



# Center for Responsible Travel

*Transforming the Way the World Travels*

[www.responsibletravel.org](http://www.responsibletravel.org)

## Opening Keynote

**Elizabeth Becker, author of *Overbooked: The Exploding Business of Travel & Tourism* and former *New York Times* reporter**

Thank you to Martha Honey and the Center for Responsible Travel and to Barbara Hendrie and the United Nations Environment – North America office for putting together this conference on the very first year of sustainable tourism.

When the powers that be decided that 2017 would be the year of responsible tourism they had no idea that Mother Nature and human nature would go to such great lengths to underline the urgency of the issue.

Mother Nature—wow! How can you have sustainable tourism when climate change is heating up the oceans so much that hurricanes that are supposed to occur every 500 years suddenly appeared this summer in rapid succession. Much of the Caribbean is a natural disaster area of epic proportions. Hurricanes Harvey and Irma crippled and even destroyed much of the tourism industry in island after island. Can they rebuild in a way that can sustain the industry in the face of greater global warming?

We humans produced some catastrophes, too--overcrowding that is destroying some of the most beautiful places on earth. In Europe, citizens overturned buses protesting the flood of tourists that were pushing them out of their own homes. Anti-tourist graffiti was scrawled in historic centers. They're trying to win back control of their neighborhoods and their lives.

Finally the industry is recognizing that unfettered mass tourism is a threat to the environment, to society and to the industry itself.

This is a turning point. For the first time that I can remember, tourism is treated as serious news, jumping from travel pages to the front pages.

The travel industry is an industry, not a pastime. It is an \$8 trillion industry and the world's biggest employer—one in every 11 people. So instead of talking only about the latest travel trends, the world is noticing that, like any other major industry, the travel industry is having a major economic, political, and environmental impact.

While travel can do much good, it can also cause great harm.

In the last decade, the industry has adopted the vocabulary of sustainability: safeguard cultural heritage; protect the environment; treat people in destinations with dignity and respect; improve the wages of the tourism industry.

The industry holds conferences, workshops, shared best practices—and, sometimes, actually puts some of these ideals into practice.

But sustainability has to be planned and carried out by all involved—not just the industry and the tourists, but also governments, especially governments at all levels, by development agencies, by diplomats.

And by international organizations like the United Nations, and by NGOs like CREST.

Signs of change are everywhere. With tourism as a major economic engine, governments' first question is: How will this affect tourism next year?

In terms of sheer numbers, nothing seems to put a damper on travel—not the 2008 recession; not terrorism, including attacks on tourist resorts; not even war. Tourists still show up in North Korea and Afghanistan. A tourist was released last month after six years of being held hostage in Mali by Al-Qaida.

Just to prove that point, worldwide travel is already up six percent this year, with a 10 percent increase in the Middle East, the center of the world's most deadly conflicts. It's up six percent in Europe, despite a string of terrorist attacks.

Travel keeps rising and rising in popularity.

Part of the reason is, few industries were better positioned to take advantage of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—open borders for the first time in modern history; leaps in technology, from airplanes to the internet; the rise of the global middle class (think China and India).

In less than two decades travel doubled, from 536 million trips abroad in 1995 to one billion in 2012. When the Cold War closed off much of the world to tourism, that figure was only 25 million.

Success is no longer measured solely by arrivals—the raw number of tourists who visit—and the amount of money they spend. Sustainability is climbing to the top of that list of standards.

Today, we will be addressing how to build sustainable tourism, what it looks like, who does it well and why it is worth fighting for.

We will hear from people who are doing the hard work and reflect on what has been done and needs to be done—from food to employment, the environment, indigenous culture, even sustaining peace between two countries.

As backdrop are those two big issues, I mentioned a few minutes ago climate change and overcrowding.

The Caribbean hurricanes are the most horrific examples of climate change—warming oceans, melting polar caps, changing weather patterns. Wildfires, loss of water, threat to habitats—all affect tourism.

And the reverse: Tourism contributes to global warming and climate change—carbon emissions from airplanes and air-conditioning, for example. Hotels and resorts use exponentially more water and power per person than local residents.

Building back from hurricanes—will there be money, expertise, and government power for sustainable tourism? They will build back—tourism is the economic engine for the whole region. For example, tourism accounts for 96 percent of the economy of the very damaged British Virgin Islands. Tourism is easily the biggest foreign currency earner—\$35 billion spent, providing 2.3 million jobs.

