



**MESSAGE OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
OF THE PUERTO RICO TOURISM COMPANY,  
TERESTELLA GONZÁLEZ DENTON  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE**

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TOURISM AND THE  
PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM**

***CARIBBEAN MEDIA EXCHANGE  
ON SUSTAINABLE TOURISM (CMEX VIII)***

**HOTEL NORMANDIE  
SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO  
FEBRUARY 9-13, 2006**

Bienvenidos – Welcome to Puerto Rico. I am thrilled to see you all here today, and am particularly happy to be able to share with you some thoughts on a topic that is very dear to me. Ever since my appointment as Executive Director of the Puerto Rico Tourism Company, one of my top priorities has been to promote the development of our tourism product in a responsible way that is, above all, focused on the wellbeing of our people and our environment. I treasure our island as much as anyone, and feel that the focus of tourism should be to protect and share what we love so much about our country.

Tourism is the world's largest industry and the biggest creator of jobs across national and regional economies. Although in Puerto Rico tourism reflects only 6% of our Gross National Product, it has much more potential to contribute to our economic development and our Governor recognizes the importance of tourism to our economy. In the Caribbean region as a whole, tourism represents 35% of the Gross Domestic Product; employing, directly or indirectly, 1 out of every 4 people in the region, and generating billions in taxes and revenues for government agencies that are then re-invested into the community. Tourism is big business in the

Caribbean and, as with any major industry, it brings with it many challenges.

Despite the obvious economic contributions of tourism, there are many who do not see the benefits that the industry contributes to our communities, choosing instead to focus on a limited view of social issues, potential environmental deterioration and the corrosion of our urban landscape. It is true that we must take care how we proceed when developing tourism on our islands to ensure these issues are addressed properly, and this is the responsibility of all of us who work in the tourism industry.

As government officials, we continuously face the challenge of responding to the various expectations placed on the industry. We must keep a balance between making the right decisions for economic development and meeting the needs of tourists by keeping tourism facilities competitive through improvements while ensuring that development happens with thought and respect for our environment and surroundings.

Sustainability and sustainable development is a concept that arose from the growing clash between environmentalism and

infrastructure development. People who desired both economic development and environmental quality found that the conflict could hinder one or both of these goals. Similar conflicts continue to arise in the development of regional tourism strategies designed to expand opportunities for growth, often while putting critical coastal and marine resources at risk.

Today, it is satisfying to know that a well-managed tourism industry can stimulate both economic and social development without compromising our natural and cultural resource base. Sustainable tourism, in its purest sense, attempts to make a low impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate income, employment, and the conservation of local ecosystems. Responsible tourism is both ecologically and culturally sensitive.

It brings me pride to see government, industry and non profit organizations joining together to embrace guidelines and criteria that seek to reduce the environmental impact of development and improve tourism's contribution to sustainability and environmental conservation.

At the Puerto Rico Tourism Company, we're working on an integrated approach to tourism planning and management, combining new tourism strategies with traditional urban management; infrastructure development, transportation, land use planning, economic development, etc. We are working to promote:

- Optimal use of our environmental resources as a fundamental element for tourism development.
- Preservation of strict ecological guidelines, geared toward conserving our natural resources and biological diversity.
- Respect for the socio-cultural authenticity of our communities, conserving their natural assets, while contributing to the understanding of environmental initiatives (by means of education).
- Viable economic activities that support socioeconomic benefits and common goods
- Stable opportunities for economic development that provide social service for the host community, contributing at the same time to the reduction of poverty.

- Sustainable development in tourism projects with ample community collaboration and participation to establish a consensus.

We're also constantly mindful of what sustainable tourism should be:

- **Informative.** Travelers not only learn about the destination, they learn how to help sustain its character while deepening their own travel experiences. Residents learn that the ordinary and familiar may be of interest and value to outsiders.
- **Supports integrity of place.** Destination-savvy travelers seek out businesses that emphasize the character of the locale in terms of architecture, cuisine, heritage, aesthetics, and ecology. Tourism revenues in turn raise local perceived value of those assets.
- **Benefits residents.** Travel businesses do their best to employ and train local people, buy local supplies, and use local services.
- **Conserves resources.** Environmentally aware travelers favor businesses that minimize pollution, waste, energy consumption, water usage, landscaping chemicals, and unnecessary nighttime lighting.

- **Respects local culture and tradition.** Visitors learn about and observe local etiquette, including using at least a few courtesy words in the local language. Residents learn how to deal with visitor expectations that may differ from their own.
- **Does not abuse its product.** Stakeholders anticipate development pressures and apply limits and management techniques to prevent the "loved to death" syndrome. Businesses cooperate to sustain natural habitats, heritage sites, scenic appeal, and local culture.
- **Strives for quality, not quantity.** Communities measure tourism success not by sheer numbers of visitors, but by length of stay, money spent, and quality of experience.
- **Satisfies and educates.** Satisfied, excited visitors bring new knowledge home and send friends off to experience the same thing - which provides continuing business for the destination.

As I mentioned earlier, one of my top priorities has been to promote the development of our tourism product in a responsible way, and we have made major strides in the right direction.

We have concentrated our efforts on intelligent planning to maintain a balance between our natural resources and tourist development. In order to be successful, we must have full support at all levels of government, and legislation must be in place to ensure controls over development that encourage sustainability. We have strongly endorsed the necessary legislation and public policy to promote sustainable tourism on the island. I'm happy to announce that important legislation has been approved by our House of Representative and is awaiting the Senate's endorsement, on its way toward our Governor's signature. This legislation will now provide us with the means to promote education, awareness and development of sustainable tourism, with collaboration from community and government agencies. This legislation is also aimed at conserving and assessing the value of our natural, cultural and historical resources for the future enjoyment of all generations.

