

TOURISM & BIODIVERSITY OPEN LETTER TO THE CBD PARTIES AND SECRETARIAT

June 24, 2014

Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity

**Mr. Bráulio Ferreira de Souza Dias
Executive Secretary
Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity**

Dear Parties and Mr. Ferreira de Souza Dias,

We urge you to bring tourism back onto the CBD agenda, for thorough review. With several environmental and social crises converging, the rational and moral frame for tourism has shifted substantially in the past decade - requiring us to revisit provisions for sustainable consumption and use.

When tourism entered the CBD agenda, through the Ministerial Roundtable at the Conference of Parties in Bratislava in 1998, there was a spirit of collaboration enabling productive dialogue to start between U.N. agencies, Parties and NGOs, as well as Indigenous Peoples and local communities experiencing firsthand the benefits and costs of tourism. It is crucial that a collaborative approach to evaluation is revitalized, during the Twelfth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP12), to develop strategies responsive to research on tourism impacts, from a full spectrum of community contexts.

The first civil society submissions to the CBD on tourism, at COP4, highlighted the urgent need for harm avoidance (attached). Between initial submissions in 1998 and the U.N. International Year of Ecotourism in 2002, civil society groups provided extensive technical input to the CBD process, delivering findings from community-based research internationally. This research identified the perils of policies for tourism growth. It also suggested strategies to tackle rapidly accelerating tourism problems, such as those related to climate change.

Since then, involved NGOs have continued to evaluate the impacts of tourism on cultural and biological diversity worldwide. This ongoing research by civil society groups is crucial for developing a precautionary approach for the tourism sector. Several longstanding NGOs have collaborated, developing extensive archives of data on national and supra-national tourism plans (for example, 'sustainable,' 'green,' and/or 'eco' tourism) versus actual outcomes of tourism. Consistently, research shows a vast disparity between projected benefits and associated costs: a continuum of unsustainable trade-offs. Tourism involves an acute flow of urbanization - bringing heavy strains on the biosphere, plus pronounced consumerism at the ecosystem level.

With concern, we note that many NGOs and local communities (notably, those that are specifically concerned with tourism-related issues) lost faith in the tourism workplan of the CBD, during the process to advance guidelines for tourism. Although the CBD Secretariat and UNEP strived to initiate an inclusive and representative process, some interest groups came to exercise disproportionate influence over its eventual shape and outcomes - despite their lack of experience within the destination communities, cultural landscapes, and ecosystems most affected (for example, biodiversity 'hotspots' of the global South). Consequently, mechanisms intended to improve tourism policy and practice suffered an early collapse of credibility. Since then, the CBD guidelines on tourism and biodiversity have been viewed as not only lacking relevance among affected Indigenous Peoples and other local communities, but also potentially harmful, by tourism NGOs monitoring human rights and environmental performance across spatial scales.

We are optimistic that the spirit of collaboration and principle of inclusion characterizing the early CBD process on tourism can be restored, in order to bring the tourism sector into alignment with the CBD objectives and policies. The CBD offers a promising framework for addressing the governance complexities of tourism, across sectors - if we work together to develop congruent implementation mechanisms, integrating applicable international law.

In light of the deepening ecological crises worldwide, cultivating broad political and grassroots support for a renewed CBD process on tourism is a very urgent matter, requiring our collective wisdom, research, and practice-based insights. We urge a thorough review of the CBD guidelines on tourism and their application, through an inclusive, balanced, grounded, and transparent process. The process needs to engage not only those civil society groups involved from the outset, but also other tourism NGOs and local authorities offering perspective from long-term, community-based research and practice. Dissent should be welcomed as a sign of a healthy process and an indicator of issues meriting careful reflection. A full spectrum of research and experiential knowledge must inform decision-making.

It is with a sense of deep concern that we appeal for the outdated, largely disregarded guidelines on tourism to receive fresh scrutiny. The volume of tourism globally, and its aggregate footprint, have breached sustainability thresholds. Tourism growth now compromises multiple biological processes supporting life on Earth; for example, climate, groundwater, marine cycles, and soil - with far reaching consequences, including food security. 'Green' variations of tourism can be particularly problematic and misleading, penetrating fragile ecosystems, stressing endangered species, and triggering culture loss; often, while imbedding poverty, as a basis for profit margins. We are gravely concerned that harm has become normalized in both the tourism industry and its 'development' offshoots. Damage to marine and coastal zones is just one illustration, among many, of the serious repercussions of tourism.

We are calling for a review process that is both rational and moral, to avert further harm from tourism, before emerging tourism markets cause exponential and irreversible harm across generations. Today's children and future generations deserve not only justice but also an ethic of care, assuring their well-being and flourishing.

