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Sustainability Challenges: Changing Attitudes and a Demand for Better Management of the Tourism Industry in Malaysia

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1. Introduction

1.1 The acceptance of the sustainable development principles in reference to the brundtland report

Before discussing how tourism can be an essential tool for sustainable development, it is necessary to present the importance of sustainable development as a background for understanding its concept and principles. The notion about sustainable development started to come together in 1983, when the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) established the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). One of the main objectives of the WCED was to prepare long-term planning on environmental concerns towards the year 2000 and beyond. The WCED also focused on heightening cooperation among developing countries, including countries at different stages of economic and social development. This was with the intention of creating mutually supportive objectives which took into account the interrelationships between natural resources and economic development.

The term, sustainable development, was popularised in *Our Common Future*, a report published by the WCED in 1987. Also known as the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future* included the now accepted definition of sustainable development as development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Acceptance of the report by the UNGA gave the term political salience and in 1992 leaders set out the principles of sustainable development at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This is probably the most crucial conference to date in promoting the concept of sustainable development; the event is now interchangeably referred to as the Rio Earth Summit, Rio Summit or the Earth Summit. The Rio Summit was the largest environmental conference ever held, attracting over 30,000 people including more than 100 heads of states. The objectives of the conference were to build upon the hopes and achievements of the Brundtland Report, in order to respond to pressing global environmental concerns and to agree on major treaties for biodiversity conservation, climate change and forest management. It also focused on environmental development and conceived frameworks for strategies and measures in minimising and controlling the effects of environmental

degradation. This had greatly assisted governments in the context of increasing domestic and global efforts in the promotion of sustainable development in their own and UN member countries.

Consequently, the event rapidly contributed directly in shaping the concept of sustainable development which led the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development (UNCSD) to issuing Agenda 21. This was further affirmed, with a globally accepted political statement, called the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Agenda 21 is a framework which provides action plans consisting of forty workable chapters, detailing the future of sustainable development from 1992 into the 21st century. Although Agenda 21 is a nonbinding set of recommended approaches, this had since translated into greater co-operation between countries at different stages of economic and social development in the achievement of global objectives.

It is generally accepted that sustainable development calls for a convergence between the three pillars of achievement: economic development, social equity and environmental protection. Sustainable development is a visionary development paradigm and over the past 20 years, governments and private-sector businesses have accepted it as a guiding principle. This had involved progress on sustainable development metrics, and improved private-sector businesses and NGO participation in the sustainable development process. Yet for many, the concept remains elusive and institutional implementation has proven difficult as unsustainable trends continue and political entry points in making real progress remain generally very limited. As a result, market forces have taken over to become, in all intents and purposes, the understudy for the implementation of the sustainable development agenda. However, frameworks of private sector negotiations are not always appropriate platforms for broader strategic management discussions of sustainable tourism or sustainable development.

Unfortunately, while sustainable development is intended to encompass the three pillars, the general perception is that sustainability is often compartmentalised as an environmental issue. In addition to this, and potentially more limiting for the sustainable development agenda, is the orientation of development growth which is predominantly assessed as, economic growth. This is largely due to traditional economic frameworks used by developed countries in attaining unprecedented levels of wealth; in which rapidly developing countries, including Malaysia, aspires to attain. The dilemma with such an approach is that natural resources are often displaced and / or their quality compromised to an extent which threatens biodiversity and environmental preservation. Due to global changing attitudes and more environmentally knowledgeable societies, the demand for better management of businesses, including that of tourism is increasingly evident.

Although there is increasing affluence and technical capacity in implementing more sustainable policies and measures, the required level of political leadership and the engagement of society in Malaysia is still a long way off. This is compounded by economic growth which follows the resource-intensive model of developed countries. Without a concerted effort in addressing levels of consumerism and resource use, it would be difficult to expect a receptive audience when attempts are still directed towards pure economic development practices. In other words, more sustainable development directions are needed which will require levels of dialogue, cooperation and most importantly, conviction; which

are simply not reflected in the practices of multilateral institutions and organisations across tourism and its related businesses.

Even where attempts had been made to turn policies into action, the results have been limited. There is a huge gap between the multilateral processes in which broad goals and strategies had not transpired into national actions, which reflects domestic political and economic realities. Deep structural changes are needed in the addressing the practical side of businesses which allows society at large to manage its economic, social, and environmental affairs. Hard choices may need to be made in translating ideals into workable actions in making tourism more sustainable. However, while fractions argue that Malaysia has been unsuccessful in achieving its sustainable development obligations, it is worthwhile to consider that 20 years is a relatively short time frame to implement the required changes in such a mammoth area. As the country continues to achieve rapid growth, the needed systemic changes will require far-reaching ways in which businesses are managed. This will have impacts on lifestyles and consumption patterns—especially so in a fast developing country, with a rapidly growing middle class. The current global economic and environmental crises and the use of the liberalisation and globalisation models, in the trading of services, could bring renewed receptivity towards a shift in the sustainable development paradigm. The new economic models can demand development directions which could focus on reducing resource use, and integrating economic, environmental, and social issues in policy decision making. The opportunity is certainly there, for progress to go beyond concepts in its move towards actual systemic changes.

2. Malaysia's decision in taking tourism as a sustainable development option and hence, obligation to global agendas

In Malaysia, the tourism industry and its related services have emerged to become the second most important industry over the last twenty years. The industry has remained strong despite several economic slowdowns in Asia and continues to be a key foreign exchange earner, contributing to growth, investment and employment. The allocation of public funds has continued to increase in order to meet the demands of a growing tourist industry. However, global obligations towards Agenda 21 and Local Agenda 21 have not created the planning and management measures necessary to ensure that tourism growth is sustainable. Additionally, new legal measures have not been designed nor implemented, in order for concerns relating to uncontrolled development to be recorded. This challenge is complicated by differing concepts of economic growth and its relevance to sustainable development. The application and approach to sustainable development, including tourism, requires new legal tools which can mitigate and adapt to a knowledgeable traveling market base. Meeting this challenge will involve multi disciplines which are not traditionally deemed to be critical in international negotiations.

