

Growing Sustainable Tourism: The Seychelles Approach

**By Alain St. Ange,
CEO, Seychelles Tourism Board**

Seychelles, by virtue of its small population of a mere 87,000 people, may be studied as a microcosm and a mirror for some of the issues of climate change.

Seychelles is an archipelago of some 115 sparkling islands, located between 4 and 10 degrees south of the equator in the western Indian Ocean. Only settled in 1756 by French settlers, it was first a French colony before being ceded to Britain in 1812, whose colony it remained until its independence in 1976. Today, the Republic of Seychelles has a multi-party political system with an executive president as head of state and government.

We have been fortunate to have, by history, the opportunity to make of our isolation and remoteness, a very real strength – to weld the many ethnic strains of our people into a vibrant but tranquil nation. We, in the Seychelles, pride ourselves on our claim that our islands are not only the land of perpetual summer, but also a place where harmony is a way of life. That stability is the foundation of our society and, of course, the pillar of one of the lifelines of our economy – our tourism industry.

I believe that this is a crucial starting point for any tourism industry; in order to be in a position to bring peace to the world through tourism, we first have to be able, and to be willing, to bring peace to ourselves, at home. At the same time, we must invest in the long-term prosperity and sustainability of our tourism industries and not forget the famous saying, “he who would conquer the world, must first conquer himself.”

Like mother Africa, the Seychelles islands have many natural attributes. Nature has blessed Africa with so much sublime natural beauty, rich cultures, lush forests, spectacular savannahs, amazing flora and fauna, and a suite of activities that are the envy of the world and with all the space in the world to enjoy them.

Africa has untold potential to develop its respective tourism industries to the sky, capitalizing on the bounty of Mother Nature, but at the same time, ensuring that any exploitation is sustainable in nature and will guarantee that the integrity of the underlying attributes remain intact for future generations to enjoy and for future generations to benefit from. We must take pains to ensure that we do not commit the cardinal sin of succumbing to appetites for short-term profit and cut through the very branch upon which we are seated and upon which we depend for our livelihood – for our very existence!

In a world where there is hardly any country that is not competing in the highly competitive tourism arena, tourism is about successfully raising one’s profile, while ensuring that its house is in order and that its tourism products are, of course, worthy. In

recent remarks, the secretary general of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has emphasized the critical importance of quality in the development of a competitive tourism sector. My remarks come in the wake of the first public appearance of the UN Steering Committee on Tourism for Development, which reflects the increasing relevance of tourism in the development agenda and represents a clear commitment of the UN system in making tourism work for development.

How do we achieve this? How do we ensure that we stick out in the marketplace, head and shoulders above the competition? And also ensure that our industry remains healthy and vigorous in the long term?

A Case Study of Seychelles' Tourism

To answer some of these questions, I would like to present you with a short case study of Seychelles' tourism. Seychelles depends on its tourism industry. Tourism remains the pillar of the Seychelles economy. We need to succeed with our tourism industry.

In 2009, following the crash of financial sectors in America and Europe, and the resulting recessions, Seychelles experienced a serious dip in its visitor arrival figures and, therefore, in its revenue. It was decided that change was needed in the way the country was approaching its tourism industry, along with a serious streamlining and invigoration of institutions and also resources, both human and otherwise.

What then took place set the stage for the revitalization of Seychelles' tourism industry, and it paved the way for the successes that we have since enjoyed.

Firstly, government, in the new role of facilitator, entered into a new partnership with the private sector, which now assumed responsibility for its own industry. The composition of the board of the Seychelles Tourism Board was revisited to allocate a majority of board-member positions to private-sector players, and this as government guaranteed the continued funding of the board's activities and of its total budget.

With local stakeholders now in the driving seat, the resulting new synergy has allowed much-needed changes to be affected on the ground that, together, have enabled Seychelles to make greater and more efficient use of its resources across the board. Fresh, new policies have been adopted vis-à-vis open skies policy and airlift, which have resulted in a marked increase in the number of visitors arriving on our shores. New markets in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and the Americas are being explored together with new synergies for twin-hub vacations.

New initiatives designed to raise our profile internationally have included schemes such as appointing Seychelles Tourism Ambassadors – Seychellois nationals living abroad who are prepared to use their contacts and local knowledge of their country of residence to promote Seychelles as a tourism destination. We have Seychellois nationals everywhere in the world and as we are in Zambia, I have just appointed Seychellois Emily Luring yesterday as our latest Tourism Ambassador for Zambia.

We also have our Friends of Seychelles Press Program. This is for people who are members of the international press with loyalty to, and extensive knowledge of, Seychelles, and who are important conduits for disseminating news items about the islands.

To create even greater dynamism, President James Michel took the helm and the portfolio for tourism and asked the nation to refocus on a Seychelles' brand of tourism – that unique suite of attributes, natural beauty, culture, activities and events that make Seychelles what it is. He called on the entire country to stand behind its tourism industry and to get involved in making things happen.

