



Wellness Tourism Congress

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2013 · NEW DELHI, INDIA

7th Annual Global Spa & Wellness Summit

New Dehli, India

October 5, 2013

**Costas Christ, Editor/Columnist, National
Geographic Traveller; Sustainability
Ambassador, Six Senses Hotels Resorts Spas**

**Should Wellness Tourism Embrace Wellness of
the Planet? The Business Case for Doing Well
by Doing Good**

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MS. BONNIE ST. JOHN: I'm really excited now that Costas Christ is here to talk on a subject which is near and dear to all our hearts, sustainability. He's an award winning editor and columnist for National Geographic Traveler Magazine, and one of the world's top sustainable tourism experts. His work and travels have taken him to more than 125 countries on six continents. He's Director of Sustainability for Virtuoso, the largest luxury travel network in the world. And in 2012, he was recognized, along with Richard Branson, Ted Turner, Jane Goodall, and RFK Jr, as one the 50 most significant sustainability visionaries working to save the planet. Whooo. [Laughs].

When he's not traveling, though, he really walks the talk. He lives on a 40-acre organic blueberry farm in Maine, where in August and September he's tending the crop and managing the local Farmers Cooperative. So please recycle your last round of applause.

MR. COSTAS CHRIST: Thank you. Thank you, Bonnie. I want to pick up on that last image there, Peter and Susie were just on the stage of—let's not narrow ourselves, let's widen our horizons and talk to you a little bit about this issue we call sustainability.

Why does it matter? That's really the key question. And sure, we can think, oh, yeah, here's a reason and here's a reason, but take it to its nuts and bolts. Why does the principles and practices of sustainable tourism—and I'll tell you what those are in just a couple minutes—matter to the global traveling tourism industry, and why does it matter to all of you in this room?

Well just a quick snapshot. In 1950 there were 25 million international travelers, what we call tourist arrivals, in the lingo of the language of the industry. 2012, we know, one billion. 1950 to 2012, 25 million to one billion. Jean-Claude Baumgarten said this morning that we can expect, in 2027, two billion. We're talking about a pretty big industry on this planet that is growing at a tremendous rate. And ladies and gentlemen, in case you're not 100% sure, you are part of that in the Spa & Wellness Community, as much as hospitality, you are very much part of that.

And here's just another thing to ponder. I wonder how many of us in the room know that all species, that is all animals, all plants, the majority of life on earth exists on 3.9% of the earth's land surface. More than 76% of all life on our planet exists on 3.9% of our land surface. This is what they call the bio-diversity hotspots. There are 34 of them around the world. And guess what? This is where tourism is growing now.

Conservation International and the United Nations Environment Program asked me to head up a project called, Tourism and Biodiversity, Mapping Tourism's Global Footprint, in the context of these 35 biodiversity hotspots. And what I found out—this was a research team, not just myself alone—what we found out was that tourism is growing most rapidly into these last strongholds, the last wild places on our planet; the last refuges of indigenous cultures and indigenous knowledge; the last unspoiled places, which also are, for many people on this planet—millions, as a matter of fact—the make or break world for basic survival, food, water, health, education.

So I ask ourselves, can we really heal ourselves inside? Can we bring that sense of inner peace that we seek within ourselves if we are not thinking about healing the planet that is around us; if we are not thinking about safeguarding the cultural and natural heritage that is our planet? Think about this for another moment. What do we really sell? What do all of you in this room—I put myself in that. I'm an editor with National Geographic Travel Magazine, National Geographic Society, what do we really sell? What do all of us sell? What does the global travel and tourism industry trade in? Cultural heritage and natural heritage.

Sure, we dress it up. We dress it up in nice rooms, we dress it up with beautiful views. We have wonderful service, all of these things are impeccable, they're wonderful, they're great. But when you distill it down to its essence, we are selling cultural and natural heritage. Just look behind me; incredible India. What are those images telling you? It's cultural and natural heritage.

Think about what your products are. Your products are drawing upon botanicals, biodiversity. What do people want? They want purity, they want nature; we're drawing upon it. When we think of our hotels or just wherever in the world it might be, make no mistake about it, you might see in Travel and Leisure Magazine, or some other travel publication, oh,

go to this wonderful little bistro on a side street in Paris. My goodness, it's 100 years old, but the grandmother there cooks. Recipes handed down for generations. You'll have the most wonderful authentic travel experience imaginable. You've just experienced cultural heritage.

