to be done. Wageningen expertise has a lot to offer. TEXT RENÉ DIDDE ILLUSTRATIONS YVONNE KROESE

In Bwindi National Park in Uganda, groups of tourists venture into the misty forests to see gorillas. Local people work as guides on these excursions – which are not without risk. The tourists, for whom this is usually part of a tour of this poverty-plagued country, stay in hotels or expensive lodges near the park. This is a setup that René van der Duim thoroughly applauds. ‘This generates income that shows Uganda that it is worthwhile to conserve the nature reserves for the gorillas’, says Van der Duim, extraordinary professor of Tourism and Sustainable Development at Wageningen University. ‘And the income benefits the

local population, so tourism contributes to combating poverty too.’

Van der Duim is supervising a PhD student from Uganda who is researching how the local population can benefit most effectively from this new kind of tourism. A total of twelve young African researchers are working on similar projects, three of them in Wageningen. Besides Uganda there are projects in other countries including Kenya and Namibia. On this project Wageningen University is working together with three European and six African universities. Sustainable tourism has gone beyond the stage of >

‘alternative’ tours run by small tour operators for environmentally aware Westerners who enjoy roughing it for three weeks in basic little huts. ‘Almost all the main tour operators and travel agents are increasingly aware that tourism has a big impact’, notes Van der Duim, whose extraordinary chair is funded by the Worldwide Fund for Nature, Dutch development organization Cordaid, the Dutch branch of the International Union for Conservation and Nature (IUCN) and the Dutch airline KLM.

Tourism certainly has quite an impact. A few examples: long-haul tourist flights contribute to 3 percent of CO₂ emissions; intensive diving around Australia’s Great Barrier Reef is damaging coral, to say nothing of the ecological and social impact of changed land use resulting from tourism. You don’t have to go to developing countries to see that: ski slopes in the Alps have caused erosion.

On the other hand, tourism is the biggest source of employment worldwide, claims Van de Duim. ‘To give you a bit of an impression: one job in twelve is related to tourism, and more than 240 million people make their living from it. In 46 out of the 50 least developed countries, tourism is the main source of income. And 40 percent of tourists come from rich countries to developing countries’. More importantly, even in the face of the global recession tourism remains a growth sector. And it is precisely for this reason that there is growing interest in making the sector sustainable. ‘Sustainability can no longer be optional; it must be a requirement’, Van der Duim asserts. ‘Attention must be paid to climate change, water scarcity, vulnerable nature areas, and also to the human side of things, such as labour conditions, child labour, sex tourism (including child abuse). For

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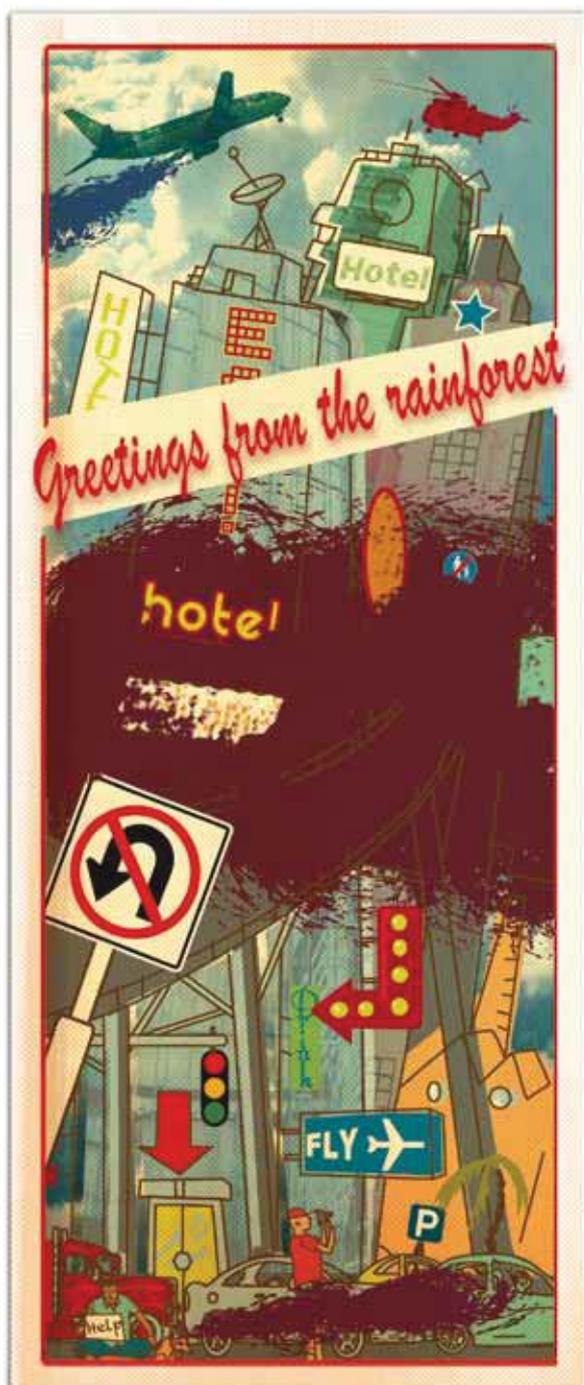
all these reasons the sector must concern itself with people and planet, if it wants to go on making profits in the future’, he says, referring to the three Ps of the UN sustainable development slogan.

