

Tourism and Renewable Energy – in the Sign of the Sun

**By Max Haberstroh,
International Consultant on Sustainable Tourism Branding,
Destination Management, Marketing**

Energy and its Higher Purpose

We have all seen the headlines: houses in Alaska and Siberia collapse, as permafrost is melting; mountains lose their snow caps; glaciers in the Alps recede and disappear; polar-ice breaks into pieces, leaving behind the familiar picture of a lonesome bear desperately rafting on the floe; hurricanes leave their deadly track in American towns and landscapes; dunes in the Gobi desert threaten fertile farmland; wells are drying out in the Sahara; droughts are occurring in parts of Africa, while floods hit interior and coastline cities – as witnessed currently in Thailand; and forests and houses fall prey to uncontrolled fire blazes. Increased volcano eruptions, sudden earthquakes and deadly tsunamis have become a constant challenge to modern civilization. We have become a threatened civilization, whose machinery is still largely kept in motion by oil and coal – air-polluting fossil energies that are running short.

As we are all aware, some experts say that there have always been climate changes throughout Earth's existence, and, as a matter of fact, civilizations have come and gone. The difference today is that, as scientists found out, these changes are to an important degree caused by human activities and, in return, affect a dramatically increased world population, disregarding whether they live in shacks of poignant poverty or operate their highly sensitive devices of a sophisticated lifestyle. Hence, the human impact has ceased to be regarded as negligible. Still, we must not forget that, responsible for a great deal of public and private transport and running hotels and leisure facilities, travel and tourism has well its share of CO₂ and greenhouse gas emissions (GHG).

In an interview with the Washington Post, media mogul Ted Turner said: "I think the situation with global climate change is a life-or-death issue for us that we have to get on right away ... We'll be moving from subsidizing a dying smokestack industry to going to clean, renewable electrical power, locally produced. It will be terrific for our economy."

The matter of global climate change is not all about CO₂ and GHG emissions. When smog is in the air, people's health is at stake. Environmentalists point to diminishing rainforests, fossil and nuclear energy calamities and an almost pandemic spread of garbage. Hence, there is no conscious awareness of a "ticking clock."

The way our industrial society has developed until today is indisputably linked with fossil-energy production. How would the economy have developed, had James Watt not invented the steam engine, using coal as its most appropriate energy source? What if,

instead, he had shown up with a solar-powered steam engine, driven by a parabolic mirror, like the one presented at the Paris World Exhibition in 1878?

However, there was coal in abundance. Fossil energy and combustion, the “myth of the big” and centralization were characteristic for the Industrial Revolution.

Ultimately, energy means power. For Rudolf Diesel, who lived in the 19th/early 20th century, this was a special challenge. His striving for independence from foreign oil was reflected in his book “Solidarism.” At the Paris World Exhibition in 1900, Diesel’s engine was driven by peanut oil – very impressive, but not very effective. However, Rudolf Diesel stuck to his mission. Today, there are diesel engines in everything from cars to construction machines to cruise ships.

To be truthful, the consequence of his invention is that Rudolf Diesel made an essential contribution to the proliferation of fossil energy, but the crucial thing that matters is that he wanted to serve humanity. In fact, Diesel’s invention has influenced our lifestyle until today.

A Trendsetting Vision to “Solar Revolution”

A trend-setting visionary in communication technology, Steve Jobs has created a new lifestyle. His vision was not to become a billionaire; his vision was for Apple to create a computer for everyone. He called it a “personal computer.” Today, PC, the Internet, Facebook and mobile communication have become common ingredients of modern lifestyle.

Another lifestyle trendsetter is indisputably travel and tourism. Tourism may lead to “prosperity and peace” – as the UNWTO says. Nonetheless, there is a more gloomy side of tourism. In his book “The Final Call,” Leo Hickman wonders who would really pay for the collateral damage caused by tourism.