And again, this morning, when we saw those images, it was the same thing. Of Kerala in incredible India, what is incredible India selling? So I just wanted to make that point for a reason, because when I think about it, what business doesn't invest in protecting its product? What successful business would there be in the world if you didn't safeguard your product?

And we have a disconnect in our industry 'cause we don't always realize what it is we sell, and we don't always realize that the future of our economic livelihoods, or our business growth, of the businesses of tomorrow, are going to be dependent upon what each of us do in the room today, to protect the cultural and natural heritage that the travel industry and the spa industry and the wellness industry, and all the other components of it, depends upon for their economic livelihood.

When was the last time you met somebody and they said to you, oh, goodness gracious, I've just come back from this amazing wellness holiday. I was in this rain forest that was clear-cut. There were no birds singing, the wildlife was dead, there wasn't a flower to be seen. It was wonderful. I'd love to go back. Really? Or think about a beautiful tropical island. Oh, yes, I had this massage; it was on the beach. It was great. After that sunrise massage, I meditated, I went swimming, there was plastic everywhere. There was trash all over the beach, the coral was dead, the water smelled like pollution. I can't wait to go back. You're not going to hear that.

That's why we need to connect the dots between what our livelihoods are, what our business is, what we bring people to experience and change their lives, to protecting that very asset. So that is why sustainable tourism principles and practices matter. Because sustainable tourism is what is going to lead us in the direction of ensuring that this massive industry that we call travel and tourism, and all of its components, protects the very places we visit, and supports the livelihood of those who live closest to the experiences that we cherish.

There's another reason why this matters in a way that we might not ever think, but was announced just a week ago during the Clinton Global Initiative. President Obama also talked about it. And that is, I just came from Kenya—Peter Greenberg was there last week as well—where there was a terrible tourist attack. How many of us in this room know that the tourists—this isn't theory, this isn't conjecture—funded their operation by the killing and selling of illegal ivory. An iconic animal, an elephant, which the entire Safari industry depends upon; millions and millions of livelihoods in Africa depend upon this.

So it's not just a question of wouldn't it be nice for us to do what's right for the planet. Terrorism is not going to help this industry, so again, this notion of how we invest in protecting our natural resources is connected in so many different facets of how each of you, along with my self, drive our livelihoods. And let's be clear, what are those sustainable tourism principles and practices. Well I'm going to give you the three pillars, the key three pillars. Okay? 'Cause under each of them there are details; but these are the three key things.

One, environmentally friendly practices. In other words, environmentally friendly operations. That's to reduce; the reuse, the recycle part of sustainable tourism.

The second pillar, support for the protection of cultural and natural heritage. Archeological sites, iconic wildlife, beautiful pristine forests, and so on. Cultural heritage in the context of countries like Bhutan, and other parts of the world, which we celebrate, which we enjoy, which we're eager to learn about. It's why people buy National Geographic Magazine, by the way. So support for the protection of cultural and natural heritage.

And third is, direct and tangible contributions to the social and economic well being of local people. We cannot have a healthy traveling tourism industry and a thriving economy if the people who live closest to the places that we visit, their lives aren't improved, that they are not stakeholders and partners in this wonderful thing that we're talking about. And tourism is a wonderful thing. All of us have been on wonderful vacations. We can talk—I'm sure each and every individual of us—about an experience that has changed our life in a powerful way, connected to travel.

So environment footprint is critically important. But it's not the only thing and it's largely misunderstood in the sustainability discussion. It's broader. That's why I said at the beginning of this talk, we want to move from here and widen it. We're talking about an integrated holistic understanding of how our industry operates, what it depends upon, and the power and opportunity it has to transform lives and make this world a better place.

Which leads to another question that I think is important. And that is, does it pay to be good? Is there a business case for sustainable tourism best practices? I'd like to share with you briefly, a few recent studies and surveys that have come out. The travel foundation based in London, last year published a report in which they said in the world of survival of the fittest, sustainable tourism means business. Established companies will sink, other companies will rise, and the difference between the two will be whether or not they're embracing sustainable tourism practices as we move into the future of travel and tourism.