TOUR OPERATORS ARE KEY

This kind of thinking is catching on in the Dutch tourism sector, where the Dutch Association of Travel Agents and Tour Operators ANVR is shot through with it. Mirjam Dresmé, head of communication and sustainable tourism at the ANVR explains: ‘We have a policy of sustainable tourist enterprise. We have launched a website together with our European partners (www.travelife.eu), and one of the things we offer is a training programme for tour operators’. All two hundred member tour operators have appointed sustainability coordinators who have already followed the training. ‘The aim in the sector is to pay more attention when buying tours to the sustainability side of the transport, the accommodation and the entertainment’, Dresmé says. ‘Tour operators are key there: after all, they buy the tours.’ The training consists of information and best practices and ends with a compulsory exam. ‘The sustainability coordinators submit a business report to the ANVR, and after it has been approved they receive an ANVR-DTO certificate for sustainable tourism entrepreneurship.’ Later this year the 1,500 travel agencies belonging to the ANVR will follow a similar training course.

NO RHINO OR CORAL

Certified tour operators must steer clear of child labour and child sex tourism, must not offer hunting, and must reject unethical souvenirs such as parts of rhinos, elephant tusks or coral. Besides these compulsory points, there is a list of 150 points for action on which tour operators are invited to work on an optional basis, explains Dresmé. ‘Examples of these are offering CO₂ compensation for flights, and stimulating local production and local transport.’ The ANVR and the tour operators are also working on encouraging accommodation providers worldwide to make their business more sustainable in terms of water use, labour conditions, waste disposal and purchasing policies. Pilot projects are running in Brazil, Thailand, Kenya, Tanzania, Turkey and Egypt.



Combating poverty and conserving nature in developing countries is very important of course, but Dresmé points out that in fact the vast majority of European tourists go for beach holidays in the Mediterranean. 'Small steps forward there in saving water or making transport and accommodation more sustainable make more difference than improving the handful of safaris in Kenya or Uganda', says Dresmé, who stresses the need to work on both fronts at the same time.

GIVE ME A BREAK

There is work to be done on the mentality of the modern tourist, the Dutch included, notes Dresmé. 'The Dutch have to recycle their glass and their plastic all year, so they often have the attitude, 'I'm on holiday now; give me a break from all that environmental awareness.'

Besides, particularly in these times of economic crisis, what matters most to the Dutch is the price of a holiday. 'There is a lot of awareness-raising needed to make tourists aware of the environmental impact of their trip. We are going to provide more information on that in the near future', says Dresmé. 'Our aim is for awareness of sustainability to play a bigger and bigger role in the choice of tours offered by tour operators and for the ANVR logo to be the mark of more sustainable tourism. That certainly doesn't have to make travelling more expensive; in fact, it can even lead to savings. Sustainable coffee is no more expensive than ordinary coffee either.'