The tourism industry has tremendous potential in its contribution to sustainable tourism development, particularly for environmentally and culturally sensitive sites, which can be linked to Local Agenda 21 processes in planning and monitoring. In order to achieve sustainability, the tourism industry is perhaps in the better position in integrating and balancing competing economic, environmental and social interests. These interests are represented as pillars on the sustainable development model. However, the impediments to

achieving sustainable development arise not only from an imbalance of the economic, environment, and social sustainable development pillars, but also from political biases. Based on the economic potential tourism can bring to the country, Malaysia has taken this sector as one of its core development options. The government also recognises the vast potential of tourism as a major source of employment which can create a foundation for entrepreneurial resourcefulness. Hence, a great deal of marketing and promotion effort is placed in attracting increase arrivals to a destination which has much to offer in terms of competitive shopping, and natural icons of global significance. This has led to continued year-on-year growth in tourism arrivals, which are grounds for enthusiasm and concern.

There is no doubt that tourism has the potential to generate the needed revenue for the economy, increase awareness for the host environment and culture, in addition to increasing political incentives for the conservation of natural resources. Nevertheless, there are also increasing concerns that poorly managed or uncontrolled tourism can cause more damage to the environment, culture and society in general. Sustainable tourism is supposed to have the potential to meet each of these challenges. However, if sustainable tourism is to fully achieve its potential, well-founded principles and clear guidelines for the active involvement of stakeholders such as planners, developers and private entrepreneurs, are no longer obligatory, but a necessity. The guidance in facilitating site-specific research on socio-economic and environmental impacts of visitors, and the development of appropriate local, national and regional tourism strategies will need to be imposed.

Sustainable Development –the goal universally agreed to at the Rio Summit in 1992 – has become the main challenge, against the background of a rapidly growing tourism industry in Malaysia. Within the concept of the Brundtland Report and the framework of sustainable tourism, it is now necessary to address the key sustainable development issues especially for environmentally and culturally sensitive areas. The perception that sustainable development is a complex process which is too unachievable or simply too difficult cannot be given too much credence. Twenty years after the publication of the Brundtland Report, the concept behind *Our Common Future,* remains true to form and more critical today. The aims and objectives are realistic in that emphasis is focused on its practicality and application. The attention needs to be on manageable steps in which individuals and society can identify which supports sustainability.

There must now be less concentration on the design and promotion on all-embracing theoretical frameworks and idealistic concepts but rather on, applicable practices which leads to sustainable development; concentrating on identifying and applying lessons from practical experience and implementing the principles and commitments that have already been agreed. Consequently, the development of the tourism sector must begin with the goal of achieving a balance of the three pillars, as tourism offers a good starting point for analysing the relationship between sustainable development and progress. Sustainable tourism can be an effective tool in achieving sustainable development because when practiced, it benefits all the three fundamental pillars.

3. The need to address rapid adaption of technological changes, product innovation and new markets

There is no doubt that tourism is a dynamic industry; and with it, continued challenges are expected from its technologically confident market base. With technology developing,

tourist experiences are evolving at a rapid pace. Tourists acquire sophisticated and refined tastes and needs in differentiating tourism products and destinations based on a variety of sources. These levels of sophistication has transform into real trends where existing tourism products requires deep innovation; especially as the competitive focus is on the quality in service and comfort, combined with the uniqueness of the destination. In order to achieve continuous product innovation, destinations require a change in organisational policies and practices, at macro and micro levels, as well as, in their corresponding strategies. These changes can impact dramatically on profit margins if the engagement of organisationwide strategies, technology skill development and procedures are not in place in addressing this knowledgeable and technology savvy market base.

The 21st century had brought profound changes in the international and Asia-Pacific markets. Accordingly, the operations within the tourism industry in Malaysia, had faced a series of changes which required new strategies in capturing a bigger share of the global market. Among the changes was the increase in disposable incomes of developing nations, economic crises and natural disasters which had a direct impact on the industry. The adjustment of tourism suppliers in meeting the demand had required modifying the content of tourism products and adapting them to the requirements of global agendas, including the creation of products which meets sustainability concerns.

The changes generated by international trends, which already had an echo among the tourism stakeholders, are obvious. In most cases, the base for the development of new markets and new tourism products is represented by market demand. It is noteworthy to recognise that although in Malaysia, national policies for stimulating mass market tourism is still maintained, there is also a shift towards segmentation, specialisation and diversification of markets especially in the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak, which focuses on nature and culture, as their primary markets. As travelers are becoming increasingly more sophisticated in terms of destination selection, the industry must adapt to rapid technology changes in order to meet demands. New technology, more experienced travelers, global economic restructuring and environmental limits to growth are only some of the challenges facing the industry. The desire to innovate is increasingly enhanced as it becomes the only way in which a highly competitive industry, such as tourism, can survive and prosper.

In most cases, competition can push destination management organisations to invest in innovation. Unless a competitive advantage is secured through innovations in terms of destination or products offered, there will still be uncertainty, in terms of risks and instability. Consequently, the key to success in meeting market demands will rely on the industry's ability to innovate and take risks. The tourism industry must be aware of and anticipate changes in the global tourism market, or risk losing their share of that very market. In order to increase market share, there is also the need for innovations to be backed up by real strategies in order to secure competitive advantages. The main types of innovation which is likely to trigger interest in the development of tourism is the adaptation to tourist purchasing power and behaviour.

The strategies of tourism operators bear resemblance to those in other fields of activity. In this situation, market size expansion, market share enhancement, cost cutting and product mix adjustments are looked into. As strategies go, they are closely associated with product innovation. For instance, tour operators that offered trips to undiscovered areas, expanding

its market share by attracting new customers who had not previously considered such options. Product innovations involve the ability to make one's product stand out from those of the competition. The essence of product differentiation exists in creating a niche as opposed to the competition, either at similar or different approaches, and thus, gains expansion by being a market leader with benefits to match. On the contrary, it is worth mentioning that opening the product market towards mass tourism has been significantly influenced by marketing and advertising playing their due parts, and also by investments in research into new product development and technology.

For instance, the development of holiday packages from Peninsula Malaysia towards the two eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak was heavily influenced by the technological changes in the purchase of plane tickets and the expansion of air accessibility. This has subsequently led to cheaper flights (due to competition), as well as by investments in hotels which further promotes domestic travel. This had underlined the importance of re-discovering domestic attractions whereby the tourism industry took advantage of international trends and adapting them locally. As far as process innovations are concerned, it has been recorded with respect to the length of time it takes to complete travel related transactions and subsequently, bear witness to varied methods of combining decision-making aspects, which led to increased business competitiveness.