Focus Right, an industry research group in the United States, carried out a survey of businesses and individual travelers. Forty-four percent of adult travelers in the United States, according to Focus Right, make their decision based on a place, on whether or not it is environmentally, socially, culturally supported. In other words, the principles of sustainability.

Trip Advisor ran a survey last year, and this year, on the result of that survey, they've launched a whole new initiative around these ideas. Sixty-three percent of Trip Advisor's respondents came back saying the environment and sustainability are key factors in where we choose to stay. Sixty-three percent. Harvard Business School and Stamford University, last year came out with a report. Seventy percent of North American traveling adults said that sustainability is now a considerable, a significant factor in how they choose to take their vacations.

The largest study in the world that was ever conducted was Lonely Planet, which some of you may know, started as a backpacker thing, was bought by BBC; it has kind of up-scaled itself. They surveyed 24,000 travelers, 43 different countries. Ninety-six percent of those respondents came back and said sustainability is a key factor in how we travel and where we go. Okay. That's Lonely Planet. Let's think for a

minute, they're already there, their backpack has grown up now.

Well we talked about the luxury travel market, Virtuoso this year, published the 2013 Virtuoso Lux Travel Report. One-third of Virtuoso travelers, which are the most affluent travelers in the world right now, identified sustainability as a key consideration of where they're going to be taking their next trip. That's 2013.

Accenture, these guys have nothing to do with tourism at all. Accenture is just nuts and bolts, it's basically this, where's the money. They provide a service to companies, where's the money, how do we find it, how do you get more of it. That's it. All these anecdotal reports that have been out there saying somehow doing well, does good, so on and so forth. Well Accenture said, okay, let's put this to the test.

They took the Forbes 1,000 companies and they looked at 50 companies, including travel corporations that had sustainability imbedded in the corporate mission, and 50 companies that did not. And they measured their profit and loss statements, and looked at their shareholder returns. And what they found was those companies that had sustainability as part of their corporate fabric, outperformed their competitors that did not, by a margin of 6 to 16% in annual profit returns. Who in this room would not want to increase their business by 6 to 16%?

So the question here—and when we think of statistics, we can say, well, gee, how can it be 93 and 63, and I could even throw out another one. Marriot surveyed their guests; 22% came back, so on and so forth. Here's the point to take away. It's not whether it's 22, 63, 96, 70% or the rest. Here's the point to take home with you. All arrows are going that way, whether it's 22% or 93%, all arrows are going in the direction of a sustainable tourism transformation that's happening on our planet.

Which, incidentally, the United Nations World Tourism organization and the World Travel and Tourism organization have said that sustainable tourism may be the most significant transformation in the history of modern travel. Ladies and gentlemen, we're in a whole new paradigm. This is a whole new world before us. This is why it matters.

It's no longer a question of ethics. Yes, wouldn't it be nice if every business leader in the world, every individual woke up in the morning and said, you know what, what can I do to help this planet in need? What can I do to help an individual who needs care, who doesn't have water, who doesn't have access to medicine? But the fact of the matter is if you'd just put your business hat on in the morning, and you say, you know what, darn it, what do I got to do to grow my business this year. What do I got to do to emerge on the frontend of this? You'll be thinking about sustainable tourism. It's got to be on your agenda.

And it's not a fad or a fashion; this isn't oh, yes, what is it today, what was it last week, what's it next week? No. This is an evolution of travel and tourism. This can be traced back over 30 years now. What's happening is it's just bubbling up to the surface. This has been in the cooker for quite some time. We're seeing an evolution of travel and tourism as we understand it.

I have about two minutes left, so I'm going to hit just a couple of things here, if you'll allow me. And that is we're also seeing a whole new level of interesting innovation that's taking place. Just a quick couple of snapshots that wouldn't have been the case ten years ago or even 15 years ago. Not much.