One major source of concern is cruise ships, in terms of the environment, the undercutting destinations, paying low wages. The two giants, Royal Caribbean and Carnival Cruise Lines, are headquartered in Miami but avoid paying minimum wage and exempt themselves from environmental scrutiny by registering their vessels under the flags of countries with lax or nonexistent regulations.

They turn many ports of call into crowded bazaars with tacky merchandise and dense masses of tourists. There are thousands on each ship, which are like low-rent Hilton hotels that show little concern for the chaos and garbage they leave in their wake or the pollution in the water. It's like an invasion. In many ports, the ships and passengers cause more problems than deliver profits, and they undermine local businesses.

This is the opposite of sustainability. How will that be handled in the rebuilding of tourism in the Caribbean?

Cruise ships were an essential part of the other big news story this year: open rebellion in some of Europe's most beautiful cities against tourism.

Europe is the canary in the coal mine. If governments at all levels—local, regional, and national—fail to regulate tourism, overcrowding will continue, and more places will be loved to death.

First the mayor of Barcelona, then the Spanish prime minister had to promise to bring tourism under control after Barcelona suffered a series of protests and demonstrations against the overcrowding of the city. The mayor has been trying to tame tourism. Airbnb is one of her biggest headaches—closing down all that that aren't legally registered.

But she can't reduce crowds from cruise ships that are controlled by the national government. One of her advisors told me the situation is like this: You give a dinner party for 12 and then 1,000 people show up.

Some governments have figured this out...

Bordeaux, France. The city was a dilapidated, post-industrial mess in 1995, when Alain Juppe was elected mayor and brought the city together to begin a massive rescue and renovation. After a nearly 15-year effort, Bordeaux has recaptured its 18<sup>th</sup> century beauty with a painstaking restoration effort, cutting no corners.

They reclaimed the river, removed the decaying port and docks and turned it into one of France's great riverwalks.

It's no longer a shipping giant. They've made tourism the new foundation with this guiding principle: Make it livable for locals, and tourists will follow.

The historic center is now the largest urban area in UNESCO's World Heritage registry.

Much of it is now only for pedestrians. The city is connected with a modern, environmentally friendly electric tramway system. Restaurants, shops, everything followed—farm-to-table, sea-to-table, and vineyard-to-table.

Tourism finally brought together the city and great Bordeaux vineyards. It's now France's museum of wine.

Talk about sustainable growth: Bordeaux is France's best city for preserving biodiversity—top 10 for creating green spaces and recycling waste. It's culturally open. There's an Islamic center, a project to reveal its Nazi past in museums, a synagogue.

Contrast this with Venice, the world's most beautiful city whose leaders have done far too little far too late.

Venice—the most beautiful and most likely to drown from tourists. Twenty million visitors. Half the locals have been pushed out—by high rents, under-the-table deals, unenforced laws. It now has a local population of less than 60,000 who continue to protest against giant cruise ships and Airbnb, but to no avail.

Even the United Nations has warned that the genius of Venice—its culture, art, and way of life—are being drowned by tourism.

What about us—the U.S.A.?

I was asked to review the U.S.A., since it will not be discussed on any panel today. Once again, the U.S. is the exception.

The U.S.A. refuses to believe the federal government should play a role in tourism. That became official in 1994, with a vote by Congress during the Republican "Contract with America." After 9/11, the government severely cut back on tourist visas and instituted highly intrusive and lengthy airport searches and even arrests. Tourism fell dramatically. In a decade, the U.S.A. lost \$90 billion and 200,000 jobs.

Under President Obama, the U.S.A. opened up and tourism rebounded. There were many more visas for Chinese and Brazilians, among others, a better welcome at the border without suffering security issues, sustainable efforts around the country.

Now, with President Trump, some of this is going in reverse. His travel ban and his anti-Islam rhetoric has frightened off some visitors. Increasing gun violence has frightened others. The U.S.A. is seeing a new tourism slump—eight percent—and not just from countries on the travel ban list. The industry calls it “the Trump slump.”

Some of the industry openly opposed the ban and the “America first” rhetoric. And they were surprised that it was Trump who did this. He made his fortune from tourism: hotels, golf courses around the world. And the industry is afraid he may be one of the most dangerous.

Of special concern for this conference is the Trump administration threats to America’s national parks—the treasure that is the example for countries around the world. Trump wants to open up some parks to logging, extractive industry and hunting. He also proposes diminishing their status.

We had hoped to build on the legacy of President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama, who both dramatically expanded national parks and reserves. Now we will spend energy trying to defend what have.

Welcome to a full day of great discussions.

Thank you.