

Panel Q & A

Sustainability Advisory Panelist Dr Susanne Becken

suggests how tourism can lead to stronger economic and social outcomes

Dr Susanne Becken is Professor of Sustainable Tourism, Director of Griffith Institute for Tourism, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. Susanne is a globally recognised expert in the field of sustainable tourism, in particular climate change and resource management. She is a contributor to the Sustainability and Social Responsibility committee at the Pacific Asia Travel Association.

Q: What are the challenges and opportunities presented by sustainable tourism for regional centres like Tairāwhiti Gisborne?

It is essential to understand what types of tourism and how much of it a region wants. I think the Tairāwhiti region would like a little more – but the community must be part of it, something that has not necessarily been considered in the past. To achieve this requires consultation as well as robust data on carrying capacity and resource limits.

The opportunity from well-managed tourism is clear: it brings investment, generates a cash flow, creates jobs and educational opportunities. It can also help revitalise culture and protect nature, and trigger more

comprehensive governance and sustainable management. And it creates (or reinforces) an identity and pride for the region. In the case of Tairāwhiti Gisborne there is tremendous potential based on Māori tourism but also food tourism. The downsides, if not managed well, are equally obvious: environmental damage, undermining of culture and exacerbating existing social disparities, economic benefits not well distributed or completely leaving the region. Often control sits outside the region and people are disempowered. The existing structures in Tairāwhiti make this unlikely.

Q: How can all parts of the tourism industry collaborate to manage the challenges of tourism growth?

Good tourism governance must involve public-private partnerships and involve the local communities. A substantial player like Air New Zealand secures access to the region and can ensure that well-planned development happens. Working collaboratively with Activate Tairāwhiti (an integrated tourism and economic development agency) co-funded by Eastland Community Trust and the local council, and partners for new tourism products, represents a new model where tourism is part of a broader regional development strategy with input from all key stakeholders. The approach currently applied in Tairāwhiti could be used to scale -up or cross-fertilise tourism in other regions.

The shortage of labour (shown in some regions reliance on low-

paid backpackers) tells us that at places and times we have more tourism than we can service. Some countries measure tourism success by the establishment of new (local) businesses, not jobs per se, and higher paid tourism jobs like architecture, design or planning. Globally we talk about tourism having a ‘social licence’ to operate. In Europe and parts of Asia there’s an undercurrent of resentment, and we want to avoid this situation here.

New Zealand has marketed the same places for the past 100 years; but in recent years Tourism New Zealand and businesses have begun to promote other places and off-season travel with some success. However, dispersing tourists into the regions requires investment. Some of this is already happening through the Government’s Tourism Infrastructure Fund and Provincial Growth Fund, but this is likely not enough. In addition to catching up on upgrading existing infrastructure, more investment into new attractions, routes, and assets is necessary.

Q: How are other countries or regions growing the value of tourism for communities and supporting sustainable tourism?

Globally, countries are moving from marketing – bringing in more visitors – to management. Norway, which is not so different from New Zealand, measures the value and opportunity of tourism using broader indicators (for example, proportion of qualified versus low paid jobs, gender of workers, number of startups, in addition to traditional measures such as employment and visitor expenditure) to focus on higher yielding visitors.

An increasing number of countries have some kind of user-pays principle (or tax). There are many examples. Measuring impacts is key to being able to manage tourism.

Q: What is the leadership role Air New Zealand can play?

It leads by example by presenting a value-driven approach – to the customer, to employees and to the community, as well as shareholders. Working with certified businesses, supporting high integrity carbon credits, and forming new partnerships for regional development that are based on trust and equality are all important mechanisms to ensure we do not follow a race to the bottom but to the top.

Due to its size and its status as one of the most trusted companies in New Zealand, Air New Zealand is uniquely placed to shape the direction of sustainable tourism in this country. This is unique in the world, as most airlines focus on their business of transporting people and goods and forget that they play a significant role in how destinations rise or fall. Air New Zealand recognises its role as part of New Zealand tourism, and the positive impact it can make.

