

Report on the TCN @WTM Panel Discussion on the African century

For the seventh year in succession TCN organised a debate at the WTM in London involving leading experts from the global tourism community. We were invited to hold our event in the Africa Inspiration Zone, which influenced our choice of subject. Reflecting recent talk of the 'African Century' in which the continent should realise its full economic, cultural and sporting potential, we decided on a broad theme, exploring tourism's role in making this a reality and identifying some of the opportunities and obstacles to progress.



In line with WTM's current approach, the venue was an open space on the floor of the main hall, surrounded by African stands engaged in the business of selling their services and destinations. This created a more vibrant but also challenging environment. As with our previous events, all seats were filled.

The debate was opened by TCN Chair, Roger Goodacre who welcomed the speakers and audience and introduced the moderator, Tom Buncle from Yellow Railroad.

Tom spoke briefly about the role of consultants and presented an impressive map showing some of the many countries in Africa where TCN members have worked in recent years. He then introduced the three speakers who represented a balance of interests, from government, conservation and the travel industry.

Belise Kariza, Chief Tourism Officer, Rwanda Development Board spoke about the impressive progress made by her country in becoming one of Africa's most successful economies following a period of devastation and despair, based in considerable part on the development of tourism. Fundamentally, this entailed getting the basics right at the outset. Amongst these, Belise listed six main components:

- Safety. This is the first question raised by would-be travellers. Following a programme to address security issues, Rwanda now claims to be the safest country in Africa.
- Policy and strategy. A starting point was a clear assessment of the country's assets, with a policy and actions to build on the strengths.
- Infrastructure. A programme of attracting investment has seen an increase in accommodation capacity from 600 to over 10,800 rooms, and the construction of East Africa's biggest convention centre has facilitated significant growth in the international conference market

- Accessibility. A new international airport is being built, and Rwanda Air now flies to 26 destinations.
- Conservation and sustainability. This provides the backbone of the policy and offer, with a focus on community engagement and benefit, supported by revenue sharing programmes.
- Marketing and promotion. An aggressive programme of awareness raising has included ambitious sponsorship activity, such as the slightly controversial link with Arsenal football club.



The result has been a rapid rise in tourism revenues. In the World Bank's 'Ease of Doing Business' index, Rwanda has risen from 150th position to 29th - the highest rank of any country on the continent of Africa.

Cathy Dean, Chief Executive of Save the Rhino International, spoke about the importance of conserving the resources that drive tourism demand. To emphasise the impact of poaching in Africa on the wildlife resource, she showed data on the level of destruction and its consequences. In South Africa alone over 1000 rhinos have been killed annually over the last five years. Overall, between 2006 and 2014 it is estimated that rhino poaching has led to an annual loss of tourism revenue in South Africa, Namibia, Kenya and Zimbabwe of over £200 million.

Cathy believes strongly that visitors are not told enough about the conservation challenges in Africa and how to relate to the issues. A framework for good practices can be found in WTTC's Travel and Tourism Declaration on Illegal Trade in Wildlife, launched in April 2018 with the support of over 100 leading travel companies. It covers four key commitments: tackling illegal trade in wildlife; promoting responsible wildlife-based tourism; raising awareness amongst customers, staff and trade networks; and engaging local communities. Cathy pointed to the link between these issues, including the role that tourism can play as a positive incentive for conservation. She presented examples of how to engage with visitors and local communities, emphasising the need to ensure that everyone understands how much local income is dependent on the presence of wildlife. She ended with her own personal wish-list: tell it as it is; respect wildlife; don't become part of the problem; and connect communities and conservation.

Gillian Saunders, Special Advisor to the Tourism Minister, South Africa, and longstanding tourism industry expert and consultant, presented an analysis of Africa's performance and key challenges in tourism. While the continent has seen significant growth in international arrivals, this has not been as fast as predicted by UNWTO and Africa still accounts for only 4.7% of

global market share. Within Africa, there are huge differences between countries, with South Africa totally outstripping the rest in the volume of arrivals. In the WEF Tourism Competitiveness Index, many African countries are ranked at a very low level and even those with the highest ranking have significant weaknesses, notably in safety, hygiene, visa openness, environmental sustainability and tourist service infrastructure.

Gillian drew attention to various key challenges, ranging from the need to address environmental issues, such as the water management and conservation, to the importance of investing in marketing. More specifically, she spoke about two subjects which are current weaknesses but potential future opportunities. The first was the need for more liberalisation of air services, which can lead to significant increases in visits and spending. Inter-country air connectivity is especially poor in Africa and the declared intention to tackle this must now be implemented in practice. The second and related issue was the opportunity presented by the domestic market within Africa, which shows significant potential to grow from a low base and could deliver new benefits to many countries.

Questions from the audience focused on how to address negative images and issues in Africa as well as ways to pursue the opportunities.



One questioner wondered whether there may be too many conservation bodies competing for attention and resources. This was not considered to be a problem, provided the various organisations are prepared to work together.

The need for partnership and collaboration was also identified as a key requirement in addressing the challenge of selling Africa's diversity while avoiding inefficient competition between destinations. It was felt that themes and opportunities should be identified at an Africa level, with regional strategies that are then followed locally.

The discussion pointed to the potential to use Rwanda as a role model for other countries to emulate. Dialogue between the different tourist boards has been taking place, with more opportunities to learn from each other. This approach can also apply to the treatment of themes, as has been demonstrated between Rwanda and its neighbours in the conservation of gorillas.

The meeting ended on an optimistic note. Asked when Africa will actually achieve its potential, the speakers believed that this was already happening in many areas. With the right vision and commitment much can be achieved.

For the Tourism Consultants Network, the session clearly demonstrated the ongoing need for tourism experts in various disciplines to engage with these challenging and exciting issues, building on the considerable experience of our members in many African countries.

Richard Denman, FTS and TCN member