

The importance of sustainability

The Business of Tourism

David Jessop

For most visitors, a central part of a vacation is the pleasure of eating out at hotels and restaurants; having alternative choices at each meal, being able to taste local cuisine, and having the experience of doing so in a beautiful and different environment.

Increasingly however, something new is creeping into visitor perception. It is the related issues of sustainability and authenticity.

To understand how this has become a matter of interest and concern to a growing number of visitors, and especially better-off millennials and their children, one only has to walk around New York, London or Berlin to see the emergence in restaurants, better supermarkets and shops selling groceries, of signs making clear the origin of what they are selling, indications of the distance it has travelled (its carbon footprint), and whether it comes from a sustainable source.

Moreover, in answer to the question being asked by increasing numbers of consumers: "Is it local?", it is also now common to see on the menu the origin of the meat, fish or other produce that is going into a meal.

So, for example, eating recently in a restaurant in a rural part of England, the menu I was given made clear the exact farms, the names of the farmers, and the provenance of all that was on offer, which made me feel connected to the local environment, in a manner that enhanced the positioning and marketing of all of those concerned.

Clearly, in a Caribbean context, this has obvious limitations, especially in small islands where there is no option but to import many foodstuffs. However, there is a growing interest in the industry and worldwide, in developing greater awareness in hotels and restaurants of the importance of sustainability, not just for marketing reasons, but to retain foreign exchange, job creation and local development.

One outcome is that regional industry organisations, like the Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association (CHTA), have been paying increased attention to encouraging environmental and social sustainability through responsible food purchasing.

This involves the development of guidance to all of those in the tourism and hospitality sector who purchase food. The aim is to encourage them to develop supply chains that embrace a responsible environmental approach, to boost local economies through the local and regional production of foodstuffs, and to create employment offering fair working conditions.

The initiative also seeks to demonstrate that the use of local products represents sound marketing by adding significantly to the uniqueness and value of a tourism experience.

In helpful online material – Four Steps Towards Sustainability in the Hotel Sector – CHTA with others points out the importance of a joint public/private sector approach to analysing what is possible when it comes to substituting imports with local products and services. They also provide a step by step guide to professionals in the industry on how to address the issue, most importantly, how

pursuing sustainability can result in a shared commitment among employees and suppliers, and how it can help a hotel or restaurant to develop a more positive image.

Interestingly, the document also contains case studies. One it cites is a community-based project in the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico, which created its own sustainable jam-making business based on sales to local hotels and tourism. There, Jungle Jams, using local fruit and with support from the tour operator TUI Travel and the Travel Foundation, led to local hotel groups used by TUI not only providing the product, but the women's co-operative involved going on to sell their product more widely.

As the project progressed, the benefits became apparent. It enabled local hotel operators to better understand the importance an international tour operator placed on sustainability, involved TUI and local staff in an inspirational local project, and has enabled all involved to highlight the project to guests and potential guests, thereby enhancing their commercial offering.

It and similar schemes are examples of what needs to be adopted across the Caribbean region.