**The Responsible Tourism Conference 2014**

**James Chilton – Challenging the Status Quo**

Hello again everyone and thanks to David and Eanna for giving an example of how multi-agency collaboration can produce a wide ranging destination strategy, offering real benefits for local communities along the canals. I look forward to being able to take **my** kids along a cycle trail from Dublin to the Shannon in the not too distant future!

* What I’d like to talk about for the next few minutes is the **need for change** in the tourism industry. For people who **can**, to make a **difference**, to make places **better** – **better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit**.

I called this talk ‘challenging the status quo’ not as a reference to an ageing British rock band, but because changing and influencing the mainstream approach to tourism is what **we all need to do.**

I know if you are here today, you are already ‘the converted’ and I am not going to preach about the benefits of a responsible approach. However, for many, the status quo is the safe option, even if it means **they’re** spending more on energy in their hotel than they need to; even if **their** all inclusive package deal gives them a less satisfying holiday and local people less income than the alternative; even if **their** councilsstrategic approach doesn’t put their communities first.

Deciding **what** change is required, **who** can make it happen and **how** we can achieve change is the **challenge**. People often say ‘*change can only happen if a person wants to change*’. This is true, but they can often be helped or ‘nudged’ to make that change - to challenge the fear of change, through role models leading the way and through better choices being offered to them. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Many of the people here today, both our speakers and in the audience, are those role models so needed to facilitate change in the tourism industry and today we have heard examples of approaches that can be transferred to other destinations and communities.

* In 2001 I completed a masters degree with Harold at the International Centre for Responsible Tourism, then based at Greenwich University. One of the recommended books on the course was ‘The Holidaymakers’ by Jost Krippendorf, an economist and an environmentalist, whose opinions were informed by the negative impacts of tourism on the **people, economy and environment** of the Swiss alpine region.

One of the key messages to come from the book and one I know Harold is keen to emphasise is Krippendorf’s call for more *‘****rebellious tourists and rebellious locals’*** to create **new forms of tourism**. There is a need for **both to** **demand a change** in the status quo, to **demand** better holidays and a form of tourism that **benefits local communities, makes a return to conservation and gives visitors a more enjoyable and engaging experience.**

Krippendorf’s aim was not to curtail tourism but to ensure it could be used to benefit environmental and cultural conservation and the host communities. His ambition was to do so not just by **regulation,** but by helping the tourism industry look to the **longer term** and become **more responsible for both its actions and consequent impacts.** His focus was not solely upon the **industry -** he hoped to encourage the **public** to take more environmentally friendly and satisfying holidays.

* **So what is responsible tourism?** This year the 8th Responsible Tourism in Destinations conference will be held in Manchester. In 2002 the first was held in Cape Town and the declaration from that conference forms the basis of what many believe responsible tourism to be. Responsible travel can take many forms and different destinations and stakeholders will have different priorities. In general this is a form of tourism which:
* **minimises negative environmental, social and cultural impacts;**
* **generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the wellbeing of host communities, by improving working conditions and access to the industry;**
* **involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances.**
* **makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and to the maintenance of the world’s diversity;**
* **provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural and environmental issues;**
* **provides access for physically challenged people;** and
* **is culturally sensitive and engenders respect between tourists and hosts.**

While these points articulate the **goals** of responsible tourism they are fairly general. It is important to note that **different places** will have **different priorities** and that these must be determined **locally** by destinations, enterprises and communities.

* Responsible travel is about **having fun, whilst also giving back**. It can broadly be described as **ethical travel** that strives to **reduce the negative impacts** of our journey while creating long term benefitsfor the **environment, local people, and local economies.**

It is also about ensuring those communities hosting travellers benefit from tourism through skills development, job creation and life opportunities - all while protecting and conserving local, natural and cultural heritage. **The idea is not so much about improving a place for the visitors, but about improving it as a place to live.**

Tourism is a highly emotive subject and like any other industry has many elements, about which people create many theories and lists of issues. However for me a responsible tourism approach is one that **Just Makes Sense!**

* As others have said, an easy way to summarise responsible tourism is the phrase that arose from the Cape Town conference in 2002. This is that: **Responsible Tourism** **makes better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit**. **The order is important here** – the priority is **using tourism** to make **better places** for local communities.
* **So whose responsibility is it** to drive change, **who can make a difference to the status quo?** Responsible tourism isn’t about a niche market, it’s about making **all** forms of tourism **more** responsible, it’s about changing the **nature of tourism.**

Over the last decade there has been increasing emphasis on responsibility as many have felt there had been a lack of progress towards creating a more **sustainable** tourism industry since the Earth Summit in Rio, with everyone expecting others to be act **sustainably**.

