



5.6 Viaggi del Ventaglio: Environmental Interpreter Programme

Description of Good Practice

In June 2001, Viaggi del Ventaglio (VV), one of the leading Italian outbound and domestic tour operators, launched its Environmental Interpreter Programme. The programme involves the introduction of an Environmental Interpreter at each VentaClub resort, to be a reference point for staff and clients on the company's sustainability policy and to serve as an ambassador of the policy to the surrounding communities.

The programme was launched with three objectives in mind:

- To raise clients' awareness about environmental issues in their destination;
- To support the dissemination and integration of sustainability principles and practices to resort staff and management, thus bridging the gap between the headquarters corporate sustainability policy and the resort-based operational staff; and
- To increase understanding and strengthen co-operation between VV resorts and the surrounding communities.

VV established clear tasks and responsibilities for the Environmental Interpreter, including:

- Be the reference point on environmental, social and cultural issues;
- Take part in the clients' briefings, to inform them about how to have a sustainable holiday;
- Organise informative meetings on destinations' key environmental features (coral reefs, mangrove forests, etc.);
- Establish and maintain contacts with local authorities and organisations;
- Cooperate with other staff in the resort to develop common activities (recreation, kids club, diving);
- Cooperate with the staff responsible for the organisation of excursions to select and brief suppliers on sustainability criteria and to include briefings in the excursions;
- Collect general information on sustainability issues in the destination;
- Interact with the hotel management (if not a VentaClub resort) to support the introduction of sustainability practices in management.



SHARM EL SHEIKH - VENTA CLUB REEF OASIS: CHILDREN
LEARN ABOUT THE UNDERWATER WORLD

The Environmental Interpreter Programme is coordinated by VV's Tourism and Environment Department, which carries out recruitment and training and provides assistance. On site, Interpreters report directly to resort managers, and their salaries are paid out of the resort budget.

Based on a feasibility study at VentaClub's Red Sea resort, which in particular aimed at identifying the most appropriate characteristics and contract scheme, the company considered sub-contracting the position. However, it was eventually decided to create internal positions, so that staff members could be trained based on the specific requirements of the organisation and the destinations.

The feasibility phase determined that the ideal Environmental Interpreter should have:

- Knowledge of environment and ecology, and sustainability in general;

- Understanding of the principles of anthropology and sociology of tourism;
- Proficiency in the language of the selected destinations;
- Experience in environmental education;
- Good communication skills; and
- Knowledge and experience on destination-specific subjects (such as coral reefs).

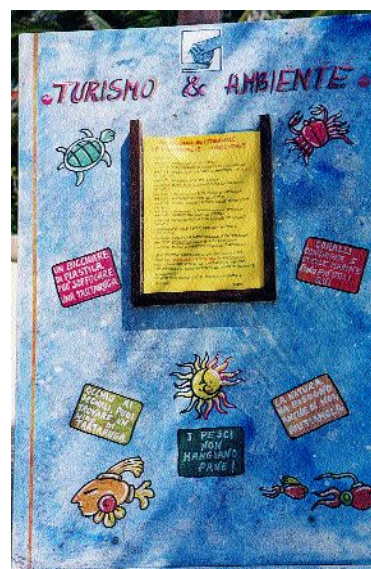
Programme development also focused on creating and gathering materials to support the work of the Interpreters, including books and other printed matter on general and destination-specific environmental issues, a reference manual developed internally for the Interpreter, and materials designed to teach children about sustainability issues.

In this initial phase, all training has been done on an individual basis by VV's Tourism and Environment Department. Recruited Environmental Interpreters spend one to three weeks at headquarters to study the destination in 'theory', prepare the necessary communication materials and receive inputs from the Environmental Manager. At the destination, training is continued on the job, with constant technical support from the Environmental Manager. In the future, all new staff can be trained directly on site by experienced Environmental Interpreters.

Implementation

The Environmental Interpreter Programme has been implemented so far in ten VentaClub resorts, selected based on their specific sustainability or environmental needs and strategic importance for the company. These resorts include:

- VentaClub Reef Oasis and VentaClub Faraana in Sharm el Sheikh, on the Red Sea;
- VentaClub Gran Dominicus in the Dominican Republic;
- VentaClub Playa Maroma in Mexico;
- VentaClub Capo Caccia on the Italian island of Sardinia;
- VentaClub Bagamoyo in Calabria, Italy, especially aimed at children;
- VentaClub Temple Point in Kenya;
- VentaClub Rannalhi in the Maldives Islands;
- VentaClub Karibu in Zanzibar; and
- VentaClub Marsa Alam in Marsa Alam, on the Red Sea.



