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**Sustainable Tourism and the Role of Educators within this Emerging Paradigm:
The Case of BEST-EN**

Tourism, rather conventional mass-tourism, as we know it has experienced rapid growth since early 1970s. Although experiencing occasional setbacks due to regional conflicts or global terrorism scares, it is expected to continue this growth trend in the first half of the new millennium. The reasons for this growth according to experts are globalization of capitalism, advances in transportation and communication technology, rising incomes and leisure time in Western nations. Many communities are looking for alternative developmental options such as tourism as their way to increase income for their residents and tax bases for local governments. But we also have learned over the years that when tourism is left unregulated and/or introduced too fast it will cause negative impacts which could in some cases threaten tourism's very survival. Recognizing such developmental ills, the market demanded and the industry responded with various forms of alternative, more benign forms of tourism such as ecotourism, green-tourism, agri-tourism and so on; all of which can collectively be called "sustainable tourism." This form of tourism activity seems to help increase awareness of the negative impacts, attempts to conserve or preserve all community resources and seeks to enhance the overall well-being of communities over generations to come. Hence, sustainable tourism is an alternative form of tourism that not only improves the quality of life and experiences of both visitors and host communities but also enhances the quality of the environment for both current and future generations. In summary, sustainable tourism seems to be the best-known developmental option that has the potential to ameliorate negative impacts of conventional mass-tourism.

The industry, academics and educators have responded to this new paradigm with increased research within their own respective expertise area. Industry has offered new products and destinations that seem to be sustainable and short-courses to educate their visitors (clients). The educators' role however seems to have been restricted to writing research papers in academics journals about various issues involving sustainability. Their role in classrooms is more ambivalent. In general, educators do not know how to respond to this call besides more research output while they struggle to incorporate research outcomes into their own classroom curricula so their students can take advantage of this characteristically just and noble and futuristically utopian paradigm. With the establishment of special journals related to sustainability issues (e.g., *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*) and proliferation of sustainable tourism related papers in major tourism journals, the discourse on sustainable tourism has been advancing beyond the philosophical issues that set the academic community apart for years, to become a body of knowledge on its own.

Not hindered by ambiguous goals, confusing concepts and principles of sustainable tourism, concerned tourism scholars and industry leaders have come together to build a Think-Tank group which is now known as the BEST Education Network (Business Enterprises for Sustainable

Tourism Education Network) to respond educational needs of the 21st century's tourism students and future industry leaders.

“The **BEST Education Network** is an international consortium of educators committed to furthering the development and dissemination of knowledge in the field of sustainable tourism. The Network accomplishes this by holding annual 3-4 day THINK TANKS at various universities around the world. During these THINK TANKS, research is presented, sustainable tourism topics are addressed, a research agenda and curriculum modules for use in undergraduate education are developed. In the research session participants identify knowledge gaps in the field of sustainable tourism that need further investigation. The curriculum modules are designed for use in education around the world. They are developed by applying the Nominal Group Technique.” (retrieved from Best-En web site)

The first time I attended their Think-Tank in South Africa, I met many renowned tourism scholars from all over the world like Eric Cohen, Larry Dwyer, Abraham Pizam, Pauline Sheldon and many more whose books and work was very familiar to me from my graduate school years. The objective of the first Think-Tank was to produce a model curriculum on sustainable tourism that was to be distributed to tourism education programs throughout the world. Follow-up activities included development of course syllabi, applied case studies, and teacher and student study guides.

I wondered where my other colleagues were! This was such a rewarding meeting unlike any other meeting I attended. I enjoyed every minute of this first Think-Tank as it not only gave me a sense of community being with like-minded academics but also a platform where I met industry leaders whom I often thought of being outside our realm of communication. The end-product of this rewarding Think-Tank was classroom modules that I started using in my classrooms.

As years passed, the attendants varied but the core people who had initiated this group like Dr. Dwyer, Dr. Sheldon, Dr. Jurowski, and Dr. Janne J. Liburd have remained the same. Finally last year's Think-Tank in Jamaica made me realize that international tourism research community needs to know more about this group and recognize them for their contribution to the betterment of the societies we live in. I know in the future, once you participate in this process, you will want to come back and be active with this group of highly intellectual, motivated and concerned individuals. I thank this group for making me realize the real purpose for my being in academia is to satisfy my intellectual curiosity and help my fellow man including students to live in better communities using tourism as a tool.

Currently, the **BEST Education Network** is organized and chaired by Dr. Janne J. Liburd from the University of Southern Denmark. The University of Southern Denmark houses the **BEST Education Network Secretariat**. Think-Tanks rotate on an annual basis among universities around the globe.

This year's The BEST Education Network (BEST EN) Think-Tank VI will meet in Girona, Catalonia, Spain from June 13-16, 2006 at the University of Girona. The conference's theme is ***Corporate Social Responsibility for Sustainable Tourism*** and includes research paper presentations, keynote addresses by international experts, a research agenda forum to drive future knowledge development in the field, and curriculum design for sustainable tourism and hospitality.

The theme reflects the fact that the sustainable development of tourism destinations depends critically upon the sustainable operations of its constituent businesses and firms, and is intended to overcome a relative lack of research on tourism sustainability at the enterprise level. Issues to be addressed will include: *Ethical Business Practices in Tourism, Triple Bottom Line in Corporate Social Responsibility, Human Resource Management for sustainable tourism operations, Volunteer Tourism and Pro-Poor Tourism, Stakeholder involvement, culture and accountability, Consumer perceptions and preferences in purchasing decisions, Knowledge Management for Corporate Social Responsibility, Service learning in tourism educational programs and Best practice indicators (cultural, environmental and social) alongside a number of case studies.*

I invite you to come join the group in Girona/Spain. For more information, I invite you to visit the BEST Education Network web site: <http://www.besteducationnetwork.org>