

# Sustainability in the Meetings Industry

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## **Sustainability in the Meetings Industry**

**Presented at the 51th ICCA conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, October 2012**

### **1. Introduction**

Sustainability is a rather new concept. In 1987, the report “*Our Common Future*” was published and the concept sustainability was presented and came into focus worldwide as the report became a UN report also called the Brundtland Report, named after the commission’s chairwoman Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway. Sustainability was defined as “*a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” (WCED, 1987, p.43). Since then the definition has been further developed include the sustainability of environment, economy and society (Weaver & Lawton, 2006). It has been related to different industries and with the introduction of Agenda 21 in the early 1990s, the tourism industry was encouraged to adopt codes of conduct and best practices for sustainability for the first time (Sloan et al., 2009, p.7). In tourism it resulted in the following: “*Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability*” (UNWTO definition in Sloan et al., 2009, p.4).

Also the meetings industry is a rather new concept. The traditional distinction of tourism in leisure and business tourism with focus on MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) has concerning business tourism been further developed with priority on meetings and congresses and events to the concept: “the meetings industry”. In 2012, The Meetings Industry Council presented

the following definition of the industry: “*The meetings industry consists of a broad range of organizers, suppliers and facilities engaged in the development and delivery of meetings, conferences, exhibitions and other related events which are held in order to achieve a range of professional, business, cultural or academic objectives*” (The Meetings Industry Council, 2012; Yang & Gu, 2012).

The industry includes many of the same variables as tourism such as time, location, accessibility, and price. Those variables have already been identified as important in academic work on the meetings industry (Toh, 2007; Draper et al., 2011). As the meetings industry is derived from tourism, it is not strange that it deals with overnights, meals, attractions/events, accessibility and destinations. However, surprisingly little scholarly or academic research dealing with sustainability in the meeting industry really exists (Draper et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2012).

The meetings industry form one of the largest and fastest growing sectors within the tourism sphere, and today it is truly global as Kim & Park wrote in 2008. This statement can be discussed today as the economic and financial crisis has had a heavy impact on the industry. The last years have witnessed considerable changes to the industry, owing to the weakening economy leaving many organisations to cut expenditures in terms of e.g. conferences, conventions and travel costs (Pearlman & Gates, 2010). Furthermore, it can be discussed if the industry is truly global meaning that the input side as well as the demand side include elements in the production function as well as if the output is really global. However, it cannot be argued that the industry is big and international. In fact, 11,929 meetings were held in 2009 worldwide (UIA, 2010). The definition of a meeting again plays an important role. In the investigation from VisitDenmark mentioned below it was found that 188,000 arrangements were registered as meetings. The international dimension is for instance seen in the many chapters of ICCA. One of the latest studies of the industry, however, shows that most participants in meetings are domestic. The Danish study shows that 83 per cent of the income is created by domestic participants (VisitDenmark, 2012).

## **2. The research project idea**

As it is found that the meetings industry should be more sustainable and that it at the same could improve the economy in the industry, the concept “green meetings” has been presented by the Convention Industry Council: “*A green meeting or event incorporates environmental*

*considerations to minimize its negative impact on the environment” (CIC, 2010). By adding “while simultaneously meeting the needs of the stakeholders without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, it can be argued that a full definition of sustainable meetings has been achieved.*

Tourism is quite often defined as including the industries of accommodation, restaurants, attractions, transportation and shopping (Lyck, 2012a). As all these industries have already worked intensively for some years with developing “best practices” that include sustainability issues that also improve the profitability *and* since the meetings industry is derived from those industries, many of the best practices developed will also benefit the meetings industry.

In this project, the interesting research question is thus:

*“Will sustainability in form of green meetings be a selling point based on a new branding totally or partly based on the meetings industry as a green industry? And how can it be done?”*

This research question is suggested by the Centre for Tourism and Culture Management as a proposal for ICCA to investigate by partly financing and by applying it to interested stakeholders who already have decided to examine the opportunities in a strategy based on a sustainability inspired approach.

### **3. Delimitation**

The proposal does not include virtual meetings. It is of course true, that virtual meetings are more environmentally sustainable than meetings face to face. However, it is also documented that the real economic value in meetings is found in the context of the meetings and in the establishing and creation of the social networks at the meetings.

The proposal presented is a first introduction to a research project as promised to the initiators of the research session. A young researcher Mads Willemoes Hjordemaal at the Centre for Tourism and Culture Management at CBS has spent time on finding relevant knowledge and information for my writing of this proposal. An implementation of the project will surely, however, demand interested stakeholders and resources.

Lastly, until now most time has been devoted to step 2 and 3, see below in methodology.

#### 4. Methodology

The methodology of the project will be divided into four steps, and **the first step** will be to identify interested parties among stakeholders. Among possible interested parties could be forerunners as the Green Meetings Industry Council (GMIC, 2012), Oracle and other leading corporations.

**The second step** will be to explore cases from the tourism industries that have already worked with best practices and identify cases that have a strong branding value that can be further developed into a green profile. To give an idea of the content of this part, some examples are presented.

