

1.2 First Choice Holidays (UK & Ireland): Development of a Sustainable Tourism Strategy



Description of Good Practice

In 2002, First Choice, an outbound tour operator that offers package holidays and flight bookings, developed a strategy aimed at achieving the integration of sustainability principles into its business processes whilst remaining appropriate to the structure and culture of the organisation. Catalysts for this strategy development included the commitment First Choice had made upon becoming a member of the Tour Operators' Initiative, as well as its participation in the UK Sustainable Tourism Initiative. The company's commitment to move towards more sustainable practice is sponsored by the Managing Director of the UK & Ireland Division, thus ensuring leadership from the top of the organisation.

With guidance and facilitation from Forum for the Future, a sustainable development think-tank and charity, First Choice embarked on a series of workshops. Initially, the UK & Ireland Board Directors were involved, and subsequently about 25 senior managers. At these workshops, the company's activities were mapped, and their social and environmental impacts identified and prioritised, using the framework developed by the Natural Step (www.naturalstep.org). These priority impacts became the basis for the company's Sustainable Tourism Policy (see Box 1). The actual wording of the policy was drafted by a subgroup of the senior managers involved, before being reviewed by the entire team, 'signed off' by the First Choice Group Executive Committee and printed in the subsequent Annual Report & Accounts.

Whilst the policy sets the long-term framework for the strategy, the senior manager workshops also identified four priority workstreams considered fundamental for the company to address in the first year:

- The environmental impacts of First Choice itself;
- Customer behaviour;
- Employee engagement; and
- Overseas destinations – supply chain and discrete destination projects.

Implementation

Responsibility was assigned to senior executives for owning and delivering the workstreams, and a programme of work for each workstream was agreed. Progress is reported at quarterly board meetings and via monthly written reports. This structure is designed to integrate the ownership and management of environmental and social issues into the fabric of the business.



A LOCAL SUPPLIER - MRS. MARULA'S BAKERY

Some examples of work already underway include:

- Environmental Impacts: An environmental management system compliant with ISO 14001 requirements is being implemented to mitigate the environmental impact of First Choice's airline, office operations, retail outlets and customer literature.
- Customer behaviour: Responsible travel information has been disseminated to customers via brochures, website, pre-travel information booklets, in-flight magazines and videos, and resort literature.
- Employee engagement: A 'responsible tourism' training module, prepared with the guidance of the non-governmental organisation Tourism Concern, now forms part of each overseas holiday representative's training programme and a Sustainable Tourism site is being built on the company's intranet.

- Overseas destinations: An environmental checklist of overseas accommodation suppliers has been piloted and is due to be rolled out over the course of 2003 to all priority bed stock suppliers. First Choice also participated actively in projects in destinations – i.e. in the Gambia, to help identify how tour operators and local enterprises could work more closely to mutual benefit, and in Cyprus, to develop an excursion that benefits local communities, the environment, customers and tour operators.

Benefits

Anticipated long-term benefits of this strategy include:

- Environmental protection of the company's core product (beaches, seawater, landscapes, etc.);
- Improved relations with and benefits to destination stakeholders;
- Business practices aligned with investor and consumer expectations;
- Attraction and retention of talented employees;
- Lower operating costs due to more efficient operating practices; and
- Reduced regulatory intervention.

Comments

One year after the development of the Sustainable Tourism policy, First Choice is receiving increased interest from both internal and external stakeholders in its sustainable tourism activities. Work is now underway to develop a formal stakeholder engagement plan to support two-way communication on sustainability issues. Involvement in sustainable development issues has helped First Choice play an active role in the recent launch of the UK's Travel Foundation, an independent charity that will fund sustainable tourism projects and which the company will support by facilitating a customer levy on package holidays sold from Autumn 2003 onwards.

Box 1: First Choice UK & Ireland – Sustainable Tourism Vision & Policy

Vision

Enable people to explore and enjoy the world without harming it.

Policy

We recognise that the environment, the communities and cultures within which we operate and our relationships with key groups and individuals are vital to the success of our business. We therefore commit in the long term to:

- Minimising the direct environmental impact of our operations and being proactively involved in activities and projects that work to protect and restore the natural environment.
- Working with customers, employees, shareholders, suppliers, industry partners, local communities, and other relevant interested parties, to understand and respect their needs and also supporting them in delivering our commitments.
- Using the collective influence of the First Choice Group responsibly to create momentum to make tourism more sustainable.
- Being open, honest and realistic about our environmental and social impacts, targets and achievements in the context of our business objectives.

In support of the above we will work to:

- Engage First Choice employees and gain their commitment to action, by raising awareness and understanding of sustainable tourism and the benefits of addressing it.
- Promote fair working conditions throughout our own business and our supply chain.
- Comply with all relevant legislation, act in advance of it where possible and keep pace with best practice.
- Review current business practices and ensure plans are in place to embed the company's sustainable tourism vision.
- Deliver long-term strategic benefits and shareholder value by maximising the synergies that sustainable development provides.