

II

(Preparatory Acts)

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

54TH PLENARY SESSION, 21 AND 22 APRIL 2004

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Basic orientations for the sustainability of European tourism'

(2004/C 121/01)

The Committee of the Regions,

Having regard to the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Basic orientations for the sustainability of European tourism' — (COM(2003) 716 final);

Having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 21 November 2003 to consult it on this subject under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Communities;

Having regard to the decision of its President of 27 January 2004 to instruct its Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy to draw up an opinion on this subject;

Having regard to its opinion on Working together for the future of European tourism (CdR 99/2002 fin) ⁽¹⁾;

Having regard to the conclusions of the Euromeeting 2003 on sustainable tourism conference, held jointly by the Tuscany region and its COTER Commission;

Having regard to the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and its opinion on the subject (CdR 266/98 fin) ⁽²⁾;

Having regard to its draft opinion (CdR 397/2003 rev. 1) adopted on 18 February 2004 by its Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy (rapporteur: Mr Adan Martin Menis, President of the Canary Islands Regional Government (ES/ELDR));

Whereas:

- 1) tourism is one of the most important and rapidly expanding sectors of the world economy and that of the EU;
- 2) tourism can contribute significantly to achieving the objectives of maintaining high and stable levels of economic growth and employment, social progress which recognises the needs of everyone, effective protection of the environment and the prudent use of natural resources;
- 3) the natural, economic, social and cultural resources that define the economic sustainability of the sector will not withstand an indefinite expansion of European tourism;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 66 of 19.3.2003, p. 14.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 93 of 6.4.1999, p. 36.

- 4) the implementation plan adopted at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development claims to be based on the development of sustainable tourism and outlines measures to change unsustainable consumption and production patterns;
- 5) tourism is a global phenomenon that is shaped locally. Sustainability issues range from global ones that need to be solved globally, to local ones requiring action on the ground. Tourism, however, is a primarily local and regional sector. Tourism-related measures must therefore be designed and implemented above all at local level, in order to address the specific needs and limitations that exist;
- 6) Article 2 of the Treaty establishing the European Community identifies the promotion of the sustainable development of economic activities as one of the Community's tasks. Tourism has great potential for contributing to the achievement of sustainable development objectives, and Article 3(u) of the Treaty provides for Community action in the field of tourism in order to meet the objectives set out in Article 2. The sustainability of tourism must be in line with the general guidelines on sustainable development in the EU, as defined in the European Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS);
- 7) since the mid-1990s, the sustainable development of tourism has been a priority for the EU Institutions. In its Communication on Working together for the future of European tourism, of November 2001, the Commission proposed further promoting the 'sustainable development of tourism activities in Europe by defining and implementing an Agenda 21';
- 8) this objective received strong support from the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions;

adopted the following opinion at its 54th plenary session held on 21 and 22 April 2004 (meeting of 21 April).

The Committee of the Regions:

acknowledges that it is difficult to summarise in a document of this kind the priorities and strategies of sustainable European tourism, which are as complex as Europe's regional make-up, as varied as the range of products on offer, as numerous as the range of consumer demands and as diverse as the different administrative and business practices employed to shape tourist destinations;

welcomes the Commission Communication, even if it may disagree with some of the points made in it, as it is the first time that the European Union has adopted an overall standpoint on the challenges of sustainable tourism;

considers that, although there are other equally useful standpoints on sustainability, such as the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), the main value of this Communication resides in the fact that it outlines actions that need to be taken, in particular by regions and destinations, if sustainable tourism is to move from theory to practice;

points out that the Commission is offering local and regional authorities new opportunities to base sustainable tourism policy on the three pillars of sustainability, and that working together and good governance are key methodologies which will promote progress in the industry and remedy the lack of consistency between the many existing practices;

welcomes the fact that the Communication also recommends steps to be taken by European citizens and tourists, private sector enterprises, the social partners, international organisa-

tions, local, regional and national governments, and civil society groups;

1. Challenges and objectives of sustainable tourism

Main challenge: sustainable activity and growth

1.1 considers that it is not only particular geographical areas such as the Mediterranean and the Alps that face additional specific challenges in the area of sustainable tourism but also other areas such as island destinations, the outermost regions and developing countries;

1.2 welcomes the fact that the Commission considers the sustainable management of mass tourism as a particular challenge which 'promises to be the biggest contribution to the sustainability of tourism';

1.3 such mass tourism can exact a heavy price in environmental, social and landscape terms in many destinations. Nevertheless, from the European perspective, the impact on sustainability is mitigated by the beneficial social effects for the citizens of both the countries they come from and the countries they visit;

1.4 many of these destinations are now turning away from quantitative physical growth and opting for qualitative growth by upgrading their infrastructure and products and by ongoing renovation, at the same time setting limits on growth and framing new strategies for planning and managing sustainable tourism;