A very good ambition, says Willem Ferwerda, who appreciates the ANVR's mission. 'It is high time the sector stopped being so laissez-faire about this', asserts the director of the Dutch branch of the IUCN, an international umbrella organization for nature and environmental organizations, governments and scientists. One of the goals of the Dutch branch is to reduce the global ecological footprint of Dutch business. Ferwerda knows the travel world well. Before becoming director of IUCN, he worked in tourism for more than ten years.

A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY

According to the IUCN, a tax of a mere 50 eurocents per booking would be enough to create a substan- ➤

tial 'nature fund' to set up pilot projects on nature conservation, sustainability and poverty alleviation. 'There are currently ten million bookings a year in the Netherlands, so you could have a fund of over five million euros. At the IUCN, we know enough projects in which local partners can get inspiring results with relatively small levels of funding. One hundred thousand often goes a long way. Which means the tourism sector could start fifty of these sorts of project per year', says Ferwerda.

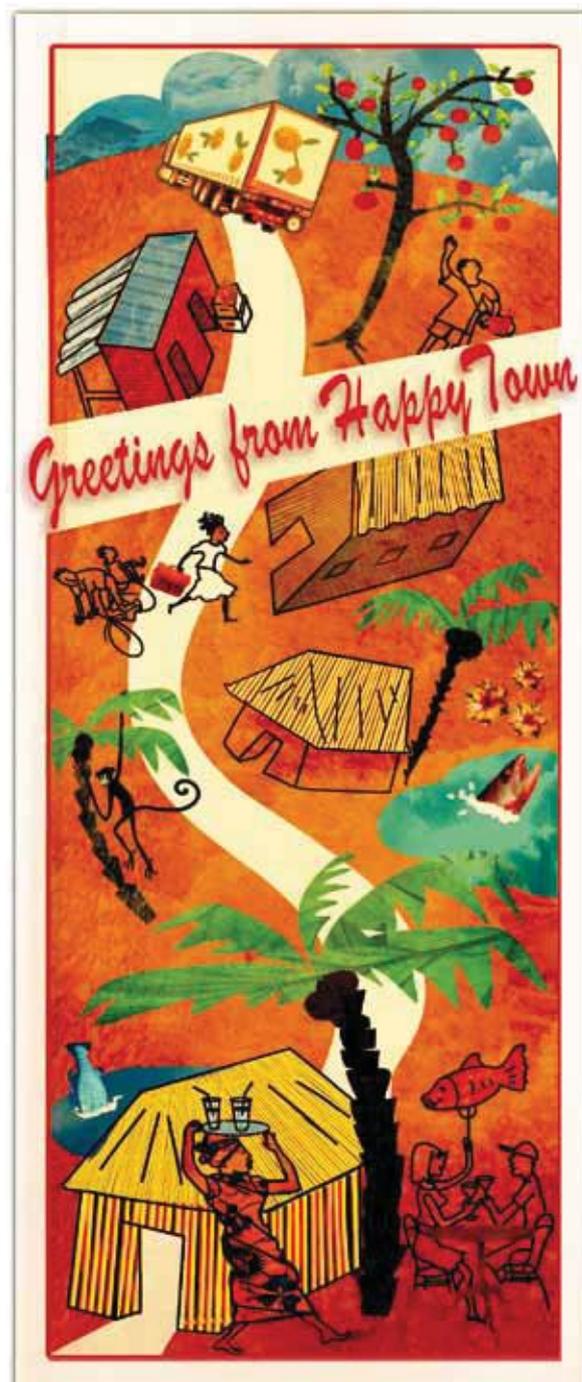
One such project is the purchase of 132 hectares of former agricultural land in Costa Rica. The land forms a corridor between two important national parks at the edge of the rainforest near Carara.

Ferwerda: 'By buying the land for only 80 thousand euros, an ecological corridor has been created. A similar project has been carried out in India, enabling elephants to migrate freely again.'

