

Opening Speech GSTC Global Conference
Luigi Cabrini, Chair, Global Sustainable Tourism Council
“Navigating the way forward in sustainable tourism”
Terceira Island, Azores, 6 December 2019

Regional Secretary for Energy, Environment and Tourism – Ms. Marta Guerreiro.

Municipality Mayor of Angra do Heroísmo - Mr. Álamo de Menezes

Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear friends

We are living in times when nationalism, populism, discrimination, and even racism are accepted as normal in the conduct of many politicians.

It seems that the notions of good and bad are blurred and that any form of ethics is lacking in politics at the international and national level.

Not surprisingly these attitudes are often combined with an irresponsible behavior in response to the great challenges facing our planet: global warming, pollution, biodiversity loss, deforestation, food waste, We see with astonishment a denial or a gross underestimation of how these phenomena lead to human and natural catastrophes. Scientific evidence is refuted, and alerts of irreversible damages are derided as pessimism of a few idealists. But in fact, they are here already: widespread fires, devastating hurricanes, extinction of thousands of species, bleaching of corals, desertification...

The concept of sustainability as an approach to growth that combines development with integrity of resources in order to guarantee its viability in the future is often questioned, if not ignored.

But mitigating this black picture, we see some positive signs:

Some political leaders (though only a minority) adopt a long-term vision and strive to respond to the challenges posed by the risks that threaten our civilization.

There is a rising and strong movement of young people that are actively determined to drive a real change (the Greta Thunberg effect).

A share of the private sector is taking seriously the notion that business needs to be sustainable in order to last.

The CEOs of 181 Businesses from the USA have publicly repudiated the idea that making more profit is their primary goal and stated that private companies must reconcile the interests of their shareholders with those of their clients, employees and communities where they operate.

87 big companies with a capital of over 2.3 billion dollars, have formally engaged to comply with the goals of the Paris agreement to reduce Greenhouse Gas emissions.

The fact is that every country, every sector, every company can develop either a "green" or a "brown" scenario, defined by their production and consumption patterns.

Where does the tourism sector stand in the adoption of green or sustainable practices?

It very much depends on whom do you ask.

In this room we are likely to be more critical about the negative impacts of tourism but at the same time more optimists on the possibilities to address the imbalances. We advocate for a model of tourism that reduces poverty, protects the environment, does not contaminate and benefits the communities where it develops, but we also know that achieving this ideal scenario is almost impossible.

The obstacles are many.

The sheer growth of the global population, expected to reach almost 10 billion in 2050, exerts tremendous pressure. The pattern of increasing flows of international and domestic tourism is such that the efforts to integrate sound management systems are becoming more and more difficult.

We are confronted with dramatic situations such as the closure of tourism destinations in Thailand or the Philippines or the now widespread protests against tourism in many cities.

Dear friends,

Our challenge is twofold: we need to create effective and practical tools to mainstream sustainability in tourism and to convince those skeptical decision makers, who are not ready nor convinced, to evolve from their "business as usual" methods.

This has been our goal at the Global Sustainable Tourism Council for the last 12 years and I wish to mention some of the achievements so far:

The Criteria for Destinations and the Industry are widely recognized by the public and the private sectors as relevant instruments to inform strategies and planning of central and regional governments, destinations, hotel chains, tour operators, etc.

The Accreditation program for certification bodies is steadily progressing despite its novelty when compared with other sectors and the difficulties deriving from the complexity and the transversal nature of the tourism chain.

Every year several hundreds of people with responsibilities in tourism receive training, tailored on their needs, on the use of the criteria.

Some very important players in the tourism industry are reaching out to the GSTC as they realize that sustainability is not only of concern to NGOs, but a necessity for any company that intend to maintain its business in the future. They see value in our programs as a means to reduce the negative footprints of their operations.

Finally, the GSTC has made important steps forward to position sustainable tourism in the markets, a key factor for any change to be relevant at the global level.

Of course, much remains to be done and we are just one of the many organizations committed, in different ways, to promote and to implement more responsible practices in a difficult context, as mentioned before.

There are many key issues that need to be addressed:

- The tourism sector is not responding adequately to climate change: both the adaptation to the consequences of global warming and the mitigation measures to reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions are not sufficient nor satisfactory.
- Over tourism is a major problem not only in a few iconic places, but affects a wide range of destinations, causing negative perceptions from the local populations and reducing the quality of the tourism experience.
- Reducing Plastic and eliminating single use plastic materials cannot be delayed any more. The quantity of unrecycled products has reached a volume that is causing an irreversible damage to the oceans and rivers. Again, the tourism sector while has increased awareness and introduced new policies, is far from a change of trend.

These are just a few of the serious problems that require a structural change in the way we travel today. Failing to find solutions justify the voices, more frequent and louder, of those calling to stop or drastically reduce tourism.

On our side we have a stronger social commitment of the new generations and the extended awareness to preserve the environment. We should also be able to harness more effectively the fast spreading technological innovations that are changing, in an unprecedented manner, business, communications, marketing and the whole societies.

In these two day we will debate around these matters, and hopefully provide relevant contributions on how to address them. *"Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all."* I am sure many of you agree with this quote from the American writer Dale Carnegie , written almost a century ago.

I wish to warmly thank our hosts from the Azores and especially from Terceira. These are places where tourism is indeed an experience to enjoy and to remember! My sincere congratulations to the authorities and to the tourism sector of the Azores that while positioning and promoting this great destination are committed to preserve the authenticity of the islands and to enhance their culture.

I wish also to express our gratitude to all the speakers and participants who have taken the time to be with us. There is a lot of talent and expertise in this conference and all of us will be enriched by sharing ideas, initiatives and lesson learned.

Enjoy the conference and the Azores!

Thank you!