

Tourism Needn't Pollute, Says Ecology Rep

By Harriet Davenport

SAN FRANCISCO — Even the first-time tourist can see an incongruity between the steel and concrete hotel where he stays and the primitive appeal of palm trees and white sand at the exotic destination he visits. Members of the travel industry all over the world are beginning to label this phenomenon as a form of pollution: tourism pollution. What can travel agents do to assuage the corruption of the environment by tourism? Take a look at those glossy travel folders, says Dr. Edward Towle, president of the Island Resources Foundation on St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Are you selling slick new hotels, American-style meals and sightseeing buses? Or are you selling clean air and sparkling beaches? Are you instilling interest in the indigenous culture?

If you're concentrating on the hotels, says Towle, the beaches might not survive.

Towle is a member of the Travel Industry for the Environment council. He noted wryly that, although the American Hotel and Motel Assn. verbally supports the council, it did not send a representative to its first meeting last week.

"Tourism as an industry is very unstructured, primitive and doesn't have adequate research facilities or quality control. Airlines, hotels and travel agents work so independently that each can say, 'That's not my problem,'" Towle said. But if an anti-travel backlash develops, either in resort areas or among travelers, agents will be among the first to suffer.

The tourism that's developed isn't the only kind of tourism possible, he continued. He stressed that newly-developed resort areas, particularly islands, are easily enticed by powerful travel interests into surrendering their land.

"They find out too late that a new hotel can change waterfronts, the labor force, even social styles," he commented. "Development took place so fast in St. Thomas that there are only three public beaches left to

serve 60,000 residents. Over one million tourists visited there last year."

Towle said that unsophisticated islands, eager to develop, view tourism as a relatively quick and easy way to improve the flow of capital. "It isn't that they shouldn't develop; they should do so with care," he said, adding, "If a government doesn't make visible tourism progress, it will be voted out of power."

Much building on small islands has been done with the aid of international agencies such as UNESCO, OAS, the World Bank, AIDB and Canada's

and beaches are lost. Some builders consciously destroy beaches by removing sand for mixing concrete."

Is indiscriminate building the fault of island governments? "No," said Towle. "How can an inexperienced government that doesn't even have a biologist on its staff ask questions about the water supply? They're growing too fast. It's all they can do to patch the holes in their roads."

As an alternative, the Island Resources Foundation offers a team of specialists which, at no cost, gives advice to islands all over the world on building, with emphasis on preservation of

Travel Council Protects Environment

SAN FRANCISCO — Everyone attending the first meeting of the Travel Industry for the Environment council Oct. 4 agreed that ecological concern is needed in the travel-tourism industry. Discussion centered on priorities for action.

Council members from all over the world, including travel agents, airline heads and representatives from environmental groups, voted to concentrate efforts on a newsletter which will be sent to members of the industry.

Primary emphasis was placed on education of the travel industry to the self-negating effects of tourism as presently expanding. The council hopes to educate

others through public service announcements.

Other priorities were compiling a film list, printed library and speakers bureau to publicize problems; establishing grants to permit travel environment representatives from other countries to attend international meetings on the subject; and working with boards of education around the world to involve young people in the movement.

The council decided to hold its next meeting Jan. 19 in San Francisco. Paul Gibson, vice president of urban and environmental affairs for American Airlines, was elected temporary chairman.

CEDA, but Towle doesn't believe these organizations have always been helpful.

"The pattern is simple. Country X wants to develop so it goes to agency Y and says, 'Here we have 200 miles of undeveloped coastline. What should we do?' The alleged experts reply, 'This is a great place for a hotel.' Agency Y gives country X some money and, without much investigation, its so-called experts reroute a river or dredge a swamp to build a hotel. In comes a hotel, out goes the fishing industry.

"Fishing industries in half the Virgin Islands are in trouble from building by tourism interests," he continued. "One dredged harbor can alter coastal circulation so that fish are gone

the environment. Fifteen governments, including the U.S., contribute to this organization, hoping to make islands more self-reliant.

The Caribbean Conservation Assn., parent organization to the IRF, helped Barbados fill in a swamp. St. Lucia and five other islands have asked for aid in planning national parks and the British Virgin Islands have sought assistance in setting up an iguana preserve.

"We are most pleased about St. Kitts, a small, unexploited island which asked us to help plan its entire development. We're usually repairing damage already done, but here we are practicing preventive measures," Towle said.

Prevention is not always in a

government's hands, he added. "In hundreds of cases, private interests — large hotel chains — buy up land, escaping the usual system of checks and balances. A landowner can lie through his teeth about the 'good' he is doing and no one can stop him."

Clients suffer, too, he said. "In most hotels you can't tell from the room or the menu whether you're in Barbados or Sacramento. Many hotels are ecologically designed for another area but the owners, who often run the hotels away from the island, don't realize the incongruities." Towle also mentioned a tendency to hire people from other countries to manage island hotels.

"Concentrate lots of hotels in a fancy resort area and you get a kind of reverse ghetto that could be anywhere. But people don't go to France and Switzerland to live in plush hotels. They go seeking what is uniquely French and Swiss.

"We find what we call the 'idyllic niche syndrome' in places like Jamaica's north coast. In the black Caribbean, if you juxtapose white men at leisure with black men at work, you get an interesting situation," Towle noted.

"When a bunch of Americans travel to Europe, their presence doesn't alter the culture. They see the Gothic cathedrals, the marketplaces, the people, and then leave. But in the newly-independent countries of the Caribbean, the huge influx of white people is threatening the natives. Little black kids in the Caribbean grow up being more influenced by the values of tourists than those of their own people."

Towle explained that a small but growing contingent of West Indians is protesting the effects of tourism and that he had found the same sentiments expressed by islands in the South Pacific.

"This isn't just their problem; it's everybody's problem," he said.

Both the Island Resources Foundation and the Caribbean Conservation Assn. may be contacted at P.O. Box 4187, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands 00801.