



3.1 Aurinkomatkat-Suntours: Staff Training on Sustainable Development

Description of Good Practice

To encourage and promote sustainable and environmentally sound tourism within its internal operations, Aurinkomatkat, a Finnish outbound tour operator, has created a sustainability awareness-raising and capacity-building training programme for staff.

The training sessions are designed for the entire head office staff, as well as all destination managers and staff. The topics addressed in the sessions are the environmental, economic, cultural and social impacts of tourism, destination-specific issues, sustainability actions for staff, and recommended practices to combat the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

The training programme was designed and developed by Aurinkomatkat's Manager for Sustainable Tourism as part of the company's overall strategy for sustainable tourism. The modules took about a week to develop and are regularly revised. The development of the training modules and the newsletter was financed from the company budget and considered part of the terms of reference of Aurinkomatkat's Manager for Sustainable Tourism.

The content of the training is not very technical, and the language used is very simple, with the aim of connecting with the audience's emotions and 'inviting' staff to work together according to the ethical guidelines that Aurinkomatkat has adopted. Training materials include a PowerPoint presentation, videos and handouts.

For the specific topic of sexual exploitation of children, the training modules are based on material from ECPAT, an international network of organisations working to combat the commercial sexual exploitation of children. The training of key staff was done by ECPAT Sweden and the Secretariat of the Code, and follow-up training was done internally.

Implementation

The training sessions are carried out by the Manager for Sustainable Tourism. The first training, consisting of 27 sessions of two hours each for the entire head office took place in the spring of 2000. A new round is currently being planned. Additional training was given in small, dedicated groups, such as contract managers or key persons for topics such as destination management or child sex tourism. Staff was divided in groups of 20 people or less.

All destination management staff go to Finland twice a year to receive one to three hours of training, during which they get an 'up-grade' from previous sessions. In addition, all new destination staff receive basic training in sustainability issues prior to leaving for their destinations, and all new guides get a two-hour training session on sustainable tourism, with an additional hour-long session focusing on combating the commercial sexual exploitation of children. No evaluation or monitoring is carried out on the staff's performance during or after their training sessions, and no grading system is used.

Aurinkomatkat's customers and stakeholders are informed about the staff training, via the company's web site and brochures.

To support the training sessions, a staff newsletter on sustainable tourism has been produced since January 2000. The newsletter is distributed via the company's intranet when there is news to be conveyed. Six issues were produced in 2000, five in 2001 and five in 2002.

Benefits

Aurinkomatkat has seen a number of benefits of having its entire staff continuously trained and informed on sustainability issues, including:

- Staff members are now taking their own initiatives to improve sustainability performance in the office and in destinations;
- The training sessions encourage participation and the sharing of ideas;
- There is increased information on sustainability for customers;
- Aurinkomatkat has improved its relationship with partners by showing that it cares;
- There is a feeling of commitment among staff; and
- The circulation of the newsletter enables staff to be informed of the progress that is being made and what difficulties are faced.

Comments

Awareness-raising and capacity-building on sustainability is essential, as it motivates staff to work together for a better future and ensures staff commitment to developing sustainable tourism. The training programme has succeeded in part due to the high level of general awareness on these issues in Finland and the concern among experienced colleagues who have seen the development of the major destinations during the past 20 to 30 years. The only limitation of the programme has been the lack of time for employees to devote to sustainable tourism development.

The same modules from Aurinkomatkat's staff training programme are used in the company's supplier awareness-raising programmes, with particular links to Aurinkomatkat's supply chain management practices.

Aurinkomatkat is currently developing an internet-based information system on destinations that will initially be open to travel agents, and later to the public. The information channel will also be used to promote sustainable tourism and work against commercial sexual exploitation of children.