

Panel sees conscious efforts at restricting degradation of natural heritage, beauty spots, landscapes essential for tourism development

By Ali Ahmed al Riyami

'Responsible Tourism' seen as the way forward for Sultanate's own tourism progression

OMAN'S fledgling tourism industry has grown by leaps and bounds over the past few years, as the government has made this sector one of the priorities in attracting new investment and as an important source of non-fossil fuel generated income. This has been incorporated in the national Oman Economic Vision 2020 strategy that seeks to diversify the economy away from overdependence on finite oil/gas generated income.

Consequently, tourism generated revenue has grown threefold in as many years and, with an ever increasing number of visitors to the Sultanate's shores, a number of significant tourism-related projects have already been realised with others soon to be completed or well underway.

As seen in the development of tourism in other countries, where tourism is the main or major revenue earner, tourism, especially mass tourism, does have an impact on not only the society, but also, in many cases to a much greater degree, on the environment as well.

In order to avoid mistakes, problematic outcomes and all the negative, often stereotypical, effects of tourism, omran recently hosted a roundtable discussion on the theme 'Responsible Tourism'. The hope was to bring forth ideas, methods, ways and means and potential improvements to the manner in which tourism is progressing here in Oman, as well as to avoid the well documented adverse effects of it.

Wael bin Ahmed al Lawati, Chief Executive Officer, omran, chaired the discussions that were led by Dr Harold Goodwin — a leading professional in the tourism industry, Professor at Leeds Metropolitan University, Chairman of the Responsible Tourism Awards that are held at the World Travel Market, London, UK and who chaired both the Capetown, South Africa and Kerala, India, Responsible Tourism Destination Conferences, and coordinated by Maurice Gent, Media Adviser to the CEO, Oman Establishment for Press Publication and Advertising (OEPPA) — publisher of the *Observer* and sister Arabic daily *Oman*.

Dr Goodwin gave an introductory presentation on Responsible Tourism. This gave the grounding and scope for further participatory discussion and elaboration from the specially invited guests that included fellow professionals and consultants from the fields of tourism, hospitality, the environment, conservation, communal affairs and the media, namely: Issa al Hajry, Hotelier; Dr Mehdi Jaffer, Vice Chairman of Environment Society of Oman (ESO); Robert Baldwin, Head of the Marine Subcommittee, ESO; David Insall, Independent Environmental Consultant; Dr Andrew Spalton, Adviser, Conservation of the Environment, Diwan of Royal Court; Mohammed al Riyami, Tour Operator and Founder, Sea Tourism Oman; Tara Hammond, Environment and Social Responsibilities Officer, Six Senses Hideaway — Zighy Bay; Badriya al Siyabi, Founder, Sidab Women's Sewing Group and Dana Sarhan, CSR and Marketing Manager, omran.



Wael al Lawati and Dr Goodwin

Dr Goodwin's presentation briefly outlined the main features of responsible tourism, in terms of 'international trends' in this direction, ideas in connection with 'sustainable tourism' and what lies behind this in relation with concerned parties 'taking responsibility'. More importantly, in this regard and in the case of Oman, is the question 'does what is happening in the marketplace allow for specific opportunities that are explicit to this part of the world?'

With regard to his first visit here, Dr Goodwin said he was impressed by the level of cultural and natural heritage Oman has, as well as the high level of diversity. He added, the policy of maintaining low-rise structures — that are in conformity with Arabian-style architecture — has made Muscat a very striking city, one which is very different from many other cities. This is part of many things that first-time visitors would find striking, he pointed out.

Noting that tourism development is often taken over by economic development departments, he said, "Tourism is seen as a way of shaping an identity and shaping economic development opportunities" and "a critical way of shaping peoples perception of the economic development opportunities as part of a way of attracting inward development investment and also as a way of asserting an identity."

