

Development People



• Fishermen's livelihoods in India are under threat from tourism. © Tourism Concern

As the holiday season takes hold, **Tricia Barnett**, Director of Tourism Concern, provides a stark reminder of the negative impact that tourism can have on local communities.

Describe your role at Tourism Concern?

In the early days, Tourism Concern was very focussed on development education and campaigning because we knew that tourism is a fantastic window for teaching people about a whole range of development issues. Until you go on holiday, the disparity between those with wealth and those who are poor are remote from you – you only see them on television or read about them in newspapers. Holidays bring you face-to-face with development issues.

Now my role is now much more focussed on trying to get the tourism industry to understand what human rights are and what they need to do to ensure human rights are respected and protected in their overseas business activities. Before we started working on this, UK tour operators didn't know what corporate social responsibility was, nor did they have any interest in understanding the impact that tourism has on people living in destinations. Now, I would say they are taking

a lead globally, although there is still a long way to go. I think that is in a huge part due to Tourism Concern.

Our efforts to highlight exploitation in the tourism industry have forced it to look at how it works. Tourism Concern is a human rights campaigning organisation, although since the 26 December 2004 tsunami we have been involved in a development project to empower coastal people whose homes and livelihoods are threatened by tourism developments.

What inspired you to work in the sector?

I didn't come into tourism thinking it was part of the development sector. In my early life, I spent a huge amount of time travelling around the world for my own enjoyment. It wasn't until later that I realised that I was part of a brigade that had opened up regions to mass tourism and the consequences of that were that local people and visitors no longer had a relationship of hospitality and mutual benefit. It had

become a relationship of quick money and rapid growth. This was often in a way that was against the best interests of the local people.

I wanted to understand that better and explore the roots of tourism, and I became increasingly interested in what needed to happen to ensure tourism's benefits were equitably shared.

What are you working on at the moment?

Our priority at the moment is water, and the way that water is abused by resorts around the world. For 20 years, we have been hearing stories about impoverished communities living near hotels and resorts who go without water, while tourists play on golf courses and swim in the pool, which the developers provide without thinking about sharing water provision with locals. With climate change increasing water scarcity in many tourism destinations, combined with tourism's ongoing expansion – particularly in

developing countries where access to water for the poor remains inadequate, the situation is likely to become far worse.

What outcome do you hope this will have?

We would love UK development agencies to understand the role of tourism and its impact on local people's human rights, including the environment. Tourism is a serious issue and it dovetails into the work of many development agencies.

We want tour operators in this country to take on board the fact that they have power over the development and construction of hotels and resorts that can help ensure that the water needs of local people are met, as well as the resort's needs. We would like our on-site research to inform guidelines for tour operators and local authorities on how best to achieve fairness in water distribution.

What is the most rewarding and most difficult part of your job?

The most rewarding part is meeting people on the ground; listening to their stories, meeting the activists, and knowing that Tourism Concern is fulfilling a need. Whether it is meeting with the indigenous Mursi people of south Ethiopia and trying to analyse and understand why the relationship they have with tourists has become so exploitative and unpleasant for both sides, to people who are campaigning against coastal regulations that promote tourism at the expense of fishermen's livelihoods in India, it is a serious privilege to meet with them.

What are the most common challenges that Tourism Concern faces in its work?

The two main challenges are land issues – people's right to their homes and livelihoods – and finding the finance to support us to do the work. It used to be that people were displaced from their homes for conservation and tourism in national parks, in East Africa for example. Now they are being displaced from their homes by international tour operators.

Tourism is marginalised from the thinking of funders, NGOs and other agencies. Many see tourism only as a positive – it brings money to people – and are not open to discussing the other side. In disasters and emergencies, for example, all we ask is that development agencies include tourism into their needs assessments. It might not apply, but actually you might find that the farmer can no longer farm because the water used to irrigate his crops is being diverted to the tourism resorts. Tourism seeps deeply into all sorts of development issues, and certainly has impacts on agriculture, farming and fishing.

What, in your opinion, is Tourism Concern's most significant achievement?

We have lots of them! We saved 20,000 people from being uprooted from their homes for a major development in Zanzibar; we assisted in empowering coastal people in Sri Lanka and India post-tsunami to challenge their displacements and loss of livelihoods; we got the UK Government to change the way it works around Foreign Office advisories which still penalised countries if there had been a 'terrorist attack' several years after issues had been resolved.

One of the most important things has been to get sustainable tourism onto the agenda in schools and universities, and to transform the way tourism is taught.

Where would you like Tourism Concern to be in five years time?

Not to be fretting about income, and being able to support those who come to us for help in a more sustainable way.

What is the key challenge for the international development sector in the coming year?

From a Tourism Concern perspective, I feel that the sector should be asking for more support to ensure that the activities of British businesses overseas are working alongside human rights guidance for business. The sector needs to be encouraging that with all the businesses they work with, and encouraging the Government to take that on board.



Tricia Barnett is the Director of Tourism Concern. Visit the website for more information about their work: www.tourismconcern.org



• Cultural exchanges foster greater understanding. © Tourism Concern