Asia Pacific Slowly Wakes Up to Carbon-Neutral Tourism

2008-05-02

Asia's carbon-neutral pioneers say this is already bringing them credibility in lucrative longhaul markets such as Europe and North America. These are markets where an increasing number of consumers and tour operators now insist on green benchmarking before booking hotels, tours and ground handling services in Asia Pacific.

Edwin Fuller, President and Managing Director of Marriott Lodging International admitted to delegates at the PATA CEO Challenge 2008: Confronting Climate Change in Bangkok today: "In Europe, consumers say: 'We will not buy your hotel unless you have an environmental program we can see.'"

Unsurprisingly, those environmental programs are now springing up in the private sector, despite a lack of incentives or environmental policy initiatives at government level in Asia.

In the private sector, for example, Six Senses Resorts & Spas now invests 0.5% of gross income from each hotel back into a sustainable, environmental and responsible fund (SERF). This averages out at US$100,000 per hotel per year across the group.

Six Senses' carbon offset program now replaces all carbon emissions from guests' flights as well as emissions from hotel operations. The company offsets emissions from coal fired power plants in South India by replacing them with wind turbines.

Banyan Tree Hotels and Resorts has a corporate goal to cut carbon emissions between 10-30% per property and 20% across the group within 12 months.

Marriott aims to reduce emissions by 20% in 10 years. Ninety-six percent of its hotels have embraced recycling. The remaining 4% can't do it yet, because they lack support or facilities from the surrounding communities.

Australia-based tour operator Intrepid Travel aims to become a carbon-neutral company by the end of 2009.

Whole destinations such as Sri Lanka and New Zealand are striving towards carbon-neutral status.

New Zealand aspires to become a fully sustainable, carbon neutral, destination by 2015.

Sri Lanka is adopting multiple environmental codes. It aims to be carbon-neutral within 10 years by positioning itself as a "Tourism Earth Lung".

"We're offsetting, which also offsets the guilt of the longhaul market," said Mr Renton de Alwis, Chairman of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority.

Speakers at the PATA CEO Challenge said it was crucial to get staff fully motivated and empowered on carbon neutral objectives. They identified the need for local supply chains to create "zero food miles".

Representatives from leading companies such as Banyan Tree, Intrepid Travel and Europe-based TUI told delegates that they were more than happy to share carbon-neutral best practice techniques with small companies in Asia Pacific who may lack investment.

Mr Sonu Shivdasani, Chairman and CEO of Six Senses, summed up the direction the tourism industry is heading. He told delegates: "The travel industry needs sweeping goals. Not improvements of 10 to 20%, but 50 to 100%. Goals need to be structured in profit and loss plans. Eventually, we need to offset travel entirely," he said.

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The URL for this story is:
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