A responsible tourism approach emphasises **all those involved in the tourism industry, individuals, organisations and businesses, are responsible** for the kind of tourism they develop or engage in and need to take **responsibility** for their actions and the **consequences** of their actions.

* This includes central and local government, product owners and operators, transport operators, community services, NGO's, tourists, overseas volunteer organisations, tour operators, local communities; industry associations; the media...all are responsible for achieving the goals of responsible tourism.

While individuals can and do make a difference there is a strong role for local & national government to work together, with the private sector and local communities, in a collaborative approach to tourism development.

For the responsible tourism movement to continue to achieve change, we need **rebellious tourists and rebellious locals**, we need **activists in destinations and tourism enterprises**, and we need **travellers and holidaymakers** to hold the **operators and accommodation providers** to account.

* Everyone has different roles to play depending on their experience, location and background. For the last 10 years I’ve specialised in the strategic planning of tourism and recreation, working in New Zealand and Ireland and for both the public and private sectors.

Strategic planning for tourism requires an alternative approach. Tourism is unlike any other economic sector in that it involves state, private sector and the communitywhere it takes place and requires balancing a range of outcomes. For me theoptimum approach to tourism development is to ensure it contributes to the local **economy; heritage conservation & the maintenance of social cohesion**; as well as maximising **visitor spending and satisfaction**. It still amazes me the number of hotels and B&B’s I go to that don’t promote local recreation activities as a means of encouraging visitors to stay another day.

One focus I bring to all projects I work on is the importance of cooperating to compete or **co-opetition** – with businesses working together by developing complementary products and cross-marketing.

I’ve worked on projects all around the country since I arrived in Ireland in twenty oh one and what interests me most and fills me with hope for the future are the amazing community-driven initiatives and enterprises that make local places in Ireland so diverse and fascinating. For me ‘**celebrating the difference’** is the direction all destinations, communities and enterprises need to follow.

* Many people have many ideas on how to drive change. For me it is about collaborative learning – finding out what works elsewhere and how that can be applied at a national, regional or local scale.

I set up the Irish Centre for Responsible Tourism last year as a focus for sharing ideas that work. I developed the idea, not because I know more than others, far from it; or because I want to compete with or replace any other organisation, but because I believe in the importance of **collaboration**.

Many of Harold’s past students have set up similar sister collaboration hubs in other countries – the ICRT network now includes hubs in Wales, Barcelona, South Africa, Kerala, Canada, Australia, Belize and South East Asia. All are different, some are embryonic and just consist of a website, some operate a membership scheme such as Canada, and some are far more advanced such as South Africa with road shows around the country promoting the concept of responsible tourism.

* **What could the Irish Centre for Responsible Tourism be?** I see it as having four main roles: **Lobbying** for greater integration of responsible tourism into the policies, operations and activities of public institutions and tourism businesses; **Raising awareness** of the benefits of a responsible tourism approach; **Undertaking research** and technical advisory services; **Facilitating networking** between the public & private sectors and local communities in the promotion of responsible tourism development through conferences and workshops.

It could be an **information hub** and help to spread awareness and facilitate networking and collaboration by organising **this and future conferences and workshops** – providing an annual focus for those involved in responsible tourism in Ireland. I’d welcome your suggestions on this in the next session after the tea break, where there is time for an open discussion about where we go from here, how we can achieve and secure change.

**There is a growing realisation there is a better way to travel, by having more meaningful connections with local people, experiencing local culture and contributing to conservation - lets continue to build on this movement and use tourism to make better places for people to live in and to visit.**

1. ***Choice architecture*** *describes the way in which decisions may (and can) be influenced by how the choices are presented (in order to influence the outcome), and is a term used by* [*Cass Sunstein*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cass_Sunstein) *and economist* [*Richard Thaler*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Thaler) *in the 2008 book* [*Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nudge_%28book%29)*. Choice architecture seeks to affect outcomes through the manner in which the person or organization presents the choice to the decision-maker.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)