Additionally, a combination of marketing innovations (including online retailing of airline tickets or accommodation), selectivity (seat assignment on board the aircraft), and the ability for price comparisons (between airlines) are now available at a touch of a button. Process innovations can be achieved through exclusive technological changes that are linked to the information technology revolution or ones which are specific to the tourism industry. By adapting to e-commerce technologies, the sales process within the tourism industry will have the highest impact. Technology changes the framework of competition regardless of the field of activity, location or size. This has a bigger impact on competitive advantages; as it gives opportunity for the set up of price and product differentiation.

The rapid changes in technology provides the tourism industry with a series of advantages linking it to unprecedented access to markets in terms of distribution channels, pricing policy, cost in shipping, and increase effectiveness. And, technology improvements also offer the travelling markets virtual tourism; even if costs generated by this have displayed a decreased trend in time, innovations constantly need substantial capital investments, either capital-related or pertaining to work force training. Therefore, it can be concluded that certain risks can be associated to technology innovations, despite technological evolutions. Information technology not only changes the volume of information transferred but it also influences the long-term relation within the distribution chain and gives rise to new forms of competition.

This issue has contributed to the metamorphosis of tourism; from a standardised, rigid mass phenomenon to a more flexible, customer-oriented industry which is more sensitive to the latter's needs and expectations. Information technology is certainly deemed as one of the factors which facilitated change. At the same time, it also triggers changes in the traditional organisation of production and can decrease the level of dependence on tourism agencies, as customers can purchase airline tickets or holidays directly via the internet.

Additionally, advancement in technology has contributed in some cases to the disappearance of customer relationships. From the perspective of information technology use, it is also noted that there are differentiations between tourism service providers, as not necessarily all markets enjoy equal rights to accessibility and has the required technical skills. Competitive capacity is still reliant not only on the development and implementation of new technologies but also on the capacity of the tourism industry in learning and adapting itself to changes. Further, the competition is not limited to the way in which the destination is positioned but also, can be due to its performance in the market. The cooperation within increasing levels of competition can be seen particularly in airline and hotel alliances.

4. The adoption of knowledge management strategies and governance in managing tourism development

The tourism industry has become one of the most dynamic industries globally; and, rapid adaptation to technological changes, product innovation and new markets must be explored. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), which is responsible for overseeing global tourism growth, states that "… tourism is firmly established as the number one industry in many countries and the fastest-growing economic sector in terms of foreign earnings and job creation." The UNWTO also shows that growth of the tourism industry is indeed remarkable, with the number of international arrivals documenting an evolution from a mere 165 million international arrivals in 1970 to over 846 million in 2006. Moreover, the UNWTO forecasts an increase in the arrival number of international tourists to 1.6 billion in 2020. The critical relationship between the tourism industry and sustainable development is an examination of global trends and the challenges they raise. As environmental and societal decisions can be irreversible, individuals who hold key positions in determining policies which affect society must identify and solve unstructured problems which require the use of multiple information sources.

In Malaysia, the tourism industry's ability to maintain global arrivals in the future will depend largely on solid research, in order to better understand and accept new trends and concepts as they appear. The wellspring of future tourism growth in Malaysia is a commitment to good and structured frameworks as determined by differing policies in governance. The Government whether national, state or local, the private sector and non-government organisations (NGOs) is working cohesively in making this a reality. It realises that managing tourism growth depends on forward-looking policies and sound management philosophies which include a harmonious relationship amongst the public sector, private sector, non-government agencies and society at large.

If the assumption that policy decisions are made based on the delivery of rapid development which serves only to address tourist needs, this will undoubtedly cause setbacks to vital questions about the future of the destination, appropriate scale and type of development, and residents' quality of life. This is largely because this said assumption is questionable at times of rapid social change, especially where tourists' knowledge of sustainability, is not taken into consideration. The rise in tourism and international arrivals can be explained by many factors, including population growth, increased tourism segmentation, the development of information technology, and marketing. The internet has transformed the tourism industry, providing a medium for marketing through websites,

email, and website pop ups in addition to a dissemination of advice on where and how to get to the best destination, and a means for reserving airline tickets, car rentals, and hotels.

Consistent with the growth of information technology is the increase in the use of digital cameras and social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, which allow tourists and marketers alike to immediately share images of exotic destinations all over the world via email, blogs and websites. Such exchanges are increasingly influencing travel decisions. Furthermore, increasing efficiency in the transportation sector, such as aviation, increases the range, and capacity of travel. Despite discouraging factors, such as acts of terrorism (Bali bombings, 9/11), the economic crisis (USA, UK and Europe), and natural disasters (earthquake and tsunami in Japan), which sometimes slow the growing rate of tourism. However, the overall long-term growth rate of tourism will continue to increase.

In exploring current solutions, the management of tourism development offers insights for policy makers in seeking better solutions when confronted with issues on sustainability. The continuing importance of market-based strategies for balancing the development of the tourism sector demands a change in the way sustainability is viewed. As the tourism industry has become one of the fastest and largest growing economic sector in Malaysia, it can make an important contribution to sustainable development. Nonetheless, the implementation and development of policies, plans and strategies regarding sustainable tourism is a challenge for policy makers in balancing economic growth with sustainability.

Indeed, many methodologies and assessment tools for sustainable tourism management have been developed by researchers, which recognise the multiple facets of sustainability. Amongst them, Spenceley (2003) developed the Sustainable Nature-based Tourism Assessment Toolkit (SUNTAT) which provided a mechanism to measure sustainable tourism at two levels; strategic (for policymakers and planners) and enterprises (for tourism enterprises and developers), and took into account policy and planning, economics and tourism management, environmental and conservation management and social and cultural issues. Cernat and Gourdon (2007) developed a Sustainable Tourism Benchmarking Tool (STBT) in order to detect sustainability problems in a tourism destination. The tool, using benchmarks and policy-relevant indicators, was also aimed at enabling policymakers to make informed decisions and improve the prospects for sustainable tourism development in their respective countries. The STBT encompassed the key dimensions of economic sustainability (tourism assets, tourism activity, linkages, and leakages), socio-ecological sustainability, infrastructure sustainability and destination attractiveness.

