

Renewable Energy and Sustainable Tourism 11 Questions and Answers

Follow-up to Interview with Mr. Agha Iqrar Haroon, President of The Regional Tourism Initiative TRI, <http://theregionaltourism.org/news/htm>

3.11.2011

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- 1. A. I. Haroon (AIH): Renewable Energy has been on the rise in tourism during the past years. Why do you think Sustainable tourism and Renewable Energy should be 'cross-promoted'?**

M. Haberstroh (MH): You are right, Renewable Energy is on the rise. In fact, Renewable Energy should be promoted – and branded! – as the perfect energizer of Sustainable Tourism. Sustainable Tourism and Renewable Energy are complementary to each other. And they share a local 'focus', which points to decentralization. Renewable Energy and Sustainable Tourism position themselves as the world's leading peace industries, which includes a highly ethical claim. The message is that the only sustainable energy is Renewable Energy, and Sustainable Tourism is Responsible Tourism. This message not only needs to be promoted, but cross-promoted, in order to enhance its effectiveness.

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2. AIH: How did you come to the idea of cross-promoting Sustainable Tourism and Renewable Energy?

MH: The basic idea is that although Renewable Energy has already been an environmental issue for long, widely discussed and used in a scattered 'pockets', decisive government steps to systematically introducing Renewable Energy and cross-promoting it with Sustainable Tourism have been missing. Actually, uncoordinated activism has largely substituted sustainable strategies from the very beginning until today, as more and more countries, panic-stricken by 'Fukushima', are embarking on Renewable Energy.

Having always been part of a long list of requirements, even before 'Fukushima', Renewable Energy has increased momentum, for sure, but has never been treated as really elementary to Sustainable Tourism – not even today. Due to the impact of energy on life, however, Renewable Energy is key to sustainability and therefore poised to a close partnership with Sustainable Tourism. And this approach should become a core issue of master plans accordingly, rather than leaving alone Renewable Energy pioneers in their dispersed 'pockets'.

Look at the facts: Everybody expects that hotel heating, cooling, or illumination are constantly available. But nobody likes being exposed to the sound of diesel-propelled power engines, as I experienced in holiday lodges in Amazonia and Madagascar, or at camps in Central Asia's Celestial Mountains. And: Attending trade fairs, I wonder whether anybody would frown at being offered electric mobility from airport to hotel, or electric shuttle services on exhibition grounds. The promotional challenge is to transmit high-tech into high-emotion. In doing so, hardly another emotion-loaded industry but Travel & Tourism might be an appropriate partner for Renewable Energy.

3. AIH: So, the question was triggered off during holidays and vacation?

MH: Yes, but from the supplier's angle, and the staging was development. Imagine people in landlocked regions: In many developing countries, access to both electrical power and electronic communication is insufficient or non-existent. Wood and charcoal are often the only energy sources in rural areas. People are out of reach for any existing power-grid. Solar Energy devices and mobile phones provide a solution.

4. AIH: You said the word 'sustainability' has been overused and abused. Do you think that sustainability is the right word to mobilize people?

MH: Though already an overused and abused word, sustainability is what all of us are disparately seeking in our volatile and hasty times. Actually, nothing is really 'sustainable', if you allude to nothing less than eternity. Back to earth, tourism can only be sustainable, if stakeholders, including politicians, investors, suppliers and consumers are aware of their joint socio-ecological responsibility for future travel, particularly from and inside emerging countries like China and India.

Indeed, people with an ecological consciousness still feel very much attached to sustainability rules – but let me tell you: Many years ago, Greenpeace succeeded in arousing people's minds and hearts by simply telling them that "Man can save whales". Nowadays, experts teach people about the assets of environmental responsibility, decentralization, sustainability, and they write a lot of papers about it. Instead of rehashing the technical advantages of system updates in coded messages, why not tell people that "everyone can be an unlimited clean energy producer"?

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5. AIH: Do you think that “everyone can be an unlimited clean energy producer” will touch minds and hearts the way “Man can save whales” does?

I think I know what you mean. The message “Man can save whales” both appeals to our empathy and flatters our heroic aspirations. The other message that “everyone can be an unlimited clean energy producer” does apply to “energy autonomy” (Hermann Scheer) and the common cause targeted to spread Renewable Energy. What’s missing? Either something like Steve Jobs’ ‘sexy’ message of “a personal computer for everyone” or the heartbeat of a truly altruistic message like ... “Save the whales”; a ‘higher purpose’ that goes well with both Tourism and Renewable Energy. I don’t have a solution, yet I am sure a brainstorming with the right people could provide it.

6. AIH: The issue on greenhouse gas emissions is still being discussed controversially. After all, climate changes have occurred ever since the earth has existed. The last global warming occurred in the Middle Ages, at a time, when there was no man-made industrial impact. Do you really believe in a human impact on climate change?