Both in tourism and the energy business, it is easy to find dubious practices negatively affecting people. With millions more travelers predicted from emerging powerhouses like China and India, we have only a vague idea of tourism and its energy needs in times to come.

Every one anticipates that hotel heating, cooling and illumination are constantly available. But nobody likes being exposed to the sound of diesel-propelled power engines in holiday lodges. And hardly anyone would frown at being offered electric mobility from airport to hotel, or electric-shuttle services at trade fairs and exhibitions.

In many developing countries, access to both electrical power and electronic communication is insufficient or non-existent. Wood and charcoal are often the only energy sources in rural areas. People are out of reach of any existing power grid. Solar energy devices and mobile phones provide a solution.

Sometimes visions do come true, if the people in charge want it badly enough. The crucial point is leadership – “visionary” leadership. It’s a matter of entrepreneurial capability and political will. In terms of energy, it’s about harnessing the limitless power of the sun and realizing the great vision that “everyone can be an unlimited clean-energy producer.”

Where are the protagonists who make this vision a cause for tourism stakeholders? Where are the tourism organizations that are ready to “energize” their concepts with a strong, new and cohesive approach – the “solar” approach? Where are those cross-corporate pioneers who set benchmarks of making renewable energy the pivot of sustainable tourism?

The sun is shown on so many national flags and coats of arms. The sun is an indispensable ingredient to wonderful holidays. The sun has always been the “face of tourism” on catalogues and advertisements. Providing the basic impulse for any kind of movement and life, the sun is a symbol of freedom, happiness, wealth, success, beauty and unification. The sun is the “face of energy,” the symbol of an emerging Solar Age. Let’s make the sun the interface of renewable energy and clean global travel and tourism!

It’s time to say good-bye to the wait-and-see attitude – to say farewell to needless “combustion” and consumption. Let’s set a new trend towards solidarity and authenticity in cross-corporate relationships! It’s all up to pioneering decision makers. Renewable energy and sustainable travel and tourism can provide, as Tom Peters would say, the most “scintillating” venue of what is already under way – the “Solar Revolution.”

World Tourism Foundation Founder, Edward Beauchamp says: “The world’s largest industry revolves around the smallest destination,” that is, locally. The same holds true for renewable energy – due to its very nature of unlimited “power” and its capacity to produce “clean” energy locally, exactly where it is used.

Cross-promoting sustainable tourism and renewable energy would pave the way for win-win solutions so far unheard of. Let’s just think about PATA’s concept of “Total Tourism”* being linked with renewable energy businesses. Could such a move not be instrumental to enhancing cross-industry investment and to mutually boosting export in energy-related products and tourism?

As Climate Changes – So Does Tourism

Travel and tourism can become a promotional bandwagon, using renewable energy as key to sustainability of destinations and tourism operations. Let’s make renewable energy the first principle of sustainable travel and tourism! This would provide tourism with the crucial strategic edge to effectively help counter global warming and ecological degradation.

There are more and more responsible stakeholders who understand that everywhere in the world millions of power stations could stand, different in size, technology and capacity, providing with renewable energy everything from private houses to cities. Renewable

energy is predestined to become the first principle of sustainable tourism, since energy stands at the beginning of everything. As a matter of fact, renewable energy is not only “natural” – it is inherently “ethical.”

Late renewable-energy pioneer Hermann Scheer’s “energy autonomy” thesis points to what renewable energy is – decentralized, subsidiary, ecological and autonomous, including the innate higher purpose of nothing less than promoting peace. Travel and tourism positions itself as a paramount peace industry. Both industries share the same ideal.

We decide what should prevail: the authentic, the beautiful or the valuable or mere mediocrity, hypocrisy or fallacy, the fossil-energy consumer or the renewable-energy user, the indifferent tourist or the responsible traveler, or paradise lost or planet Earth regained. The options are more quantity or better quality – more caterpillars or beautiful butterflies.

**Benefits from covering the complimentary benefits of inbound and outbound tourism – introduced by the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) years ago.*