1.5 considers that this new objective of subjecting tourist development to sustainability criteria - which also promotes sustainable patterns of consumption and products in contrast to tourist development which caters to the satisfaction of immediate and short-term interests - faces numerous political, economic and legal difficulties which, in many instances, fall outside its remit;

1.6 also considers that these difficulties may be exacerbated in those destinations where tourism is the main source of wealth and economic activity;

1.7 believes that these difficulties could be even greater in the case of fragile and remote islands, upland areas and territories where the effects of non-sustainability are exacerbated by isolation;

1.8 considers that the response of local and regional authorities to challenges of this magnitude should receive maximum cooperation and support from national governments and the European institutions which should be ready to use the most suitable legal, economic and political measures to prevent sustainable tourism initiatives undertaken by regions and localities from failing;

1.9 believes that it is particularly important to suitably adjust Community rules on State aid to encourage (i) the ongoing renovation of tourist destinations, (ii) limited and sustainable growth and (iii) the development of sustainable tourism in areas suffering a permanent natural and geographic disadvantage where tourist activity could be detrimental to fragile and highly valuable natural resources.

A balanced approach to the three pillars of sustainability

1.10 welcomes the Communication's explicit recognition of the importance of all parties working together and good governance;

1.11 believes that local and regional tourism authorities must emerge from this process strengthened and equipped to coordinate their work with other authorities and bodies at all levels, establishing the necessary synergies and using good governance practices to achieve the desired objectives;

1.12 believes it is also necessary for all local and regional sectoral authorities and policies that have a clear influence on the shape of sustainable tourism to be offered new opportunities and incentives so that they can contribute, for example, towards good governance and the planning and management of sustainable tourism models;

1.13 believes that the tourism industry as a whole and all other relevant players must be involved from the start in shaping a new tourism policy based on sustainable destinations;

Sustainable consumption patterns

1.14 considers that the Commission has every reason to identify seasonal spread and transport as two of the main problems facing a sustainable pattern of tourist consumption;

1.15 believes that while seasonal spread is a regional problem, it is one shared by many tourist destinations and

products in Europe which must therefore design and manage their patterns with this variable in mind;

1.16 believes that any political action on seasonal spread at European Union level must be very cautious so as not to cause distortions in the market that could affect destinations and products which have a competitive advantage when it is the low season in other destinations;

1.17 believes that the issue of transport must be analysed from various angles, including efficiency in the area of consumption and emissions, redistribution of wealth and other related benefits, and the sustainability commitments that European destinations and regions will have to make to this end, based on documents and protocols, such as that of the Alpine Convention and others that have made progress in this area;

1.18 believes, however, that any analysis from the point of view of consumption must consider other relevant variables to avoid partial and contradictory diagnoses;

1.19 considers that a more holistic approach should be adopted that:

- encourages more money to be spent on sustainable tourism;
- gives tourists interested in sustainability more decision-making power and choice;
- protects the rights of tourists interested in sustainability;
- promotes tourism as a uniting force in Europe;
- recognises tourism's ability to redistribute wealth;
- promotes tourism as a catalyst for peace.

Such an approach would allow for more comprehensive assessments of sustainability from the point of view of tourist consumption patterns;

1.20 does not believe that few tourists are interested in sustainability. On the contrary, essentially European tourists are interested in sustainability and demand sustainable products, even if the understanding of the meaning of sustainable products varies greatly from one tourist to the next; the challenge for destinations and companies, then, is to offer sustainable tourist products. Destinations must be enabled to develop sustainable tourist products, promote, in particular, their sustainability-related qualities and commitments, and offer tourists interested in sustainability more choice;

1.21 believes that a proper link must be established between sustainability and competitiveness. This link, though until now fragile and contradictory, is the best chance of moving towards sustainability through dialogue and at the same time gaining more allies and partners in this cause;

Sustainable production patterns

1.22 congratulates the Commission on the ideas set out in its paragraph on sustainable destination development;

1.23 considers this to be one of the most relevant contributions of the entire Communication;

1.24 welcomes the references to the following:

- destination as the overall tourism product;
- the importance of activities that combine public and private interests in achieving sustainable production;
- fragile and over dependent 'mono-economies' without the desired indirect effects;
- a level playing field for local providers and the reinvestment of profits back into destinations.

These factors justify actions and policies designed to shape regional tourism patterns on the basis of market potential and the sustainability needs of destinations and regions;

1.25 welcomes the references to the following:

- the traditional cultural landscape;
- heritage-related resources, infrastructures, hospitality and facilities as basic resources of tourist destinations;
- wise land-use;
- local cultural identity and local residents' needs.