Dr Goodwin pointed out, the focus of tourism being seen as more of the 'yield' and the national benefit derived from tourism rather than just on the figures of international tourist arrivals. Another important facet, he added, is how Oman is presented and marketed for the attraction of tourists; the results of which will be visible some thirty to forty years down the line.

In defining what responsible tourism is, he said perhaps the easiest way of doing this is by "creating better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit." Another important consideration is



Roundtable participants

how, once it sets in, tourism is managed?

Dr Goodwin outlined the main, broad guidelines arising from the Capetown Declaration 2002:

- Minimising negative impacts in social, cultural and environmental spheres
 - Generating benefits and the wellbeing of host, local communities, both tangible and intangible benefits, and engaging local people in the processes of this
 - Putting in a positive contribution to conservation by tourism putting something back in to the host country, as well as providing enjoyable experiences and meaningful connections
 - Providing access for people who might otherwise be excluded — particularly those who are physically challenged
 - Ensuring cultural sensitivity and trying to engender respect
- Some of the main considerations that arose from the discussion

relating specifically to Oman were comments given:

David Insall — Protection of the environment and the stipulated provisions put in place for this have been fully made, although of equal concern in this parameter and which has not been addressed is 'the landscape' — especially as it has been stipulated that tourism is everyone's responsibility. This is an important environmental issue and it contains everything that matters in this regard. Much more needs to be done to protect landscapes, as so far no provision for this has been put in place. Hence, developers may be allowed to put up a hotel, for example, without any consideration to the environmental damage it may do to the landscape.

Tara Hammond — Any new construction should be built in such a way that it fits in with the landscape around it.

Issa al Hajry — From a business perspective, there is a need for legislation to ensure that developers conform to acceptable design-

plans of new establishments. Specific expertise is an essential requirement in tourism-based construction that will allow for new sites to blend in with the environment. Lack of these factors results in unsuitable property development.

Mohammed al Riyami — The impact of wrong decisions taken in tourism-related structures can have a tremendous effect on the country. It is important to know exactly where we are headed with regard to tourism development. It is critical to ensure the proper portrayal of Oman is embedded in any new construction so that eyesores do not occur

Dr Mehdi Jaffer — Referred to His Majesty the Sultan's speech to students at the Sultan Qaboos University some eight years ago where His Majesty spoke about tourism and where he had assured that mistakes that have occurred in leading foreign travel spots would not happen here. In this regard, there is a keen interest here in protecting the



David Insall and Tara Hammond

environment and rules and regulations have been put in place for this. However, more often than not these rules and regulations are to some extent ignored or misused. Would-be investors can easily move on to other places if their conditions are not met. Hence, it is imperative to ensure that legislation be the guiding principle so as to minimise the impact on the environment.

Maurice Gent — The current world economic recession, which will linger on for the next two to three years, is a factor that will have a tremendous impact on government policy everywhere, as to how revenues are to be earned. With a greater impetus on immediate profit and how this is to be attained, it will become more difficult to achieve required results.

Dr Andrew Spalton — The EIA's are not always required with many projects just requiring a permit. They can do the job if they are enforced, as they have strong environmental and social values, but if they are not enforced and are just seen as part of a mission process then they will not suffice. Further, broad regional plans are too broad. There are numerous plans and strategies that have been reviewed and evaluated, but they are not specific and are far too broad. There needs to be a fundamental change towards the approach of EIAs', how they are used and are called for.

Robert Baldwin — Tourism, here, is likely to set a precedent with regard to where the onus of responsibility lies. With regard to government policy, how is it possible to dictate the direction one takes. There are many forms of tourism and it is possible for Oman to adopt several types of tourism under one roof.

Other important considerations discussed included the need for quality tourism, marketing and other related strategies, cultural and communal considerations and local employment — Omanisation.



Dana Sarhan



Mohammed Riyami



Badriya al Siyabi



Dr Mehdi Jaffer



Issa al Hajry



Dr Andrew Spalton



Robert Baldwin



Maurice Gent