As examples can be mentioned *the accommodation industry*:

Already in the 1990's, the American Hotel and Lodging Association began different initiatives to increase sustainability, most notably the Green Task Force along with a policy statement and a framework of best practices. Another early mover on sustainability initiatives in the hotel industry was American Kimpton Hotels, who had 16 % of their guest staying as a direct result of the sustainable implementations (Butler, 2008). Inspired by Kimpton Hotels, many hotel chains such as Fairmont Hotel and Resorts, Hilton, Marriot, Taj Hotel Group and InterContinental Hotel Group have since then implemented sustainability approaches. In fact, the industry already has fixed frameworks on sustainability in terms of certifications that should be fulfilled in order to be able to call the operation sustainable. Among the most well-known certifications are; the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), The Green Seal and the Energy Star certification (Draper et al., 2012).

Copenhagen has achieved a leading position within sustainability. In 2012, 64 % of all hotel rooms are eco-certified. In 2008, only 8 % were eco-certified (Woco, 2012). More in direction of a direct selling point the Crown Plaza Towers in Copenhagen can be mentioned: *Hold your conference or meeting in Copenhagen in an exclusive green environment*". Greeted by this statement when entering the hotel's website, there is no doubt that it is bedding on (at least) two things in its approach to competition; meetings and sustainability. Hosting numerous meetings each year, the Danish hotel Crown Plaza Copenhagen Towers is the first CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral hotel building in Denmark and maybe in the world. Ensuring a comfortable climate throughout the hotel without damaging the environment unnecessarily, the energy consumption in terms of cooling and heating is nearly 90 % less than for other hotels in the Copenhagen area. Also, many initiatives such as intelligent controlling of lighting and the use of organic products from local areas in the hotel's restaurant have

been introduced to reduce CO2 emissions. Additionally, a large part of the building is covered by a solar system.

The Meetings Team at Crown Plaza Copenhagen Towers is furthermore educated to approach their work from the three overall themes, namely innovation, service and sustainability. Among other things, this is seen in the two innovations “The Walk of Sustainability” and the “Social Media Lounge”. The former is a concept, where the hotel has placed small stories of how the hotel became green in the hotel area. Each story has a QR code, enabling all guests to download movies to their smartphone. The latter is about using Facebook and Twitter to enable conferences and events to connect with a global audience. The hotel simply provides clients with a team, who is ready to assist with the right guidance in how to utilize the product for a meeting, conference or event, and in doing so the hotel is also taking care of all aspects from technical assistance to project management in its meeting approach.

Also *food, beverages and restaurants* can be mentioned with examples of sustainability. Already in 1990, the Green Restaurant Association was established as a non-profit organization that facilitates restaurant owners and the alike to become more environmental oriented. For example, restaurants can earn certification points in seven different categories; being chemical and pollution reduction, water efficiency, waste reduction and recycling, sustainable furnishings and building materials, sustainable food, energy and disposals. In Denmark, all retail food enterprises have been subject to forced ratings and mandatory publication of inspection reports since 2001. Although mostly focusing on the hygienic part of running restaurants and other food establishments, this has forced the Danish food and beverage industry to focus on operating their business in a more sustainable way. The so-called ‘smiley-system’ has thus helped to create more transparency, which means that companies can compare themselves with each other and compete even more on food safety, which is ultimately benefitting consumers (findsmiley.dk, 2012).

Other certifications do exist in this part of the tourism sector, including the Green Food Service Alliance, Sustainable Foodservice Consulting and the National Restaurant Association, who recently established the Conserve Initiative, which should improve the approach towards sustainability in the food and beverage industry even further (Draper et al.,2012).

From Copenhagen a restaurant called “Toldboden” (Toldboden.com, 2012) is also worth to mention. The building of the restaurant is made in a sustainable way using untraditional local natural materials, and information is given on the impact on the environment of producing the course in exact numbers for each course. The impact on the environment is low due to the menus consisting of local products without too much transportation and fertilizers included.

Also, from *the transport industry* some examples are worth mentioning:

Within the transportation sector much literature on sustainability implementation has been made (Lyck, 2012). Sustainability in the aviation industry is perhaps the most debated theme in the sector currently. Even though there has been a lack of willingness from the aviation industry to pay for its externalities (Marques & Brochado, 2008), the design of environmental regulations has been carefully considered to ensure that costs arising from externalities can be internalized. Due to the negative spillover effects the question has therefore not been whether to regulate but instead how such regulations should be implemented optimally. The Kyoto Protocol has so far been the most important of the solutions to regulations, as it obligated the industrialized countries (i.e. so-called Annex 1 countries) to pursue the reduction of GHG emissions from aviation through the International Civil Aviation Organization, ICAO (Scheelhaase et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2010).