It also welcomes the reference to the need for local and regional tourism policies to be linked to other sectoral policies, through good governance;

1.26 welcomes the reference to the need to respect the carrying capacity of natural and cultural areas, and the importance of analysing carrying capacity in a general context of designing sustainable tourism patterns at local and regional level;

1.27 welcomes the references to secondary or third-age residence and one-day visits, as they demonstrate the importance of properly identifying tourism-related phenomena and studying their positive and negative effects before policies and legislation are drawn up.

2. Where we stand

Many initiatives

2.1 considers that one of the most interesting conclusions of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) is its call for sectoral industries and authorities, including the tourism sector, to take on board their responsibilities in the area of territorial planning. This is one of several documents that call for specific sectors, including the tourism sector, to be involved in territorial planning and encouraged to share their knowledge and methodology from the start. This will strengthen the decision-making power of tourists interested in sustainability, improve the positioning of the most sustainable products and respond to ongoing efforts to focus regional policies on local residents' sustainability concerns at economic, social and environmental level;

Slow progress

2.2 agrees that there is a lack of progress on sustainable tourism, demonstrating the need for basic orientations to be drawn up in order to re-direct trends towards sustainability objectives;

2.3 is pleased that the Commission advocates a bottom-up European tourism policy that is firmly grounded in the subsidiarity principle and makes destinations responsible for improving their level of sustainable development;

2.4 agrees with the Commission that SMEs and destinations play a key role in the success of sustainability initiatives.

3. Facing the challenges: The policy options

3.1 agrees with the Commission that actions should focus on the following areas:

- effective implementation of existing initiatives;
- Community activities designed to optimise the effect of Community policies and measures;
- Community activities based on defining additional measures.

However, the Committee would have liked these concepts to have been developed further.

4. Implementing tourism sustainability: Basic orientations for a European Community approach

The general concept of future action

4.1 agrees with the Commission's assessment that stakeholders must be included at all levels, from local to global;

4.2 is concerned by the Commission's view that issues linked to seasonal concentration and travel for the purpose of sustainable tourism need to be addressed higher up than the local and regional level;

4.3 believes that stimulating certain tourist demands at a higher level could jeopardise the interests of non-beneficiary destinations, not to mention non-EU destinations, resulting in a distortion of the market;

4.4 believes that the Commission is right when it says that political, business and social stakeholders must not only take the necessary action to make sustainable tourism a reality, but also formulate their own Agenda 21 at sectoral level. In other words, and where regional policy is concerned, re-defining local and regional tourism policy on the basis of sustainability criteria - the justification, objectives and methodology of which are outlined in the Communication - is an excellent opportunity to free up Agenda 21 processes which are currently on the administrative, political, business and social backburner in many European regions and tourist destinations;

4.5 considers that, by creating local and regional frameworks for action in developing sustainable tourism, which link in turn to national and European level frameworks, this will open up new opportunities for regional authorities, especially local and regional tourism authorities, which will need to improve their capacity in order to meet challenges; all regional authorities and policies that have a clear impact on sustainable tourism, e.g. in the area of the environment, spatial planning, employment, agriculture, cultural heritage, training, etc., will now have a new framework in which to formulate their actions owing to their link with sustainable tourism;

4.6 agrees that information is a key issue for the sustainable development of tourism. Tourism is characterised by a severe lack of transparency and information. Industries and destinations will only be able to properly adopt sustainability strategies if they are given vital information relating to their activity. Much of this information can only be produced and collected in destinations;

4.7 calls on the European institutions to establish and support networks of destinations that are capable of producing and exchanging information;

4.8 considers that some relevant tourist information cannot be provided by destinations or networks of destinations. This is where the European Commission comes in, playing a key role that cannot be played by the regions or Member States;

What the Commission intends to do

4.9 welcomes the impact assessments undertaken by the Commission, in particular on tourism, as they are excellent examples that will encourage good governance in European regions and tourist destinations;

4.10 supports the Commission's objective of preparing and implementing an internal work programme to enhance the effect of the various Community policies;

4.11 believes that sustainable tourism indicators are more than an objective in themselves, i.e. to measure the sustainable development of tourism; they also play an important role as a catalyst for sustainability processes. It is therefore essential that the interested parties (e.g. industry, authorities, civil society, etc.) are involved in defining indicators from the start and that they are kept simple and user-friendly, so that everyone can understand them and continue contributing towards them;

4.12 considers that measuring sustainability is a way of improving it, as it encourages stakeholders to understand the impact of tourism, alternatives to be discovered and the necessary social capital to be developed;

4.13 supports a cooperation agreement on sustainable tourism with the World Tourism Organisation (WTO);

4.14 welcomes the Commission's plan to set up a Tourism Sustainability Group composed of representatives of local, regional and national authorities, tourism companies, trade unions and civil society;

4.15 believes that, given that the CoR is the EU body that represents local and regional authorities in Europe, it should appoint the members representing these authorities in the Group in cooperation with the pan-European associations of local and regional government;