Although there is much discussion that the tourism industry will be affected with the global economic crises, it is clearly evidenced that there will always be a market for tourism, due to an individual's wish to travel and discover new and foreign places. It is without doubt that the tourism industry has proven to be resilient and will continue to expand. As sustainable tourism is not only about protecting the environment, and tourism initiatives do bring benefits to some people and costs to others, what level of development and where to develop has become not only an academic field of study, but a highly political one. In any case, progress towards more sustainable forms of tourism will depend far more on the activities the industry and the attitudes of tourists, rather than solely the actions of public sector bodies and policies. In the highly competitive tourism market, success will come from understanding the target markets, and focus will be on the most profitable prospects in

terms of motivation to visit, economic yield and appreciation of what Malaysia, as a destination, to ensure its long term security as a profitable industry.

There is also continuing efforts to promote domestic tourism for future growth, within the thirteen (13) states of Malaysia. The lack of direct international access to Sabah and Sarawak, the two eastern states of Malaysia, will be the key constraint to these areas. There is clear emphasis that an expanded direct international service and more domestic links are important initiatives for the respective State governments. However, any major changes to the current scenario will not be achieved until open air accessibility is further developed to stimulate commercial demand for access. As international interest grows in authentic destinations, these two eastern states are positioning itself as nature and cultural hubs as specialty destinations, based on natural and cultural experiences.

5. The growth of tourism in Malaysia

The main government machinery behind tourism development is the Ministry of Tourism. This was first established as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT) in 1987, and further designated in 1990, as the
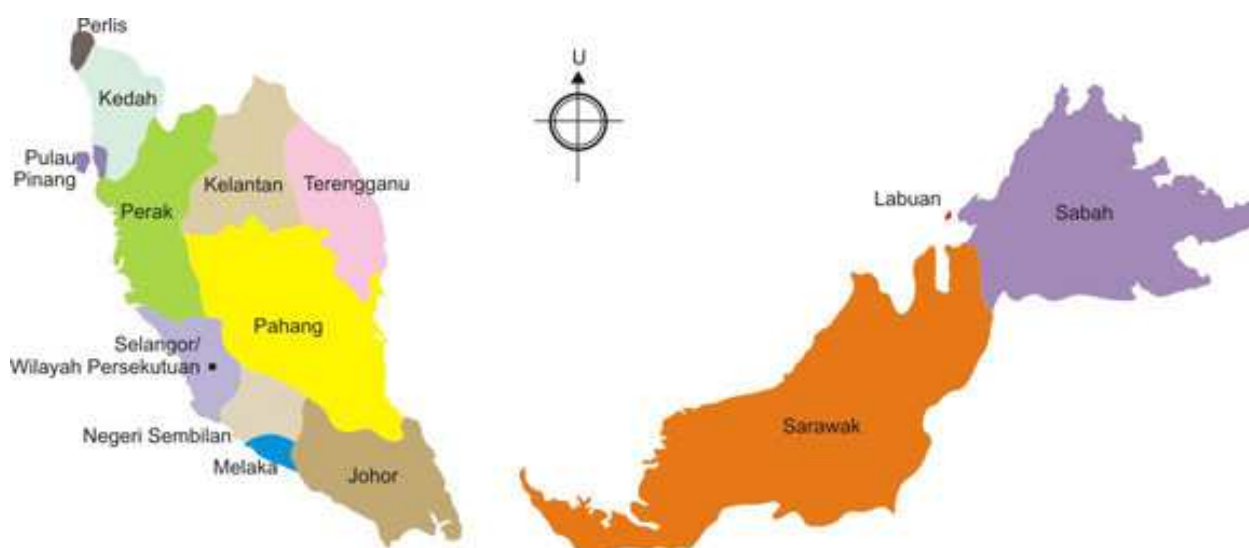

Fig. 1. The thirteen (13) States of Malaysia

Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (MOCAT). In 2004, it reaffirmed itself as The Ministry of Tourism (MOTOUR) in order to fully reflect the responsibility of coordinating and implementing government policies and strategies pertaining to tourism development in the country. MOTOUR's vision is to develop Malaysia into a leading tourism nation and its mission is in the implementation of the National Tourism Policy and building the industry to be the nation's main source of income for socio-economic development. Currently, tourism and its related services is the second largest contributor to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and contribution to employment is 1.7 million jobs.

The Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board, or commonly referred to as Tourism Malaysia, is a statutory body established under the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board Act 1992. Tourism Malaysia's ultimate aim is to increase the number of foreign tourists to Malaysia,

extend the average length of their stay and increase Malaysia's tourism revenue. Its activities centre mainly on promotion and the increase of arrivals for both international and domestic tourism. It also coordinates all tourism related marketing and promotional activities conducted by any organisation; government, non-government or private sector. Tourism Malaysia also offers recommendations for the adoption of appropriate methods, measures and programmes, in order to facilitate or stimulate the development and promotion of the tourism industry within the country.

Malaysia is made up of thirteen (13) states; each has its own government and autonomy in its decision for tourism development. Eleven of the states are located in the Malaysian Peninsula (West Malaysia) and two in the Island of Borneo (East Malaysia). In addition to the thirteen states, Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya are called Federal Territories. At the national level, the direction for tourism development is led by the Ministry of Tourism. At state levels, such as Sabah and Sarawak, this is led by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment and Ministry of Tourism and Heritage, respectively. Not every state is represented by a designated Ministry for tourism development; of importance, as Sabah and Sarawak relies on nature and culture as the foundation of their tourism attraction, there is more emphasis for both these East Malaysian states to focus on sustainability in the development of tourism.

Tourism development is continuing to be an important economic activity for Malaysia. In the 1960's, tourism was virtually unheard of as an economic option, let alone as a sustainable development option. With complete autonomy to decide on how tourism is developed within the country, each State Government is not only in competition with another state, but also in competition with similar destinations regionally and around the world. This is evidenced by the year-on-year increase of funding allocation towards tourism development and promotion within the country. From the 1970s, the Malaysian government's priority was the provision of basic tourism infrastructure, like highways, airports and upgrading of attractions in each state. This was fast tracked in the 1980's, as a means to meet several development objectives. Tourism was actively promoted, and the focus was in terms of marketing and the improvement of services.

It was anticipated that tourism will increase foreign exchange earnings, lead to an increase in employment, and raise the standard of living of the population; in addition to fostering regional development. However, in spite of two decades of rigorous public sector intervention, tourism was only identified and taken seriously as an industry that had the potential to stimulate the socio-economic development of the country in the late 1980s to mid-1990s, when economic recession hit the region. In order to boost private sector investments, the Malaysian government concentrated on promoting tourism by providing incentives to develop accommodation, visitor centre facilities and actively encourage Bumiputera participation. Bumiputera or Bumiputra is a term widely used in Malaysia. This category of the populace embraces ethnic Malays and other indigenous ethic groups in the eastern Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.

