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PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN OVERSEAS FRANCE

Tourism is essential to Overseas French economies as it impacts other activity sectors.

However, the tourist industry has been experiencing major problems since the 2000s. This situation is not unique, as the sector, which has wide geographical, natural and cultural diversity to call upon along with homogeneous seaside assets, saw a period of significant growth in the 1960s. Its growth was later bolstered by investments in holiday accommodation, liberalisation of air transport leading to inauguration of new links with Metropolitan regions, and holiday packages to accessible tropical destinations.

However, progress came to a sudden end in the early 2000s. In general terms, there were successive drops in tourist arrivals that may first of all be explained by the development of competing destinations in each regional basin, and then by the series of crises. Overseas territories suffered from the effects of the international economic crises, the consequences of the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the 2008 financial crises, as well as local crises (including the social movements in the Antilles in 2009 and the Chikungunya epidemics on Reunion Island). More recently, a number of areas have been faced with other crises, such as the Zika virus and the “shark crisis”.

These events have had serious repercussions on tourism, expressed by a drop in numbers of arrivals, fewer numbers of hotel rooms, closing of infrastructures and elimination of jobs. Current development of community platforms is creating new challenges for the hotel industry sector.

The tourism model essentially based on bathing resort offers has finally reached its limits. Reports abound calling for a “jolt” to or “mutation” of Overseas tourism, and their findings all remain the same: the sector is still based on a model that was once competitive but which now requires radical change.

In the vanguard of the effects of global warming in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans, Overseas French territories have a dual responsibility: protecting their unique heritages while adapting their tourism economies to principles of sustainability. In other words, reshaping the present model in line with sustainable tourism *“that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”* (definition by the World Tourism Organisation).

This opinion does not seek to suggest that seaside tourism runs counter to sustainable tourism, but



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rather to list avenues enabling the Overseas tourism sector to base itself on more sustainable models. It aims to propose a method enabling creation of conditions for deployment of future strategies.

THE ESEC'S RECOMMENDATIONS

1/ MAKING TERRITORIES' IDENTITIES CENTRAL TO TOURISM STRATEGIES, DIFFERENTIATED FOR EACH LOCAL AUTHORITY

The ESEC recommends putting territories' cultural identity and wealth of biodiversity at the heart of their strategy, based on an active research policy.

2 / REORIENTATING THE MODEL TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ASSUMES STRONG POLITICAL DETERMINATION, MAJOR PARTICIPATION OF ACTORS CONCERNED, AND A COLLECTIVE DYNAMIC

Any such momentum requires the State's major commitment at interministerial level (headed by the Prime Minister, with the Ministers for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the Ecological and Inclusive Transition, Economy, Overseas France, etc.). This step would enable definition of goals and drafting of objectives contracts between the State and each local authority in accordance with their competences.

At local level, such interministerial work could be carried out at local level by strategic forums on sustainable tourism: with participation by elected officials and Prefects, and, above all, by tourism professionals, consular chambers and citizens, with a view to developing sustainable tourism strategies and plans.

The ESEC also recommends that Atout France (France's Tourism Development Agency) provide itself with an Overseas centre responsible for liaising with local authorities and assisting them in terms of tourism management, advice and market positioning.

3/ REFORMING THE OVERSEAS MODEL REQUIRES DEPLOYMENT OF TOOLS FOR ANALYSIS, ANTICIPATION AND PROMOTION OF TOURISM FLOWS

Developing a sustainable tourism strategy assumes that the territories concerned:

- provide themselves with tourism observatories;
- invest in analysis tools and satellite accounts in order to measure the importance of tourism in local economies;
- step up innovation by increasing digital solutions.

4/ FOCUSING ON TRAINING

Sustainable tourism activities create non-relocatable jobs. The ESEC recommends that a preparatory mission be tasked with clarifying training and apprenticeship offers and studying opportunities to set up centres for training tourism professionals in each territory. Such institutions could train professionals in all sector branches, incorporating the problematics of sustainable development into their programmes.

5/ INVOLVING THE POPULATION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DISCOVERY OF BIODIVERSITY

Tourism in Overseas France can only be sustainable and develop if it wins the support and participation of local inhabitants. The ESEC recommends that the Initiative française pour les récifs coralliens (IFRECOR – French Coral Reef Initiative) and the Museum national d'histoire naturelle (MNHN – National Museum of Natural History) organise educational information sessions for local inhabitants, elected officials and tourism professionals, in partnership with the Agence française de la biodiversité (AFB – French Agency for Biodiversity) and local authorities.

6/ SETTING UP FUNDING ENABLING TRANSITION

The ESEC recommends that Atout France's new "France tourisme ingénierie" scheme partnering the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (CDC) and the future Agence nationale des territoires (ANT – National Territorial Agency) lend support to local authorities and private actors in development of projects promoting sustainable tourism.

The ESEC recommends increasing investment aid rates on the basis of sustainable development criteria. In the tourism sector, such aid mechanisms should be accompanied by a social component in support of recruitment, job retention, and initial and continuing vocational training, in particular in various forms of block release and apprenticeship...

The ESEC recommends that airlines and shipping lines serving Overseas French territories encourage their customers to compensate for their journeys' carbon cost by donations to a local association working to protect the environment, and that the companies themselves commit to contribute equivalent amounts to such donations.

Lastly, the ESEC recommends that the State and local authorities continue and extend the policy on labelling sustainable tourism initiatives underway in Overseas France.