Acknowledging that developed countries are principally responsible for the high level of emissions as a result of more than 150 years of industrial activity, the Kyoto Protocol placed a larger responsibility on developed states under the principle of “common, but differentiated responsibilities” (Stone, 2004). However, the Kyoto Agreement expires by the end of 2012 and although some parts of it continues and although it has been agreed that something new shall be established before 2020, it must be noted that the development now relies on more voluntary initiatives. The Kyoto Agreement included 50 per cent of the emissions, now only 11 per cent are included. It was a problem with the Kyoto Agreement that it was not including emissions from the US, and recently Canada has left the Agreement and of course some of the countries not included in the original agreement like China have since then had a strong economic development with heavy unregulated emissions. Still, the scientific forecasts of environmental damages of the emissions in world we live in have not stopped, but in contrary increased (Nussbaum et al., 2012).

Also on the roads many changes have taken place. Intelligent highway systems have been developed and new smaller cars using much less gasoline have been developed. Also electric cars have been developed, i.e. new inventions have been developed being both more sustainable and more economically effective.

Looking into other aspects within transportation, the EU funded project EcoMobility focusing on the Øresund region was established in order to examine and improve sustainability in the sector, thereby recognizing that new energy systems are essential, but more importantly that this should be followed by new forms of governance, planning and stakeholder involvement to create sustainable supply chains. In that way, EcoMobility was in the project seen as a concept that recognizes the needs for transport in a society but simultaneously stresses that transportation should take place in an eco-friendly way (Lyck, 2012b; Carlson et al., 2012).

The recent development in sustainability also includes examples from *the attraction/event industry* too. Mentioned can for instance be that Radisson Blu is currently launching a brand new concept, called Experience Meetings, with a total of 2200 meeting rooms in 55 countries spread across Europe, the Middle East and Africa. In total, the hotel chain has educated 10.000 employees in the concept (Takeoff, 2012). The concept is therefore very internationally oriented. Furthermore, the concept includes the possibility of having CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral meetings as well as conferences on environmentally certified hotels. In fact, meeting planners and participants can obtain documentation for the reduced impact on the environment in regards to their meeting through a specific accounting system. Also, the hotel continues with its concept of “Brain Food”, meaning that they offer food and drinks that gives energy and stable blood sugar throughout the meetings, thereby also focusing on the social dimension of sustainability (Sloan et al., 2009).

In September 2012, European Sustainable Events Conference was held in Copenhagen. It was the first conference ever held on the topic of sustainable events. It was established by the Danish Sustainable Events Initiative (DSEI, 2012) that also was responsible for the sustainable Danish European Chairmanship and for the Green Meetings Industry Council.

**The third step** is the identification and use of relevant theories.

The relevant theories for the project are identified as the following: a) Implementation of sustainability b) Corporate responsibility c) Branding d) Experience economy by Pine and Gilmore

(Pine & Gilmore 1999; Pine & Gilmore, 2007) both the original publication and the latter that includes authenticity. The theories in these publications deal with the creation of experiences and with what constitutes an experience as well as the value of the experience. In total, the theories deal with management of green meetings as a concept and as a selling point for increasing profitability based on a sustainable foundation. The theories mentioned on a), b) and c) are well-known and therefore not explained here.

**The fourth step** is about strategy and management for greening of the meetings industry. Strategy and management must include guidelines and models that make sustainability both sustainable and profitable. A good starting point is to make use of the AIDA model and to adopt tools to each of the phases of the model. In the AIDA model, the A stands for *awareness*. The first step is to make the meeting visible for potential clients. I stands for *interest*, and it deals with how to create an interest for a green meeting. D stands for *desire*, and it looks into how the potential client should develop a desire for joining the meeting. In many ways, Interest and Desire reinforce each other and create need. The last A stands for *action*, meaning that the process should result in a direct client action, i.e. the potential client demanding a green meeting.

## **5. Conclusion**

The concept of sustainability has been outlined and the practices in the tourism industries have been presented in order to investigate how the sustainability concern is taken into account. It has also been presented that the sustainability dimensions have not until now had a strong position within the meetings industry. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the meeting industry is a big and important industry that has been hit hard by the economic and financial crisis. The idea of enjoying benefits from combining sustainability and improvements of the economy by learning from the other tourism industries have been presented as a reality that already takes place. However, the question is if still more benefits can be explored by using the concept of a green sustainable meetings industry as a selling point. Based on this, the research question is outlined:

*“Will sustainability in form of green meetings be a selling point based on a new branding totally or partly based on the meetings industry as a green industry? And how can it be done?”*

The research question has been formulated by the Centre for Tourism and Culture Management at Copenhagen Business School for discussion at the ICCA conference and among stakeholders. A delimitation of the project is also presented and so is a methodology for the project including 3 steps. Step 1 includes stakeholders and interests in the project and this step is open for discussion. Step 2 identifies what the project is about and identifies activities already in place to give an idea of the further development. Step 3 identifies the theories on which the study should be based. Step 4 includes the real new element in the methodology, namely guidelines and models for implementing strategy and management to achieve both sustainability and profitability. It is stressed that a research of this kind needs interested parties as well as resources.

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