The sustainable development approach is particularly important in tourism because this sector depends almost entirely on attractions and activities that are related to the built and natural environment; including any historic and cultural features these extends to in society. The tourism industry is both dynamic and diverse. Services and tourism go hand in hand

and to implement a tourism strategy, or make informed decisions involving major tourism projects and events, there is a critical need to have the right information and decision criteria. The concern for the impact of tourism is not confined to developed countries; it is part of a growing concern in regard to the sustainability of tourism in Malaysia, as well. Although meeting the needs of travelers by providing tourism related goods and services have proven to be an attractive form of economic development, unplanned tourism growth can also lead to problems. Attempts to encourage the development and growth of tourism activities are often desirable because tourism creates jobs and offer much needed foreign exchange into the country. However, year-on-year visitor growth into areas which hold the major tourism attractions is likely to have impacts on the environment on site and society, as a whole.

The complex interplay of balancing the sustainable development pillars includes economical, environmental and socio-cultural dimensions. This requires a broad understanding and acceptance from different stakeholders, working directly and / or indirectly in the tourism sector. Malaysia is ranked 16th in terms of global inbound tourism receipts, capturing approximately 2% of global market share in 2008. Of increasing relevance, the tourism industry provides 1.7 million jobs or approximately 16% of total employment in 2008. From its 11th position in 2008, with 21.3 million international arrivals, Malaysia entered the UNWTO *Top 10 Major Tourism Destination Ranking* in the 9th position in 2009. From 2006-2009, revenue from the tourism industry increased 67.1% to MYR 53.4 billion and tourist arrivals increased 43.6% to 23.6 million. For 2011, the Ministry of Tourism is targeting an increase in arrivals to 25 million. National planning and budget allocation in Malaysia is projected every five years. For the latest, 10th Malaysia Plan period of 2010-2015, the target is to improve Malaysia's position to be within the Top 10 in global ranking, in terms of tourism *receipts* and increase the sector's contribution by 2.1 times. It is also projected that this will contribute MYR 115 billion in receipts and provides 2 million jobs for the industry by 2015.

However, the projections for Malaysia from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), is more conservative. WTTC anticipate that direct contribution of the travel and tourism to Malaysia's GDP for 2011 is expected to be MYR 56.9 billion, which represents 7.2% of the total GDP), and expected to rise by 5.1% per annum to MYR 93.6 billion (7.7%) in 2021. This is expected to support 768,000 jobs directly; representing 6.7% of total employment. Despite these achievements, several issues need to be addressed, including the need to develop vibrant and iconic tourism products, improve maintenance of existing tourism sites and adoption of more focused tourism promotions.

It is without doubt that the key trend of the tourism industry in Malaysia is that, it is on its way up. This trend points to the increasing role and significant contribution of the industry to the Malaysian economy, particularly in the next ten years. From virtually a zero base in the 1960's, there are now clear indications and a recognition that the tourism industry will continue to play a significant role in the Malaysian economy. In order for tourism to be sustainable, it is vital that effective policies and planning take place *today*. Hence, policy makers, planning officials and stakeholders must identify emerging trends in tourism and orchestrate new measures that will lead to orderly growth (and production of quality products) which benefits both tourists and society. While domestic tourism is more difficult to measure, the figure is often estimated to be up to ten times the number of international

visitors. The statistics demonstrate that tourism can create economic development, investment, and income growth within the country. However, the rapid growth of tourist arrivals can also increase pressure on the natural, cultural and socio-economic environments.

Tourism development in Malaysia, like most parts of the world, is growing at a rapid pace and no doubt, is an essential part in the trade in services and economic development. With continued enhanced spending, bringing with it widespread development, an understanding of the complexities and relationships which co-exist in tourism and the roles played within the concept of sustainable development remains unclear. With the expected rise in tourist arrivals, comes the complex interplay of the social, cultural and environmental dimensions of which sustainable tourism commits to. Therefore, a broad understanding, acceptance and commitment of the different stakeholders, either working directly and indirectly in the industry, must be in place. To capitalize on the emerging trends and opportunities, the tourism industry and the public sector will need to improve on the markets' knowledge of Malaysia and what it has to offer.

In determining the direction of the government's aspirations and policies, lie the challenges and interplay of global declarations, such as Agenda 21, and the creation of sustainable policies at national and local levels. These will cumulatively, lead to sustainable development of the tourism sector amongst its thirteen states. In making the decision to take tourism as a sustainable development option, tourism must be planned and managed so that its influences on environmental, socio-cultural and economic benefits are spread widely throughout society. The question is – can Malaysia remain competitive if the global concern for sustainability is not addressed today?

6. The potential and pitfalls in tourism development

Different approaches to the valuation of goods and services can lead to an inconsistent reporting of outcomes. The dilemma lies in the different approaches to the valuation of goods and services by the three fundamental stakeholders within the tourism industry; policy makers (Government direction and guidelines), the private sector tourism industry (in the business of making money) and local residents (the victims or the beneficiaries?). Sustainable tourism represents a value point of referencing in which the management of tourism impacts takes precedence over market economics – although tension between the two is ever present. Further, tourism impacts rarely take precedence over market economics in practice, even though the term *sustainable tourism* is often used. In tourism ventures within natural environments, economic success and environmental impacts are often negatively associated; therefore, policy makers and the private sector must find a balance between the interest *for* nature and the *impact* of outside influence to these natural areas. As tourism is essentially dependent on the unspoilt nature of a destination's attractions (natural or built), it follows that tourism has the responsibility for, and a need to invest in, the maintenance of the natural environment.

Tourism's relationship with the environment is complex. It involves many activities which can have adverse environmental effects. Tourism, as an industry can no longer claim its success based on economics alone. Many of these negative impacts are linked to the construction of general infrastructure such as roads and airports, and of tourism facilities.

Water, as a natural resource, is often exploited where tourism facilities are concerned. Infrastructure built specifically to generate tourism arrivals such as hotels and resorts, swimming pools and golf courses, generally overuse water which can result in water shortages and degradation of water supplies, as well as generating a greater volume of waste water. A common example is that an average 18-hole golf course built in a tropical country, such as Malaysia, needs a minimum of 1500kg of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides per year and uses as much water for a minimum of 60,000 adults. Without doubt, the quality of the environment, both natural and built, is essential to tourism. What needs to be recognised is that the negative impacts of tourism development can gradually destroy the natural resources on which it depends, if infrastructure is indiscriminately developed for tourism.