MH: Well, usually each interest group will show up with their own statistics and arguments. As far as I understand, however, there is a sizeable majority of scientists who believe that man-made impact on climate change is essential – and proven. But we also know that mere majorities are a weak argument for truth. And we realize people’s efforts to fight climate change: Although many of these efforts look little impressive only, the question remains: Would fatality be the right answer? Doing nothing?

I am not a climate specialist. However, it’s not all about CO₂: People’s health is at stake, when smog is in the air, and environmentalists, crying for biodiversity salvation, point to diminishing rain forests, fossil energy calamities and an almost pandemic spread of civilization garbage. Ecology and climate are interconnected. There is no controversial awareness of an ecological ‘ticking clock’.

7. AIH: Do you think that pampered modern lifestyle-people would renounce of parts of their comfort to satisfy environmental needs and meet climate challenges?

MH: It is time to reflect on our own indifference towards the collateral damage caused by a civilization whose negative impact on many has become disproportionate to the increasing wealth of a few. Using and boosting Renewable Energy instead of fossil fuels would not demand ceding one slice from our usual comfort, as Hermann Scheer says, the late President and CEO of the World Council for Renewable Energy (www.wcre.org). On the contrary, Renewable Energy would improve living conditions.

However, using Renewable Energy is less dependent on a generally acknowledged rationale, but rather on an amalgam of consumer, company, and governmental long-headed habits, combined with the well woven networks of conventional energy suppliers and traditional financial players to keep wielding their overwhelming lobbying power with political decision makers. It is there the source of the problem, rather than a negative connotation of ‘ecology’ with ‘ascetics’.

8. AIH: So, ‘lifestyle’ will be the buzzword to provide a breakthrough for Renewable Energy in tourism development and business?

MH: Definitely. Energy means power, and tourism is a symbol of freedom. These are higher values added to mere functional attributes like providing ‘electric power’ and offering ‘transport, accommodation and recreation’. It is up to us to extrapolate ‘Renewable Energy’

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and 'Sustainable/Responsible Tourism' to a congenial 'lifestyle', keeping in balance the very sense of social development, economic progress and ecological sustainability.

You see, fossil energy has started to show its limitations, whereas Renewable Energy is practically unlimited. Biological systems are energy systems, after all, and invisible energetic conditions create and form visible and tangible conditions, as evolutionary research tells us. Hence, like fresh air, sunshine, and spring water, energy is originally a gift – renewable and due to be accessible for everyone. Today, the heart of the matter is no longer technology, it is up to the political acumen, will, and charisma to turn the magic of 'tapping the sun' into reality.

9. AIH: That means, our lifestyle as a whole will have to get much more adapted to natural patterns?

MH: If we want to control nature, we will have to adapt ourselves to its rules. We cannot 'protect' nature as a whole, for nature is too strong for us and could do without Man. But Man cannot do without nature. Hence, to a certain degree, we need to shape nature, in order to survive. And, therefore, we should know and stick to 'nature's way of life.'

10. AIH: Do you mean 'natural management'?

MH: Less survival nature itself has no purpose, no goal, nor will. Attaining biological maturity, the 'natural system' follows natural fits which complement and supplement one another. Being 'organic' rather than organizational, the natural system points to the deficiencies of Man's 'cocooning' efforts, which follow sharply defined functions and hierarchical structures, logically broken down and meticulously categorized. Looking at the rich biodiversity which we ourselves are a part of, we may conclude that natural organism is far more apt than man-made organization, to manage complexity and even to 'economize by creating abundance'.

11. AIH: We have been talking about 'Renewable Energy' and 'Sustainable Tourism'. At the beginning you even mentioned the word 'brand'. What are you thinking about?

MH: Yes, I said, 'Renewable Energy should be 'branded' as the perfect energizer of Sustainable Tourism'. An indispensable ingredient to wonderful holidays, the sun has become the 'face of tourism' on catalogues and advertisements. Providing the basic impulse for any kind of movement and life, the sun is the 'face of energy', a symbol of freedom, happiness, wealth, success, beauty, restart or unification. Why not catch the spirit, making The Sun, shown in so many national flags and coats of arms, the new symbol of an emerging Solar Age, the interface – the 'brand' – of Renewable Energy and clean global Travel and Tourism'?

Sharing the spirit of the natural system in times of global complexity, Renewable Energy and Sustainable/Responsible tourism are nothing less than natural allies: 'El sol' and 'solar' may also stand for 'sol-idarity'! Renewable Energy will make the world more beautiful, and Travel and Tourism will become a prime winner. However, the way to sustainability goes via change.

At last, it is up to us doing everything to make tourism generally 'sustainable and responsible' and 'Renewable Energy' self-evident on a global scale. We will decide what should prevail – the Authentic, the Beautiful, the Good – or mere mediocrity, hypocrisy, fallacy. The fossil-energy consumer or the renewable-energy user, the indifferent tourist or the responsible traveller, paradise lost, or Planet Earth – regained.

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