

SEAL THE DEAL: Climate change could stem global tourism, UN cautions



21 October 2009 – Rising sea levels could inundate coastal holiday spots while melting snow caps could spell an end to ski resorts, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has warned, as climate change threatens tourism, a lucrative industry for the world's poorest nations. Tourism is what "fuels the economy and drives people" in poor countries, Geoffrey Lipman, Assistant Secretary-General of the UNWTO, told the UN News Centre. Nearly one third of the \$735 billion generated by tourism in 2006 went to developing nations, with the industry serving as one of the major export sectors for poor countries. From 2000-2007, international tourism, the main source of foreign exchange in nearly all of the States classed as least developed countries (LDCs), recorded 110 per cent growth in these nations. Although many people look at tourism as a "sort of flippant activity," they often do not realize that the industry constitutes 5 per cent of economies, having a catalytic effect on a further 5 per cent, Mr. Lipman noted. As a result, "anything which affects the industry has a big spin-off effect on the economy," he said, pointing to the 2001 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the United Kingdom where the "biggest hit came from the reduction in tourism revenues." Developing countries, Mr. Lipman underscored, are often "unspoiled and undeveloped," pointing the way towards a new form of 'green' tourism. The industry accounts for 5 per cent of global annual greenhouse gas emissions, most of which can be pinned on air, car, rail and other forms of transportation. Air transport, in particular, has been targeted for its emissions, but, like other sectors, it has the potential to become more sustainable through implementation of more efficient engines and experimenting with biofuels, among others, Mr. Lipman said. "You can't walk to the Maldives," he said. "We want more planes flying, not less." The solution, Mr. Lipman stressed, does not lie in curtailing long-haul flights which could hurt the economies of developing nations which rely heavily on tourism for income. The UNWTO official recommends that people travel responsibly. "You can choose what you do and how you do it," he said, calling on travellers to opt to stay in resorts that are identifiably trying to reduce their carbon footprints and to offset their flights by buying carbon credits. For their part,

governments must not consider taxes on travelling as a "cash cow" and must also not "cynically impose heavy taxes just so they can detract people from flying," he said. Climate-induced environmental changes – including water availability, biodiversity, and coastal erosion – will have an impact on tourism, according to a report produced last year by UNWTO, along with the UN World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). For example, changes in agricultural production could hurt wine tourism, while increases in temperature are forecasted to hurt ski resorts in the European Alps, Eastern and Western North America, Australia and Japan. As a result, adaptation to climate change is vital tourism, according to Mr. Lipman. Poorer nations must be provided with the necessary technology and financing "to create jobs, not just helping foreign tourists have a good time." Nations are expected to 'seal the deal' on a new climate change agreement – intended to go into effect after the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol ends in 2012 – this December in Copenhagen, Denmark. Along with emissions reductions targets by industrialized nations, helping developing countries adapt to global warming's effects is also a large component of the pact set to be reached in the Danish capital. Tourism has reached a crossroads, but Mr. Lipman voiced optimism that the industry will rise to the climate challenge. In the face of the oil crisis and hijackings of previous decades, tourism "found ways to respond and overcome it. There is no reason why it can't adopt now."

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