The negative impact of tourism usually occurs when the level of visitor use is greater than the environment's ability to cope with this use, within the acceptable limits of natural changes. Uncontrolled tourism development generally poses enormous pressures on any natural area, and the quality of the environment, is unquestionably essential to the success of tourism. In spite of the large amount of literature available documenting the pressures which unplanned and uncontrolled tourism development can have on natural resources, especially in cases of consumption increases in areas where resources are already scarce, the success of tourism is still being qualified by its economic contributions.

Although tourism can cause the same forms of pollution as any other industry like air emissions, noise, solid and liquid waste, littering, sewage, oil and chemical releases, the increase in transport by air, road, rail or sea amplifies an eroding quality of air. Other negative impacts such as land degradation and pollution are also not taken into consideration when economic benefits are recorded. Tourism can create pressures on local resources such as energy consumption, food supply and other raw materials that may already be in short supply. Greater extraction and transport of these resources intensify the physical aspects associated with their exploitation. Due to the seasonal nature of the industry, during peak season, transient residents such as visitors can be as high as ten times that of the low season for some areas. The higher demands and expectations of tourists places pressures that surpasses the natural development process caused by the increased construction of tourism and recreational facilities, including land clearing and extraction of resources for the use of building materials.

As tourist arrivals continuously increase, year-on-year, tourism is now responsible for an important share of carbon emissions. It is estimated that a single transatlantic return flight emits almost half the carbon dioxide emissions produced by everyday usage and consumption of sources, such as lighting and air-conditioning in vehicles, consumed by an average person yearly. Transport emissions and emissions from energy production and use are linked to acid rain, global warming and air pollution. Some of the impacts are quite specifically caused by tourism activities. For example, tour buses often leave their engines running for hours while waiting for arrivals at airports or while waiting to go out on excursions and to, during and from excursions.

However, it has also been maintained that if properly managed, tourism has a huge potential in creating positive effects on the environment by contributing to environmental awareness, protection and conservation. An example made popular by the travelling public

is that tourism, unquestionably, has facilitated a greater awareness of environmental values. Tourism has also successfully served as a tool to finance the protection of natural areas and thus, led to an increase in their economic importance. Therefore, there is an obvious need to balance the use of tourism as a driver of economic development and the management of its public resource consumption. With the continuous increase in tourism arrivals, there is a need to find a balance between the maximisation of income from tourism and that of exploiting resources beyond its extent of being sustainable. The latter would be equivalent to killing the familiar goose which lays the golden egg, and does not make economic sense for either the public or the private sector.

The indication is that sustainability or conservation can mean very different things in different environments and social circumstances, which makes the practicing of the concept even more challenging. If Malaysia wants its tourism industry to succeed, it needs suitable plans and policies to enhance the development of tourism. A large part of tourism is about travel and the role of the public and private sectors must come together in addressing common goals. In Malaysia, it is largely due to the improvement of such private-public relationship which had contributed to the expansion of tourism. Inevitably, in order for all stakeholders to benefit from tourism, attention needs to be given towards the perceptions and understanding of the participants, including the tourists. This need to take into account the level of involvement each brings to the table and impacts of such involvement. Nevertheless, it is also critical to accept the roles played by the different stakeholders and their inter-relationships. In order for tourism to be sustainable, it is vital that a win-win situation be identified and its implications for sustainable development which benefits economic, social and environmental carrying capacity. Whichever way you look at it, sustainability of the natural and cultural environment is an integral part of the tourism industry.

7. The development of sustainable tourism

The tourism industry is important to Malaysia, as it assists in fulfilling global agendas, whilst serving as a source for economic development. Tourism, like many other sectors of the economy, uses resources, generates wastes and creates environmental, cultural and social costs. The processes laid out in Agenda 21 (and, Local Agenda 21) revitalized the commitment on goals and objectives set out at the Rio Summit which addressed environmental conservation and socio-cultural interactions. The main issues for integration under Agenda 21 are within the areas of social and economic involvement of major groups such as women, children, youth, non-governmental organisations and local authorities; especially in the promotion of education, public awareness and training.

The Ministry of Tourism has advanced the development of tourism by concentrating on the development of policies, strategies and master plans for sustainable tourism. This had required continuous cooperation and consultation among all stakeholders, including the private sector, academic institutions, local communities, and relevant non-government organisations. It also called for capacity building across sectors and public participation to include and involve rural communities. Policies had included financial support and incentives for tour operators and accommodation investors to play a continuing role in developing the tourism sector; however, these policies had not included programmes nor indicated tools and instruments to cover appropriate institutional, legal, economic, social and environmental monitoring frameworks, nor do they include voluntary initiatives and

agreements such as a commitment to corporate social responsibilities (CSR), amongst the stakeholders.

A lot of sustainability debates in Malaysia are about process failures; failures to engage and listen to the right people and organisations in the consideration of long-term, as well as immediate impacts. To take into account wider and less obvious upstream or downstream effects, consultative decision-making can narrow gaps between differing motivations to development and quite rightly, there has been much attention in addressing these deficiencies. It has to be noted that progress has been made in many areas with a commitment to open and transparent participative decision-making. This is accepted as an essential foundation for sustainable solutions across the national Government and its agencies.

To further enhance the sustainability agenda, the extent and depth of discussions has revealed many gaps in the lack of analytical tools in assisting comprehension and acceptance. There has also been a growth in the number of conceptual approaches such as life-cycle analysis, which has been vital in providing a structure for analysis, especially in the identification of priorities and the monitoring of progress in fractions of government agencies. But it is important to keep in mind that such techniques are tools to help decision-making and they do not make the decision itself. All they can practically do is provide direction to ensure that all the economic, social and environmental factors are identified. But assessing the trade-offs between, say, jobs, social cohesion and environmental damage will always be a political decision, and not an academic equation; thus, clear and defined net cost/benefit conclusions are not always the main consideration. This broadly considers how sustainable development has developed in Malaysia and continues to be managed in recent years.