AN INFORMATION BOARD PROVIDES ADVICE FOR A RESPONSIBLE HOLIDAY

The Interpreter is introduced to customers upon arrival, during orientation.

Among the activities undertaken by Interpreters in these resorts are presentations on marine biology, guided snorkeling tours, evening slide shows on the local environment, ecological beach excursions, children's activities and eco-volunteerism activities, such as beach clean-ups.

The activities of the Interpreters are regularly monitored by headquarters. The Interpreters report weekly to the Tourism and Environment Department on the programme, relationships with other departments, difficulties and problems, guest participation, general environmental issues, possible public relations opportunities, etc. In addition, although no specific question on the programme is included in guest satisfaction questionnaires, the forms are regularly monitored for voluntary mentions and comments. Once the role of the Interpreter has been fully institutionalised, questions to measure their performance will be included in the client feedback forms.

Information on the programme is available on VV's web site and through its owned travel agencies. From December 2003 onwards, the presence of an Interpreter will also be indicated in the catalogue for relevant resorts.

Benefits

For VV's clients, the programme represents an additional value to their holidays, allowing them to discover environmental, cultural and social characteristics of their destinations that most likely would have remained hidden. In the general comments section of the guests' questionnaire, several encouraging comments have been expressed, demonstrating guests' appreciation for these efforts.

Feedback from destination stakeholders has also been positive, in particular on the actions that have been carried out. For example, an excursion in the Dominican Republic has been improved by adding responsibility criteria, resulting in benefits to the local community.

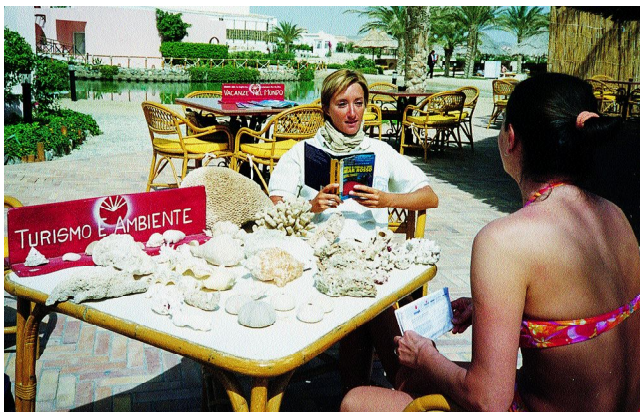
Comments

In order to support changes in attitude towards sustainability, especially at the destination level, a competent and official 'voice' was needed. Thus, in hiring Interpreters, preference was given to those candidates who showed enthusiasm, deep personal commitment, a positive attitude and good communication skills – all characteristics that are considered far more important than outstanding technical skills.



MEXICO - VENTA CLUB PLAYA MAROMA: GUESTS CONTRIBUTE TO THE TURTLE PROTECTION PROGRAMME

VV carefully considered whether to recruit Interpreters locally (i.e. in the destination country) or to hire from Italy. The local recruitment option has both advantages and disadvantages. A local recruit might better understand the destination, remain in the job longer and provide benefits to the local community



GUESTS CAN STOP AT ANY TIME AT THE 'ENVIRONMENT' INFORMATION DESK

through employment. However, experience proved that selection and training could be logistically difficult, that there is in general a lack of capacity both in terms of knowledge and communication skills in some destinations, and that there might be a cultural gap between the customers and the Interpreter. Therefore, in this first phase, no fixed policy has been established, and the decision to recruit locally or in Italy is made based on existing opportunities in each destination.

Another challenge in the implementation of the programme is that each individual interpreter has to complete a tailor-made training session, which takes into account the key sustainability issues of the destination, the type of clients that chose that specific destination and the various tasks that he or she will be required to perform.

In general, existing staff in the resorts have seen the Environmental Interpreter as a useful figure, if not indispensable for the life of a holiday resort. However, experience at the first pilot resorts demonstrated that there could be an initial 'rejection' period for this role.