According to IUCN Netherlands, half of the supported projects could be directly related to tourism, 'but the sector should also have the grace to use some of the funds outside its own tourist destinations, for example for nature projects in Kyrgyzstan.' Ferwerda sees an important task for Wageningen University in the area of monitoring and steering the projects of an ANVR nature fund of this type.

MASSIVE TURNOVER

'A tax like that is a good idea', says Joke Luttkik, leader of the Human Factor research group at the Landscape Centre at Alterra, part of Wageningen UR. 'There are already a lot of small funds of that sort and many small ones add up to one large one. There is a massive turnover in tourism, and up to now too little of that money has been spent on nature in any systematic way.' She would like to see a little of the new fund proposed by the IUCN being used for three projects in Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. 'In those countries there is a lot of tree felling going on in wetlands. By offering the local population microcredit in return for a contract in which they promise to leave the trees alone, you could generate new sources of income. For example, by establishing tourism projects', explains Luttkik, who collaborates on this with Wetlands International and the Dutch development organization SNV. She envisages Wageningen UR providing



‘Too little of the money made from tourism has been spent on nature’

training for new local entrepreneurs.

Luttik does not think that sustainable tourism is a contradiction in terms. ‘On the contrary, it offers plenty of opportunities to restore damage to nature and to combat poverty.’ It is clear that Wageningen has its characteristic expertise to offer: ‘We have knowledge about ecology and biodiversity, we know a lot about the preferences and behaviour of tourists, and we have long experience with regional economic development in Third World countries.’

SHOWER HEADS AND TAPS

In the Dutch city of Nijmegen, Ruud Klep runs the Dutch branch of the Travel Foundation, whose head office is in England. The Travel Foundation works to make tourist destinations more sustainable. ‘We are looking for local experts in Cyprus and in Morocco to set up water-saving programmes for the hotels, lodges and resorts’, says Klep. ‘There is much to be gained there. To start with, water-saving shower heads, taps and washing machines. And you can’t imagine how many leaks could be plugged. There is a lot of awareness-raising work to be done in the top tourist destinations’.

‘For the last fifteen years, competition has mainly been about prices’, says Klep. ‘So it is high time now to make a coup for sustainability. And wherever possible it should be local people who reap most of the profits. That is already working brilliantly in Namibia, where local population groups take over the management of certain nature areas, in some cases under a legal agreement. The entire spectrum of wildlife is present, from elephants to black rhinos. Agreements are made with investors about the distribution of jobs among the local population and the sharing of profits or turnover.’

In Gambia the Travel Foundation has set up projects

TOURISM AND THE UNIVERSITY

There has been an MSc in Leisure, Tourism and Environment in Wageningen for more than ten years. From the academic year 2010 – 2011, students will also be able to follow a BSc programme on tourism.

Wageningen University is working on this with the tourism department at the international higher education institute NHTV in Breda. The Wageningen angle of approach focuses mainly on sustainable land use and the synergy between tourism and typical Wageningen themes such as environmental and nature conservation, climate and local development. NHTV, the University of Tilburg and Wageningen UR are also going to collaborate on research in the newly established Centre for Leisure and Tourism Research.

Wageningen’s national and international network is a help in this. In the Netherlands there is close collaboration with the tourism branch organization ANVR, the Sustainable Trade Initiative IDH, the Travel Foundation and with the financers of the extraordinary chair in Tourism and Sustainable Development: the Worldwide Fund for Nature, IUCN, Cordaid and KLM. Internationally, Wageningen UR is part of an alliance for sustainable tourism: the African-European Academic Alliance for Sustainable Tourism Development, Environmental Sustainability and Poverty Alleviation (3A-STEP).

to give farmers in the vicinity of luxury all-inclusive resorts the opportunity to supply fresh food and fruit all year round. Something similar has been done in the Caribbean and projects are in the pipeline in Turkey. Klep: ‘These are the examples we must keep in mind when we think about making tourism sustainable.’ ■

Sustainable tourism is one of the themes at the Opening of the Academic Year at Wageningen University on 6 September 2010. www.openingacademischjaar.wur.nl/UK