8. Tourism as a tool for sustainable development

Tourism is considered to be a trade in services and differs from the trade in goods. Tourists travel to consume at the host destination, and in the case of international travel this is often, referred as cross-border consumption. With this, the development of tourism has direct environmental, economic and socio-cultural impacts on the consumption patterns within a host country. In terms of economic development, the appeal of tourism is that it can create jobs and stimulate business opportunities. It also generates foreign exchange earnings, injects capital and new money into the development of the local economy. Tourism contributes to government revenue generation through taxes and levies, either directly and/or indirectly. It can also stimulate regional development and the development of infrastructure such as roads, airports, and improve telecommunication links. Therefore, the quality and standard of life for local residents can be enhanced by economic diversification through tourism. Bearing in mind that tourism development can have a positive or a negative impact, or both, it is considered to be a powerful tool for sustainable development.

Where environmental and cultural conservation can lead to an increase of economic opportunities through the development of tourism, this can also be an incentive to protect natural resources; rather than allow for further degradation. Tourism can create financial resources which can be used for overall conservation programs and activities, such as improved park ranger salaries, park maintenance, and the establishment of more national

parks and protected areas. Tourism can also significantly contribute to environmental protection, conservation and the restoration of biological diversity and the sustainable use of natural resources. By nature of tourism's demand of aesthetic standards, pristine sites and natural areas are considered valuable for it to be an attraction; and the need to keep the attraction appealing can lead to the creation of additional natural areas to be protected as public parks. These protected areas can then further contribute to sustainability, in ways that have not yet been fully explored; such as providing a base for new medical treatments or new industries or just by serving as carbon sinks. On the other hand, negative consequences from tourism arise when the level and type of visitor use is greater than the environment's ability to cope with this use within the acceptable limits of natural changes.

For example, everyone drinks water and generates waste. Uncontrolled conventional tourism poses potential threats to natural areas if visitors are not managed properly. It can also put a strain on water resources, which can lead to local populations competing for the use of critical resources and increased costs for purification. Uncontrolled tourism development can also put enormous pressures on an area and lead to land degradation, increased pollution and discharges of solid and liquid waste, habitat loss, and heightened the vulnerability of environmentally sensitive areas such as marine and terrestrial habitats. The negative physical impacts of tourism development include construction activities, infrastructure development, deforestation and unsustainable use of the land. The unplanned rapid development of tourism can also create significant social disruptions and increase environmental and ecological pressures.

The government's focus on the economic pillar alone can lead to deficiencies affecting the environmental and social pillars. Tourism development is often compared to a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be a tool for sustainable development. On the other, if not managed adequately, tourism can significantly impede sustainable development. Of central importance, national policies need to reflect a high level of commitment to environmental management, which include strategies to effectively limit social and environmental impacts, in the short and long term, which ensures equitable sharing of benefits.

9. Malaysia's response to the principles of sustainable tourism development

Today, sustainable development is a core issue implicating every step of development. Sustainable development aims to allocate the limited natural resources not only for this generation, but also for future generations. It aims to balance development and the environment, in addition to, maintenance of an appropriate balance between economic and environmental development. As the travel and tourism industry continues to grow in Malaysia, the industry must face up to serious and difficult choices about its future. The decisions made now will, for years, affect the way of life, standards of living, and economic prospects of residents in the country. Based on the attractions which Malaysia is promoting in order to differentiate itself regionally and internationally, many of these decisions may be irreversible. Once Malaysia loses its character which makes it distinctive and attractive to tourists, it will also lose the opportunities that go with a tourist-based economy which is increasingly competitive.

In ensuring that development is going in the right direction, a number of political actions have been determined. Sustainable development has become a principle practice and many

of the recommendations of Agenda 21 have guided the new pathway of policies in addressing the issues. In the recently released 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015), the recognition that the quality of the environment, both natural and man-made, is essential to tourism is duly acknowledged. However, tourism's relationship with the environment is complex. It involves many activities that can have adverse environmental effects. Many of these impacts are linked with the construction of general infrastructure such as roads and airports, and of tourism facilities, including resorts, hotels, restaurants, shops, golf courses and marinas. The guidelines and details of how negative impacts of tourism development, which can gradually destroy natural resources on which it depends, is however, lacking.

The conflict of interest between public and private sectors in tourism development has been well-documented. If private enterprises remain, to a great extent, unregulated, it is expected that short-term profit maximisation will be sought over and above the interests of sustainability. The growing attention towards tourism development in Malaysia has been centrally driven by the potential economic benefits the industry can bring. This traditional view is now complicated not only by trends towards more socially and environmentally responsible travel but also in the intangible nature of the industry whereby stakeholders are seeking direct involvement in the development of tourism, especially where natural and socio-cultural integrities are concern.

To achieve the 2015 targets set under the 10th Malaysia Plan, the focus will be on attracting a larger share of high spending travelers; and capturing a higher share of high growth segments. The target segments are Russia, India, China and the Middle East, in addition to increasing the overall total number of tourist arrivals from current markets. For this purpose, select key strategies are promoted. The marketing approaches for unique and distinctive travel patterns and needs for visitors are defined. The aim is to attract the markets seeking nature and adventure (including ecotourism), cultural diversity, family fun, affordable luxury, and Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE).

There is also emphasis for the improvement of existing tourism products through the creation of focused tourism clusters that will leverage on existing and new iconic tourism products, which supports sustainable tourism; such as natural icons within the thirteen states in Malaysia; e.g. the Geopark and Pulau Payar Marine Park in Langkawi, Georgetown (a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Penang), Sipadan Island and Kinabalu Park, (a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Sabah) and the Sarawak Cultural Village and Gunung Mulu National Park (a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Sarawak). Subsequently, considerable budgets are allocated for the improvement and maintenance of tourist sites through multiple approaches. The framework for funding mechanisms is anticipated to be via Government linked companies and corporate sponsorship. It is also expected that stronger enforcement and imposition of entrance fees, particularly in environmentally sensitive and heritage sites, will further enhance the importance in conserving these sites.

It has also been recognised that by realigning promotional and advertising activities with the physical presence of Tourism Malaysia offices overseas, this will in turn enhance Malaysia's presence with the identified core market segments. To further affirm the government's commitment to sustainable tourism development, the beginning of a progressive certification of tourism products and activities will be implemented to ensure that quality, sustainability and safety are accentuated. With this in mind, particularly where national guidelines exist, the concept of sustainable development had influenced legislation,

and policies are continuously building on recommendations from the Brundtland Report and processes within Agenda 21.

