

# **TOURISM: URGENT APPEAL FOR HARM AVOIDANCE:**

## *Statement from Global Civil Society Witnesses*

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**22 May, 2017**

***Joint Statement of the International Support Centre for Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Investigation & Monitoring Team (Tim-Team), Global Anti-Aerotropolis Movement (GAAM), Third World Network (TWN), Consumers Association of Penang, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, and Tourism Advocacy & Action Forum***

On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Berlin Declaration on Sustainable Tourism*, the tourism industry is the toast of the United Nations (U.N.). The 2017 International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (IY2017) celebrates industry contributions. IY2017 ambassadors are propagating tourism as a 'green' economy worldwide.

Although much pomp and privilege is extended to the tourism industry during 2017, the U.N. is actually in serious disarray over tourism governance. The vocabulary of 'sustainable' tourism cultivated across U.N. agencies suggests an exemplary industry. However, one billion tourists flying and fanning through a global structure of mega-hub airports and aerotropolis cities each year is not ecologically sustainable. New tourism infrastructure investments reinforcing intensive and prolonged fossil fuels use worldwide are not ecologically safe<sup>1</sup>. Both the industry's scale and its routine practices of 'mass' tourism contravene the precautionary principle of the *U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD), plus basic international law underlying the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Still, the U.N. World Tourism Organization and its affiliates are mandated to promote tourism growth.

Since 1997, the U.N. has unrolled a series of programs marketing tourism as a 'sustainable' economy. IY2017, a successor of the controversial 2002 International Year of Ecotourism, is the second U.N. campaign boosting the 'eco' tourism industry and obscuring its harmful impacts as a form of mass tourism. Amid the appearance of an impartial regulatory process, there is in fact damaging business influence on tourism policy making.

Globally, civil society groups (NGOs) have voiced ongoing concern about this systemic dysfunction. At the outset, NGOs warned that "the sustainable tourism concept should be thoroughly evaluated to identify its appropriate use"<sup>2</sup>. Instead of heeding this warning, U.N. agencies conjured a brand of 'sustainable tourism' aligned with industry, now pushing travel past planetary boundaries. The *CBD Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Development (2004)* - of limited scope - are central to advancing this brand. Such initiatives have allowed the excessive consumerism characterizing global tourism to continue unabated - driving land grabs, displacing local peoples to accommodate corporations and investors, and spreading exploitative development blueprints to isolated regions, including sensitive ecosystems.

The aggregate impacts of tourism on biodiversity under the CBD regulatory framework 1997-2017 should be commanding our attention. Current business models are not sustainable. The global structure of 'eco' lodges, 'green' hotels, 'light footprint' tours, 'local' tourism businesses, and other allegedly 'sustainable' travel options all reliant on aviation is actually a dangerous template for development. With climate change compounding biodiversity loss<sup>3</sup>, offset schemes exposed as a false solution<sup>4</sup>, coastal cities bracing for intensifying weather upheavals, Indigenous Peoples and other entire populations at risk of becoming climate refugees, and food and water security threatened, growing the tourism industry is not a moral option. Curbing aviation is an essential first step to conserving biodiversity<sup>5</sup>.

In a witness role, NGOs have catalogued “the catastrophic net impact” and magnitude of harm of tourism worldwide<sup>6</sup>. Rapidly, NGOs’ focus broadened from foregrounding local populations vulnerable to industry exploitation due to colonial poverty, to emphasizing the growing peril of tourism impacts for humanity. However, the U.N. has yet to adapt its development model for tourism, despite accumulating data on loss and damage, across multiple fields. Approved tourism developments still prosper off environmental pollution and contamination. Water diversions and other community resources and spaces commandeered for industry continue to make everyday life all the more precarious for vulnerable locals.

To build and groom tourist playgrounds, deliver travellers to ‘their’ destinations, cater to ‘guest’ food whims, entertain the ‘eco’ tourism masses, and stoke consumer appetite for souvenirs, forests are toppled, oceans are dragged, stone is quarried, sand is mined, minerals are excavated, petroleum is piped, fauna are encircled, and cultures are packaged. While such ‘spin-off’ is applauded under conventional economics and the prevailing development model, associated human rights violations are belittled, especially those borne by women, children and Indigenous Peoples. Children, who disproportionately bear the burdens of environmental degradation and culture loss globally, are ignored in decision-making within tourism master plans - for example, disregarded in the many plans for airport expansion now underway.

In 2017 it is clear that NGOs dissent matters, for correcting systemic harms and implementing a precautionary approach. It is especially important for safeguarding the health of children<sup>7</sup>. The urbanization, zoning, patterns of development, and consumer behaviour associated with tourism worldwide are shrinking children’s access to nature, reducing their overall health and well-being<sup>8</sup>. Each ‘paved paradise’ brings a decline in biodiversity, risking compromised immune function as well as an array of allergic, auto-immune, metabolic diseases plus psychiatric and cognitive disorders among children<sup>9</sup>. Mental health impacts of tourism for children globally are of particular concern, now that climate change is linked to increased anxiety, depression and suicide<sup>10</sup>, and consumerism is understood as an addiction.

Indigenous children living on the frontlines of the accelerating biodiversity loss and climate change propelled by tourism and its mainstay aviation sector should be the immediate focus of our collective action. With guidance from Elders and Knowledge Keepers, they now inform and lead key advocacy efforts, including the class action law suit led by child plaintiffs under Our Children’s Trust, seeking remedies for climate change<sup>11</sup>. Trauma experienced by this generation of Indigenous children and youth, especially those of the Arctic and small island developing states immediately endangered by petroleum-fuelled tourism growth (including ‘disaster tourists’ in their midst)<sup>12</sup>, should be a primary focus of the U.N. discourse on tourism.

To remedy the overall neglect of duty and care for today’s children and next generations in tourism decision-making, we call upon the CBD Secretariat and affiliated U.N. agencies to:

- (1) Recall that CBD implementation “is an urgent act of attaining inter-generational justice”<sup>13</sup>
- (2) Revisit the NGOs Open Letter to the CBD Parties and Secretariat, of June 24, 2014, requesting a review process “to avert further harm from tourism”
- (3) Launch a child-centred precautionary approach to achieve SDGs in the tourism sector
- (4) Mainstream the human rights of children in impact assessment frameworks for tourism, to bring the rights and needs of future generations into decision-making and governance
- (5) Implement special measures as required by the *U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child* and *U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, to avoid tourism harms

- (6) Prioritize the distinct rights of Indigenous children in relation to Article 8(j) of the CBD, to maintain, protect and promote traditional knowledge systems disrupted by tourism
- (7) Complete a risk assessment of tourism under the Rio regime, clarifying the actual risks for humanity of aviation and other mass-scale development including 'eco tourism
- (8) Activate Point #9 of the *Berlin Declaration on Sustainable Tourism* (1997), to safeguard the Earth's biosphere as an ecologically sensitive zone and place limits on aviation
- (9) Reject all interim measures omitting or downplaying tourism as a cause of ecosystem damage and the biosphere crisis, or under-estimating its inter-generational harm

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