In addition to putting legislation in place, we have proposed the creation of an *Office of Sustainable Tourism of Puerto Rico*, under the Puerto Rico Tourism Company, to establish and implement the mechanisms for proper tourism development.

The Puerto Rico Tourism Company is also developing an *Environmental Tourism Policy*, so that we can have an instrument that helps us better evaluate new development and expansion projects, and allows us to adjust our decision-making to maximize the environmental merits of each plan. This *Master Plan* will also help the Tourism Company contribute to regional efforts to develop a *Public Policy of Sustainable Tourism for the Caribbean*. The fundamental intention of this initiative is to integrate and to harmonize national and regional standards of sustainable tourism into a united and integrated effort.

To this end, we've also worked together with the Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism (CAST) to promote upcoming tourism initiatives under the international certification of Green Globe 21. In November of last year, for the first time in Puerto Rico, we began offering the *Green Globe 21 International Ecotourism Society Course*, and became the third country in the world to provide this environmental education program. This year, we hope to further our commitment by hosting the Green Globe 21 Annual Convention.

This is only the beginning. There is much work to be done and I am personally getting involved in as many initiatives as possible that can help bring sustainable tourism development to the forefront as the only acceptable way to continue growing Puerto Rico's tourism industry.

We're placing a major focus on educating our citizens and creating tools by which they can take part in the sustainability movement. Last year, we created *Guides for the Design of Eco-Tourist Facilities*, to clearly outline and promote those characteristics that would distinguish a development project based on sustainable practices. This effort is now being implemented with the support of numerous public, private and community groups, vital to the achievement of these goals.

We've successfully opened the first Eco-Tourism School on the Municipal Island of Culebra. This is an experimental program we hope to replicate in various educational institutions across Puerto Rico.

We've also created the Hotel Development Council, a group of experienced professionals who will serve as advocates

toward the sustainable development of our tourism. Next month, we will sponsor *“Puerto Rico Towards Sustainable Tourism,”* the first local forum to discuss the direction Puerto Rico should take to comply with the principles of sustainable tourism. Experts from various parts of the world will come to Puerto Rico to present their case studies and share their experiences. The Tourism Company, in turn, will talk about our agency’s vision and the new *Guides for the Development of Eco-tourism Facilities* created in partnership with the Architect Fernando Abruña.

Presently, in Puerto Rico, we are actively supporting and developing Eco-tourism Projects including: Humacao’s Natural Reserve, Utuado’s Planned Mountain Region Development, and Guayama’s Las Limas Butterfly Ranch. We know that for the effective development of sustainable tourism, we must revise our incentive programs and adjust them to the necessities and realities of these ventures. Studies are being conducted to provide the necessary supporting statistics to justify these types of incentives.

An example of how capable we are of being successful on the environmental front is in our achievement working with the

National Parks Service to raise the standard of our beaches in order to receive *Blue Flag International Recognition of Excellence*. Our beaches represent one of our most precious natural resources, as they constitute one of our primary recreational spaces for citizens and tourists alike. It is essential that our beaches are in great condition for all to enjoy. Today, four of our island's beaches are Blue Flag certified, with seven others being currently evaluated for inclusion in the internationally recognized program. The Blue Flag Campaign certifies that a beach or port is in compliance with strict environmental standards, including water quality, security, environmental education, as well as lifeguard services and first aid. Puerto Rico was the first country in the Western Hemisphere to receive this recognition.

In addition to protecting our natural assets, we are contributing to our communities and urban centers. We are encouraging our hotels and restaurants to support the local economy by purchasing and selling "locally grown" products, goods and consumables. This is a way for the industry to make a more visible mark on the economy, while providing visitors with an enriched experience.

We've also developed a *Posadas in the Plazas Program*, with the aim of revitalizing our urban centers by supporting the development of historic buildings and structures as possible boutique hotels and tourist attractions. As you may know, each of our 78 municipalities has a plaza in its urban center. Most of these plazas are the heart of our cities and reflect our cultural and historical heritage. Up to now, they have not been the focus of development, but we see a lot of potential to create unique experiences for today's traveler.

At the Puerto Rico Tourism Company, our personnel are being trained to take the lead in developing and supporting new sustainable tourism programs. Recently, a group of employees took a *Course for Environmental Tourism* and other employees have participated in related training offered by the World Tourism Organization. We've even taken very basic steps to set an example by initiating a *Recycling Plan* for the agency that is being implemented as I speak. If we're going to talk about sustainability, it is our responsibility to behave responsibly at every level.

I hope you will join us April 25-29<sup>th</sup>, when we host the Caribbean Tourism Organization's 8<sup>th</sup> *Annual Caribbean*

*Conference on Sustainable Tourism Development* at the Condado Plaza Hotel here in San Juan. It is important to us to host this conference, which brings together all of the Caribbean nations to discuss the benefits of sustainable tourism and its social contributions, share best practices for this type of development, and develop environmental consciousness at the government level throughout the region.

As hosts, we aim to take a leadership position in this movement, which can only help us all make progress in the right direction toward building our economies and preserving out beautiful islands for future generations.

Thank you for joining me today, and I look forward to discussing these various projects and issues with you throughout CMEx. Without your support and understanding of what we are trying to accomplish, we can not be successful. I do hope you will come away from this week's activities with a full appreciation of the role tourism plays in the wellbeing of our people and the potential for preserving our environment.

Again, bienvenidos a Puerto Rico, and I hope you enjoy your stay.