10. Conclusion

The debate over environmental conservation and protection is often about the balance between leaving the area in its natural state and / or exploiting it for economic development. This choice is often fraught with pressures from stakeholders with differing motivations. Thus, an atmosphere of mutual cooperation is necessary to ensure that tourism economic opportunities are translated to social and environmental benefits for all and not limited to segments of society. One of many ways to achieve this is by forming strategic alliances with partners from all sectors in creating and establishing links between sustainable economic development and the government's social and environmental obligations.

The call from the UNCD since the Brundtland Report remains as valid and urgent as ever today. The description of similar processes identified in the Brundtland Report has been applied to organisations, including tourism businesses, and these have to some extent encouraged real progress towards the vision for sustainable development. Although it had been necessary to make changes in achieving the Brundtland Report's goals for sustainable development, it is easy to overlook that progress had been made. The continuous effort now is to concentrate on replicating and dispersion of that progress. The twenty years since the Brundtland Report has seen all the processes associated with globalisation developed at a bewildering pace. This, in turn, has helped encourage much greater awareness and understanding of the economic, environmental and social challenges across the world.

There is a strong recognition that effective sustainable development can only be achieved with the engagement of society as a whole. Sustainable development thinking needs to be integrated and ingrained in policy and decision-making at all levels. This had required the development of processes and procedures from the United Nations through all levels of government and individual businesses and organisations. Over the next twenty years, the aim is for sustainable development processes to improve to an extent whereby, sustainability thinking is the norm which does not require special units, procedures or written instructions as it does now.

The same can be said of that which has been applied to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The concept of CSR has become so ingrained in some business practices that it is a self promoting and sustaining end in itself. This has since provided a broad framework for businesses in generating profits which maximises positive contribution to society. Although tourism as an industry will never be completely sustainable, as every industry has its impacts, it can work towards being more sustainable in many ways. Key issues identified include the need for responsible planning and management, where a balance must be found between limits and usage so that changes are monitored. In Malaysia, there remains a strong sentiment that environmental management is the responsibility of the public sector, as effective implementation of sustainable development practices and environmental monitoring, is seen to be for the long-term. This has proven to be a difficult task as methods of information gathering had not expanded, and reinforced basic communication, intellectual, and interpersonal values, are not embedded into private-sector management practices.

Tourism development has helped with environmental protection by creating awareness on its values and in generating mass opinions for conservation; it has also contributed to the promotion of intercultural understanding and acceptance within the country itself. As Malaysia has a multiethnic population, tourism has narrowed the gap between the different ethnic groups. As tourism undergoes fundamental changes globally, from the experiences sought, to setting demands on regulations and an increase in budget for environmental protection, signs of these shifts have been progressively evident. This has varied from statements on natural and cultural values to stipulation of conservation fees. In spite of these, the challenges deriving from differing policy approaches indicates that the interests of all parties are not safeguarded from commercial exploitation and tourism benefits are not transcribed to society and tourists alike.

More attention can be paid to applying existing techniques, concepts and tools where they can add most value. There is certainly the need to build on and exploit the core competencies of different stakeholders. The Malaysian Government has set the broad policy frameworks and through its fiscal, regulatory, incentives and disincentives, catalysed and inspired actions which support sustainability. The Brundtland Report has set out to do, and has done well, in providing a platform and focus for exchanging experience and learning between governments, society and businesses. This had encouraged the networking and scaling up of successes in practical progress whereby sustainable development can work. However, there is a need for a more cohesive interaction amongst implementing stakeholders in embracing tourism within the sustainable development option; taking into consideration the varied depth of knowledge, working practices and priorities of the different stakeholders. The linkage to sustainability and key issues including the need for responsible planning and management is found, between limits and usage, and changes monitored. This requires long-term management and recognition that change is often cumulative, gradual and irreversible.

Hence, in order to address the sustainability of tourism, the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development must include the collective interests of all stakeholders. The tourism industry in Malaysia has to face some serious and difficult choices about its future. The decisions made now will, for years after, affect the lifestyles and economic opportunity of the country. For any tourism development to have the desired effect, it is necessary to position tourism as an improvement to the quality of life for society at large and not just to tourists and visitors. The pitfall of a bottom-up or top-down approach in tourism intervention is largely influenced by the values, rights and responsibilities of the implementing stakeholders. The ability to use data, exercise judgment, evaluate risks, and solve genuine and emerging concerns will determine options for continuing on the road of the past, or address emerging concerns about the rapid development of the industry now to ensure that its future remain just as profitable. The effects on the quality of life of host residents can no longer be determined by past performance.

Tourists, visitors and residents are increasingly demanding that the industry pursue sustainability and care of the environment; as opposed to unconstrained economic growth. It can be argued that the GDP or per capita income is incomplete measures of well-being. These measures not only do not accurately portray the distribution of economic benefits among local people nor do they realistically reflect on important quality of life factors, social

distribution of existing and anticipated costs and benefits of resource use. Although by its very nature, the concept of sustainability makes it difficult to coordinate and monitor, the implementation of sustainable development in the formulation of effective policies and, the deciding factors will have to be how policy assessments are based. Globally accepted principles can contribute to accelerated and effective implementation of sustainable development, even where the prevailing institutional approaches compartmentalise ecological, social, economic and cultural issues, as separate factors. In conclusion, there is certainly a need to systematically explore the linkages that exist, whether recognised or not, between tourism, the environment and sustainability as the Brundtland Report recommended more than twenty years ago.

11. Acknowledgement

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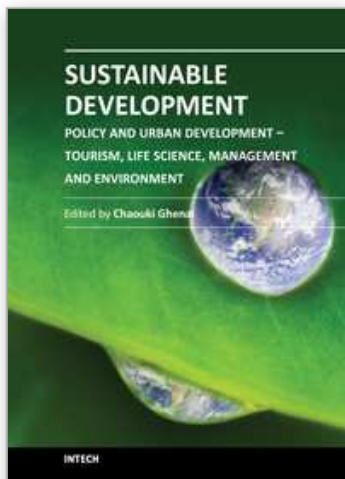
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The technological advancement of our civilization has created a consumer society expanding faster than the planet's resources allow, with our resource and energy needs rising exponentially in the past century. Securing the future of the human race will require an improved understanding of the environment as well as of technological solutions, mindsets and behaviors in line with modes of development that the ecosphere of our planet can support. Sustainable development offers an approach that would be practical to fuse with the managerial strategies and assessment tools for policy and decision makers at the regional planning level.

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