The president reiterated what was becoming evident; although our islands have been blessed with perpetual summer, the most enticing waters and sublime beaches, these alone cannot continue to form the foundation of our tourism industry. Today's discerning traveler is also seeking "experiences" in terms of cultural encounters and activities, and any successful tourism industry must be in a position to provide these. We have to learn to expand and diversify our product base, while at the same time ensuring that whatever we do today in the name of enhancing our industry does not come at the expense of tomorrow.

Once we have identified the general direction that our tourism will take in terms of effectively showcasing all that we have to offer, providing quality products across the board, and after we have also targeted our markets, both traditional and emerging, we are still left with my earlier question: How can we differentiate ourselves from the competition? How can we raise our profile and create awareness about ourselves as a destination?

To achieve these things we must be prepared to abandon traditional viewpoints and entrenched positions and start thinking out of the box. An interesting place to start this process is perhaps by recognizing that the competition may be used to our (and their) advantage. In Seychelles, we are looking at developing tourism synergies with our neighbors on the African continent. Our recently launched "From the Big Five to the Best Five" campaign twins the attributes of East Africa and South Africa with those of Seychelles, creating an enticing combination of experiences for potential visitors to enjoy.

What can we do to get people interested in Africa? We, in Seychelles, believe that cultivating a raft of international events is one way of winning international participation and vital press coverage, and we have recently enjoyed both in ample measure with the launch of the first edition of the Seychelles "Carnaval International de Victoria" in March 2011.

Here, we saw some participation from our fellow African states in this highly successful event, which has since been reported around the world, while, sadly, others did not attend. I maintain that if our tourism is to flourish, Africa must do for Africa, standing alongside our African brothers and sisters and together doing all in our power to raise the

profile of our continent. South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zanzibar, Tanzania, were present at the Seychelles carnival of carnivals. The islands of Madagascar and La Reunion from the Indian Ocean islands group joined them. That was it from Africa as part of an event for the community of nations where 21 countries participated. As a continent, as people from Africa, we missed a great opportunity to see our cultural groups parade side by side with delegations from the best carnivals of the world.

The biggest press contingent ever that traveled to Seychelles all covered this carnival of carnivals because it is unique. It remains the only carnival that brings together the best carnivals of the world and gets them to parade in one carnival procession alongside the cultural groups from the Community of Nations. The next edition of this unique event in Africa is March 2-4, 2012. In this edition, we are inviting participation from American Indians, Pacific islanders from Hawaii, Aborigines from Australia, the Pygmy people from Gabon, etc.

As we bring in new events for the Community of Nations to come together, we must sadly note that some great platforms have also come and gone (two that immediately spring to mind are the Cape to Rio Race and the Paris-Dakar, which was abandoned for security reasons) but not without first leaving us with an important message, “tourism and insecurity cannot co-exist!”

A recent resounding success on the continent was South Africa’s hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, which most definitely captured the world’s attention and imagination. Africa is crying out for a successor to that great event, and we should now do everything in our power to provide it. Let us put our heads together to come up with a worthy successor, for it is in such grand spectacles that bring us all together that the grandeur of Africa becomes resplendent for all to see and resonates around the planet.

We need to strive to maximize interest in Africa. In the domain of culture and music, for example, this would allow visitors to experience our unique culture. We all know that African music is very popular worldwide.

Have we as a continent really rallied to make an event of events of African music? Popularizing culture increases yield from tourism and ensures that the tourism dollar is spread around.

I raise that as one example of an area we might all rally to further develop that will and could help change the perception of Africa.

It is through such events that we can win hearts, influence minds and genuinely affect change for the better. Have we not all held in our hearts the golden image of a world united by football? I am certain we all recognize that the lofty goals of oneness, harmony, and by extension, peace, can be realistically achieved in this and other ways. Our task is to find them, nurture them and bring them to reality.

Before we can hope to achieve that, there is another crucial component to the development of successful tourism that we shall ignore at our peril – sustainability. This is the internal-looking face of our tourism industry that asks us to examine how we manage this resource.

Long gone are the days when any of us can afford to ignore considerations of effective power, water and waste management, which underpin current and future levels of tourism development. We must ensure that our tourism industries benefit our local communities, taking every pain to mitigate against the negative impacts of tourism development on our fragile environments and communities, the burden of increased foreign workforces, the threat of tourist numbers to our own cultures and ways of life, and to the very fabric of our societies.

Sustainability is about the continual checking of ourselves, by ourselves, as we hasten in the achievement of our goals. It is about the setting up of an efficient system of checks and balances to ensure that we do not get ahead of ourselves, but rather strive to ensure that all that we may do today, we shall still have the capability to do tomorrow.

Fellow Africans, dear participants, I would like to be able to state that these are the challenges of the future. But this is not the case. These are forces that demand an immediate and pressing response from us – here and now! And we will only surmount them by our putting, each of us, our own backyards in order, combating a lack of security whenever and wherever it threatens and by combining forces on the international stage to raise our individual and collective profiles for the betterment of our tourism industries, while regulating the development of those industries to ensure that they grow in a sustainable way.

Then, and only then, can we really hope to make a difference to our world through tourism...