Some of us participated in a pre-summit retreat for a couple of days at Vana, Malsi Estate. Vana's made the decision, among other things, to go plastic free. You won't have your laundry come back wrapped in anything plastic. You won't see a plastic water bottle. You won't see plastic wrappers, et cetera, and it's a good thing. You want to know why? Because right now, as we sit here and speak, there is a pile of plastic floating in the Pacific that is twice the size of the country of France. It's called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It's our waste. The plastic isn't disappearing, it's just gathering. So it's something for us to think about.

Six Senses. Six Senses took an innovative approach to farm to table; switched it around and said, let's bring table to farm. Let's create organic gardens and put our restaurants in the center of them. And then let's create a zero carbon menu that goes along with it, where we derive everything locally in this particular restaurant. Our zero carbon restaurants.

Golf. There are 16,000 golf resorts in the United States alone. There are tens of thousands around the world. The largest golf resort in the world is Mission Hills, in China. Who would have guessed? Mission Hills is now embarking on some of the most sustainable innovations in the world of golf. On one of their golf courses, one of the top golf courses in the world, they test piloted a solar pest control device. I went there to see it myself. In the last year, they've been able to reduce their pesticide use on that golf course by 70%. They are now rolling this out across 12 other golf courses.

This last one—well, there's two. I have to say two. By the way, one of the sponsors I saw in the magazine is a company called Lighting Science. The world of light is about to transform and revolutionize like you have never known before. One quick example. Let alone the spas, there's a representative here, and you should find her and talk to her. But think of all the beach resorts in the world, the beach resorts that turtles nest on. They have developed technology that shines lights that humans can see, so they can see turtles nesting.

This is a wonderful nature activity; it happens all around the world. But the turtles aren't affected by it. It beams out—from a turtle's ability to see, it doesn't see this light. So what that means is we no longer have migrating turtles that are getting lost on beach resorts by big spotlights, 'cause they think it's the moon. You might think that's a small thing; it's huge for a very endangered species.

Okay. The last one I've just got to tell you here, and then if they'll gracefully give me one minute, the Dutch. The Dutch are always up to something interesting. I'll tell you that. Some of you must speak Dutch in the audience. Well the Dutch pioneered, four years ago, something called the sustainable dance floor. It gives a pressure as you move on it, and a little friction, and guess what? The more you dance, the more electricity you generate. You can power your nightclub by the people dancing. Okay? Interesting.

Toulouse, France, took that technology and put it on a pedestrian walkway two years ago. And they found they were able to power the streetlights and other things on that pedestrian walkway. Last summer, London used it to connect the walkway between the Olympic pavilions. Okay?

Well I've got an interesting idea because this technology is now being looked at at airports, by the way. Just think of it, all those people running to catch their flights, generating electricity. This is the brave new world of sustainability. But my thought is something different. I just have this idea if we could just take this technology and bring it to Bollywood, we'll light up this whole subcontinent. [Applause].

All right. Before Bonnie pulls me off this stage, let me just end with this. Last year, National Geographic asked me to do a story—Why do People Travel. What is it that makes us wander. We could stay at home and get a massage, we could look at a sunrise, we could read a good book on wellness. But for some reason, we travel, we wander. National Geographic said take a look at this. What is it about people? What makes us want to move? What's inside of us that propels us to do this?

And I came upon a couple of things. I found an interesting thing in Ancient Tibetan Literature. The word groppa [phonetic], which is literally the translation of a human being. So groppa means human being. Well in Ancient Tibetan it means one who goes on migrations. So the Ancient Tibetans actually called a person—identified a human being—as someone who travels. That was the essence of what a human being was.

Then I came upon something else. In Middle Age English, the word progress, we use it all the time. Is our business progressing? Are we having progress? Is this conference progress? Well in Middle Age English, progress meant a seasonal journey. It actually meant to travel. So the whole notion of how we progress in life is tied to our ability to travel. And I've always found it inspirational.

The Nobel Prize winning author, John Steinbeck, who said this, people don't take trips. Trips take people. Trips take people, indeed, to newfound cross-cultural awareness, to international understanding, to an appreciation of this incredible, beautiful, fragile planet we're on. And when we engage and practice sustainable tourism, we ensure that this incredible experiences that we have today as travelers will be there for future generations. Ladies and gentlemen, I wish each of you a wonderful seasonal journey. Thank you.

[END RECORDING]