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WTO to be at centre of tourism data work over next few years

In March of this year I was approved as the new president of the committee on statistics and macroeconomic analysis for the World Tourism Organization (WTO), for the period 2004-2007. To some, especially to those outside the research community, the significance of this may be hard to grasp. But the history of research is ongoing, and my appointment highlights the role Canada has played in this history, as well as the new stronger presence of the WTO.

For Canada the story begins before most of the people reading this were born. During the middle of the last century, the Canadian federal government gave the mandate to its office for the tourism industry, then called the Canadian Bureau of Tourism (CBT), to promote Canadian lakes and rivers as places to go fishing. And it opened offices in New York City and London, England in 1951 and 1963, respectively, to do just that. The research that was required roughly meant finding out when the season open and closed.

We have come a long way since then. In Canada a milestone was the world's fair of Expo 67, held in Montréal. The crowds that came to Expo acted as a catalyst for Canada, motivating the federal government to take tourism more seriously, and eventually begin marketing efforts to this new mass movement of people and undertake serious research into the phenomenon.

Things have coalesced since then. In Canada the National Task Force on Tourism Data, which issued its report in 1989, put the spotlight on the need for better tourism research, and its potential to serve a growing industry. We acted on this and carried these recommendations onto the international stage, and through the 1990s helped the international research community develop both the concepts and the tools to measure tourism.

For example, in 1991, at the International Conference on Travel and Tourism Statistics, held in Ottawa, guidelines for measuring tourism were adopted. The WTO and the United Nations Statistical Commission adopted a common definition of tourism in 1993, based on the 1991 recommendations, and also in 1993 the Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA) endorsed the results of the Ottawa conference. The Enzo Paci World Conference on the Measurement of the Economic Impact of Tourism was held in Nice, France, and continued the work that was done at the 1991 conference. The first reliable statistical instruments to measure tourism, the Tourism Satellite Accounts (TSA), were highlighted at the TSA conference in Vancouver in 2001 and began to be published and accepted internationally, leading to the publication in 2001 by the United Nations (UN) and WTO of an international tourism satellite account standard. At the recent meetings of the WTO's committee on statistics and macroeconomic analysis, held in Madrid in March of this year, we continued the process of

adopting and adapting the work done to develop an international standard for TSAs. Canada has been joined in its pioneering work in this field by Austria, Spain, and France.

The committee on statistics and macroeconomic analysis was founded in 1991 with the mandate to finalize research recommendations and guide their implementation. Countries represented on the committee as member states include: Canada, Cyprus, Ecuador, Egypt, Spain, the Philippines, France, India, Israel, Mexico, Mozambique and Tunisia.

When I agreed to serve as president of this committee, it occurred to me that the job is not finished. In Canada we research and understand our own tourism sector, but we are often dependent for international statistics on, to be frank, less reliable numbers coming from other countries. As an illustration, we still don't know domestic tourism statistics from other countries – and so we are unable to compare global market share with any degree of accuracy.

This is why Canada gets involved in international organizations. As tourism is has grown, the need for reliable standardized measurements across international markets has also grown. A lot of money is at stake, after all, if tourism flows are changed by even two per cent.

Over the course of my mandate, I have established a few priorities to encourage a further leap forward in the field, and to address the new challenges of our times. These priorities include:

- defining, measuring and describing the tourism labour force;
- specifying fully tourism's role in international trade;
- understanding the role of capital in tourism economics and development; and,
- describing environmental change and assessing the challenge of sustainable tourism.

In October of 2003 the WTO was declared a UN organization, and has been given the lead role for tourism data. It seems obvious the WTO will be at the centre of tourism research work over the next few years. As an expression of this, the WTO will be holding an international conference on international statistics and market analysis in 2005. This will run concurrently with researcher's evaluations of many countries' systems of national accounts, which are the basis of a lot of statistical work.

Everywhere I look there are exciting new challenges and opportunities for the new committee, as well as for tourism researchers in general.

That may not be what you call hot news. But it is the kind of thing you will be hearing more about in the future.