

Why now is the time for sustainability in travel

By [Brett Tollman](#)

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The United Nations has designated this year as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. We believe that we all need to help ensure that World Tourism Day, being celebrated today around the world, is given an elevated value and awareness, as it comes at a very important juncture for the travel sector, both in South Africa and around the world. Each of us has an important decision to make. As importantly, the travel industry has an important decision to make together.



Brett Tollman, Chief Executive of The Travel Corporation

We can either choose to use our industry's distinct influence and capabilities to help shape a more sustainable future for our planet, or we can choose to sit back and possibly watch everything we value – as well as profit from – erode and disappear. Many in our industry have been proactive and innovative in introducing various programmes over the past several decades that benefit local communities we live and work in, and implementing programmes to reduce, reuse and recycle materials and resources we use and depend on. But there is so much more to do.

If tourism is to have a positive impact on the environment and communities, the travel industry and travellers must make a conscious and careful effort to ensure that happens. Not simply to ensure that our beautiful and fragile planet can continue to provide us with the unforgettable experiences, but also to stand together as part of a global community of travel businesses that recognise this is bigger and more important than any single organisation.

Influencing change

South African-based companies and those operating within South Africa have an opportunity to play a lead role in this charge. The US's impending departure from the Paris climate accord has worked to place South Africa amongst those countries poised to help lead our planet's

efforts to battle the effects of global warming. When one considers that the South African travel sector contributes as much as 9.4% to South Africa's GDP – and creates one in every 10 jobs according to the most recent statistics available – it becomes all the more apparent that the South African travel and tourism businesses can influence this charge.

The travel sector's international influence is much the same. As one of the world's largest sectors, supporting over 284 million jobs and generating 9.8% of global GDP – we can help to increase public appreciation of the environment and help to spread the word on the value of connecting and travelling around the world and all of the unique cultures and communities in a sustainable, respectful way, keeping our respective footprints as small as possible. Both WTTC and UNWTO are trying to coalesce our industry's efforts to do more together and to speak with one voice to governments, businesses and communities everywhere.



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Encouraging sustainable tourism development, advancing transformation

Tourism can also contribute to environmental protection, conservation and restoration of biological diversity and the sustainable use of natural resources, as the attractiveness of the natural world is a vitally important asset for our sector, proving that maintaining the vibrancy of natural sites is crucial to tourism organisations' ability to continuously benefit from their existence. We can and all need to play our respective part – as individuals who are all global citizens and members of the human race, as much as we are citizens of a particular country.

When The Travel Corporation first founded our own not-for-profit dedicated to sustainability, The TreadRight Foundation, some 10 years ago, we did so with the belief that we needed to act responsibly within our own space. Our guiding principle for TreadRight has always been to encourage sustainable tourism development through conservation, leadership, and support for communities. We've made it a priority to recognise the importance of continually adopting new best practices and policies, in the interest of helping to advance the transformation of our industry. As we learn, as we evolve, and as we move forward we will continue to refine our processes and approach to sustainability. However, individual organisations can only do so much on their own.



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Under a shared goal of sustainability

As a sector, we must follow the example set by The Paris Agreement, which brings together myriad competing entities to align under a shared goal of sustainability. The UN International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development has given us collective momentum and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to work on together, from ending poverty and hunger, improving health and education, combating climate change and protecting oceans and forests and making cities more sustainable. The conversation and related efforts continue.

There are no causes easier for organisations to get behind than those that make emotional and moral sense, as well as practical sense. In the travel sector, sustainability is our double-edged cause. We believe that ensuring the health of the planet and its populations is not only the right thing to do from a moral standpoint, it's also something we have to do if we want to be able to continue offering the best of our life-changing experiences to the world and have a world that is habitable and safe for our future generations.

There may very well be no industry with more opportunity to affect the positive transformation of the planet than the travel and tourism industry. Travel can help people see the fragile beauty of our planet, travel can help influence the decision makers. If the travel industry can move the world the way we move people around the world, then our influence can be incredible.

But we have to act now and we have to act together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brett Tollman is the Chief Executive of The Travel Corporation, a highly successful fourth generation, family-owned international travel group and a Diamond Sponsor of the UN International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development 2017. He is also the founder of The TreadRight Foundation, a not-for-profit established to encourage sustainable tourism, and serves as a Vice Chairman of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC.org).

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