

2022, the Year of Climate Friendly Travel and Tourism

Author: Hans Friederich

Abstract:

Climate Friendly Travel (CFT) is tourism that is low carbon, SDG-linked and Paris 1.5 compliant. All travel and tourism enterprises should try and halve their greenhouse gas emissions this decade, offset the balance in the interim, and aim to stop them completely by mid-century. The future of tourism should be climate-friendly, and China can play a key role, both domestically and internationally. A training programme for Future CFT leaders will be launched in China together with the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation in 2022.

Key words:

Climate Friendly Travel (CFT), curtail carbon emissions, carbon neutrality, global travel, tourism

Hans Friederich, 2022 – the Year of Climate Friendly Travel and Tourism, Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development, Vol.1 No.3. February 2022, ISSN2749-906

The COVID pandemic has caused havoc in the tourism industry during the past 2 years, but climate change will have even more impact through long-term disruption and uncertainty. Several discussions during the recent COP26 Climate Summit in Glasgow, UK, focused on the significant role of travel and tourism in causing greenhouse gas emissions, and the impact of climate change on tourism. After all, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) estimates that prior to the COVID pandemic the sector accounted for over 10% of global GDP and supported more than one in ten jobs worldwide. But at the same time, it produced 8%-11% of global GHG emissions.

During COP26, the “Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism” was launched by the UN World Tourism Organisation and partners, as the way forward for the tourism sector, and there is a general support for the sector to become more active. Signing the Glasgow Declaration, or making statements about the need to consider the environment is a good start, but the new generation of young climate activists want action now.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has called for all post-pandemic tourism to be sustainable and climate friendly. SUN^x Malta has been promoting Climate Friendly Travel (CFT) for a number of years. CFT is tourism that is low carbon, SDG-linked and Paris 1.5 compliant. The organisation was created by the Green Growth & Travelism Institute in Belgium and the Ministry of Tourism and Consumer Protection of Malta. It is a legacy for Maurice Strong, who

was climate action and sustainability trailblazer already half a century ago, and who lived and worked in China during the latter part of his life.

A key objective for COP26 was to agree on action for reaching carbon neutrality by 2050, but we need to go faster and further if we want to seriously curtail carbon emissions. As difficult as it may seem, all travel and tourism enterprises should try and halve their greenhouse gas emissions (all of them, not just carbon dioxide) this decade, offset the balance in the interim if they need to, and aim to stop them completely by mid-century.

First, and foremost, companies need to think how to avoid carbon-intense activities, and that may require them to change their business model. Where it is necessary to produce emissions, companies should take every effort to reduce the impact through higher efficiency. Where possible, high-carbon activities should be replaced by environment friendly alternatives. Eventually, only those emissions that cannot be avoided, reduced or replaced should be compensated through carbon offsets. While offsets are fine for a defined transition period, say preferably until 2030, they should not be an excuse for continued emissions after that period.

Many global organisations have used COP26 as a moment to introduce new measuring tools and accreditation schemes, and there is a growing body of case studies and support guides that can be used to help work out the current carbon footprint and possible path to reduce this. However, most of these tools are currently only available in English language. The rapidly growing domestic tourism sector in China would require tools and measures in Mandarin that are applicable to local enterprises and Chinese tourists.

COP26 also provided the platform for many countries to make statements about the introduction of regulatory instruments. SUN^x Malta advocates for the sort of regulation that provides incentives for good practice and clean energy innovation in the form of subsidies or tax breaks. But such legislation should also include severe penalties for bad behavior through the “Polluter Pays” principles, and ultimately include the right to withdraw the license to operate.

The largest market-transforming task for the tourism and travel industry is the impact of aviation, as many tourists fly to their holiday destination. Prior to the COVID pandemic, around 2.5% of global CO₂ emissions came from aviation, and together with other gases and the water vapour trails produced by aircraft, the industry was responsible for around 5% of global warming.

The critical issue is propulsion, and while there are calls from activists to curtail flying completely, the key conundrum is how to fly without GHG emissions. There is a considerable amount of research and development in electric and hydrogen-fueled short and medium haul airplanes, while there is a parallel track of research in sustainable aviation fuels and new clean-energy propulsion systems for long haul flights. The Civil Aviation Administration of China has committed to green transformation of the aviation sector, and China could play a pivotal role in developing alternatives for fossil fuel airplane engines, especially for its domestic travel and tourism industry.

During recent discussions of a think-tank of global travel and tourism experts, the importance was stressed time and again to include the new generation of travelers in planning and decision-making. The Institute of Tourism Studies in Malta, in partnership with SUN^x Malta is already producing Diploma-qualified future CFT leaders from around the world, and in 2022 a parallel training programme will be launched in China together with the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation. The 2030 goal is to have 100,000 CFT Champions around the world, including a significant number of Chinese junior experts.

While the 2030 goals of the UN development agenda and the 2050 goals of the Paris Accord provide the global direction for the future of travel and tourism, implementation must be driven from the unique local circumstances and perspectives of every destination and each individual business. A hotel in the mountains of Sichuan will have different priorities from a resort in Hainan. Each establishment will have its own reaction to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals with their 169 targets and 200+ indicators; and each will have its own realistic pathway to reach the Paris 1.5 goal. Sun^x Malta is managing a global registry to record the ambitions of all travel and tourism companies, and we look forward to working with many partners in China.

Responding to the call from the UN Secretary-General, we agree that the future of tourism should be climate-friendly, and China can play a key role, both domestically and internationally.