4.16 suggests that, for the group to be operative, representatives should be chosen on the basis of regional groupings and should reflect all types of tourist destination;

4.17 calls on Eurostat to support the work of the Tourism Sustainability Group so that sustainable tourism indicators can be defined at European level and promoted at local and regional level. This may be a crucial qualitative leap towards developing sustainable tourism;

4.18 agrees with the Commission that seasonal spread and transport are two key issues affecting sustainable consumer choices and that a group of experts needs to meet on a regular basis. However, it reiterates that their discussions must take account of global analyses and other relevant variables, to avoid partial and contradictory diagnoses;

4.19 believes that, at all events, extreme caution should be exercised when preparing potential awareness-raising campaigns, particularly those aimed at consumers, ensuring such campaigns are sufficiently general so as not to cause tension between different destinations and products. At the same time, adequate resources should be provided to help local and regional authorities in different tourist destinations to take on board the guidelines set out in the Commission's Communication and to help implement them;

4.20 considers, on the other hand, that tourists should indeed know that they have a right to sustainable tourist products, as laid down in the Charter of the Rights and Duties of Tourists, and therefore believes it is a good idea to help the industry and destinations to bring their products into line with the sustainable patterns demanded by European and international visitors;

4.21 agrees with the Commission that Corporate Social Responsibility is a positive initiative that will encourage the development and adoption of good practice in sustainable production;

4.22 congratulates the Commission for proposing activities designed to promote initiatives in tourist destinations in the following areas:

- wide-spread use of the Local Agenda 21 in European tourist destinations;
- development of locally adaptable techniques to manage carrying capacity;
- exchange of information between tourist destinations;
- bottom-up approach;
- development and dissemination of good practice;
- use of information and communication technologies.

4.23 trusts that the Commission has the necessary resources to do this and hopes that it will take measures to include these objectives in existing areas of Community aid, or at least those considered appropriate, e.g. by stepping up the INTERREG 3 initiative, which could provide financial support in particular for networks of tourist destinations, or for other initiatives that are considered appropriate;

4.24 highlights the importance of holding tourism meetings with local and regional authorities, their representative associations and relevant stakeholders in order to inform regions, industry and civil society about the objectives, methodologies and progress of the basic orientations for sustainable European tourism;

4.25 believes that actions to be taken by the Commission to help reinforce the capacity of destinations, while taking account of the spatial and land use dimension of tourism, must include competitiveness. The focus would then be three-fold: competitiveness, quality and sustainability;

What other stakeholders can do

European citizens and tourists

4.26 considers that European tourists must be properly informed about the Charter of the Rights and Duties of Tourists;

4.27 calls on destinations to defend the rights and interests of tourists interested in sustainability and to set up systems to assess their views;

4.28 recommends that destinations should promote, in particular, their sustainability-related qualities and commitments;

4.29 proposes that the above paragraphs should be explicitly included in methodologies for implementing Agenda 21 processes and in plans for the sustainable development of tourism;

Private sector enterprises and social partners

4.30 fully endorses this part of the Communication;

4.31 considers that there is a need to strengthen SMEs, training their managers and employees, stepping up their involvement in decision-making processes and improving their access to quality systems;

4.32 proposes specifically incorporating these objectives into the Community action framework;

European tourist destinations and public authorities

4.33 fully endorses this part of the Communication and congratulates the Commission on it;

4.34 considers this to be an excellent opportunity for local and regional tourism authorities to become trained and involved in sustainable tourism development and to establish synergies and work together with other authorities, while respecting each region's organisational structure, in order to achieve the desired objectives;

4.35 also believes that all the relevant local and regional authorities are being offered a clear opportunity to incorporate the sustainable tourism dimension into their actions and objectives;

4.36 welcomes the Commission's reference to tripartite agreements as an instrument for cooperation between the different authorities. In fact, tourism is one of the areas in which such tripartite agreements can be applied;

4.37 considers that the Commission must analyse efficiency in order to ensure that efforts to improve its existing framework of action on the sustainability of European tourism are not dissipated on actions unconnected at destination level, while preserving the diversity of its proposed objectives;

International organisations and national governments

4.38 fully endorses this part of the Communication;

Civil society groups

4.39 fully endorses this point, but points out that training is required if these groups and the tertiary sector as a whole are to be involved, i.e. they are really able to participate in the process, a prerequisite for which is full, detailed and accessible information. To this end, specific actions will therefore be needed;

5. Conclusions

5.1 welcomes the Commission's intention to report back to the Council and other Community institutions on the progress of implementation and prepare for the application of an Agenda 21 for European tourism, but nevertheless considers that the detailed preparation of this Agenda 21 for European tourism should be completed by 2005 at the latest;

5.2 requests that the CoR be among the Community bodies informed.

Brussels, 21 April 2004

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Peter STRAUB