Our hope lies in your leadership to fundamentally reorient the CBD workplan on tourism, directing all interest groups to revisit the core values and imperatives of sustainability, in keeping with the *1992 Rio Principles* and the Aichi Targets. Through disciplined adherence to these principles we can co-create a focussed process, for safe and responsible outcomes.

We look forward to supporting your endeavours to develop a meaningful engagement strategy on tourism - prioritizing tourism as an unresolved, cross-cutting agenda item of the CBD, pivotal to social change.

With Respect,

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Annex: NGO Statement on Tourism, COP4, Bratislava (1998)

ANNEX

Fourth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties
U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity
Bratislava, Slovakia
May 7, 1998

NGO JOINT STATEMENT ON THE MINISTERIAL PROPOSAL FOR GLOBAL GUIDELINES ON SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Madame Chair, thank you for this opportunity to present a statement with regard to agenda item 12.2 from NGOs concerned about the Proposal for Global Guidelines on Sustainable Tourism.

We welcome the Ministerial Roundtable initiative as a demonstration of global political support for the crucial issues facing biodiversity conservation. While we would like to see future Ministerial discussions align more closely with the formal agenda of the COP, we welcome the Roundtable's consideration of cross sectoral issues affecting biodiversity conservation.

As the Roundtable discussion focused largely on sustainable tourism, we welcome the proposal to have an initiative addressing tourism and biodiversity which involves indigenous and local communities, the private sector, and NGOs. We view tourism as a critical cross-sectoral issue with far reaching impacts on biological and cultural diversity. The complexity of tourism, i.e. its ability to impact for better or worse on almost every component of the host community and ecosystem, poses one of the greatest sectoral challenges within the Convention on Biological Diversity

We therefore support the Ministers' consensus that action be taken to make concrete headway on this matter. It is well documented that tourism can have serious adverse impacts on biodiversity and indigenous and local communities; this being the case, we feel that the sustainable tourism concept should be thoroughly evaluated to identify its appropriate use.

In expressing our support for this initiative for global tourism guidelines, we want to convey certain concerns as to the content and process. These concerns include:

- the lack of clarity as to whether the discussion is oriented to:
 - guiding the direction of future tourism development only or also facilitating a reform of existing tourism practices
 - facilitating current growth rates in the industry or setting precautionary parameters
- the possibility of the process facilitating the expansion of tourism in indigenous homelands and sensitive ecosystems that are biodiversity rich
- the potential for community participation in the initiative to be limited to marginal consultation, as has already occurred with many projects billed as sustainable tourism
- the potential for this process to result in development priorities and practices which do not reflect the needs of indigenous and local communities
- the potential for indigenous peoples' rights, specifically the right to self-determination, to be infringed upon by this process and its outputs
- the potential for the interests of industry to overshadow the needs of indigenous peoples and local communities in the absence of a genuine support system for bottom-up innovations
- the need for workable mechanisms for ensuring equitable benefit sharing among involved communities
- the need to duly take into account the impacts of tourism-related transport on both biodiversity and climate change

In light of these concerns, **WE RECOMMEND THAT:**

- The conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity be integrated into the tourism sector as required in Article 6(b)
- A precautionary approach be maintained at every stage of the process so that ecosystem integrity and cultural values are not compromised
- Precedence be given to the definition of cultural sustainability as per the 1997 Berlin Declaration on Sustainable Tourism, with indigenous peoples leading the process
- Indigenous peoples' right to define their own development priorities, policies, and practices be recognized, with priority support given to indigenous tourism innovations that foster the implementation of Article 8(j)
- The mechanism established to carry this initiative forward allow for the full involvement of indigenous peoples, local communities and NGOs, with funding allocated accordingly
- Information on "best practices" be efficiently compiled, utilizing existing policies, strategies, and data
- "Best practices" standards be applied to current tourism enterprises before any additional tourism developments are considered
- Bio-cultural diversity impact assessments be undertaken for all proposed policies and projects
- Strict controls on the movement and removal of biological material by tourists be instituted
- A framework for local and national reporting on the initiative be developed, with data forwarded to the Information Clearinghouse
- Ways to cooperate with the Framework Convention on Climate Change be identified for addressing the impacts of tourism related-transport
- In-depth education and awareness raising on the above issues be undertaken at the national level as required by Article 13.

We respectfully extend support to this global guidelines initiative so long as the concerns and expertise of indigenous peoples, local communities, and NGOs, are embraced in the process to ensure ecosystem integrity and the conservation of biological and cultural diversity.

Thank you,
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