

What is the key to a successful tourism sector in Africa?

By [Tim Smith](#)

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Just as some of the water restrictions are lifted in Cape Town we struggle again with load shedding and electricity supply. There could not be a better reminder of the limited resources all countries have with which to care for their citizens. Sir David Attenborough's speech at the climate summit in Poland described global warming as "our greatest threat in thousands of years" and warned of "extinction of much of the natural world" to emphasize the perilous position in which we find ourselves.



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If this scenario becomes reality all those high spending tourists visiting Africa to enjoy the natural world will be dissuaded from coming. Africa is at the forefront of this fight and will be one of the worst-hit regions if it is a fight we lose. The impact on tourism to so many countries will be paralyzing. It will not just be limited to well-known safari destinations such as Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa. Treks to the gorillas in Rwanda and Uganda, the burgeoning tourist industry of Madagascar, visitors to Botswana or the sand dunes of Namibia will all be affected.

Environmental success

If we are to arrest this decline global changes are crucial. Initiatives should include everything from banning plastic straws to reducing carbon footprints. Unfortunately, locally there is little we can do to move the global needle on these initiatives. There are however African solutions that are making a difference. Kenyan is the 8th largest producer of geothermal power and is expanding further. The Kenyan electricity industry has a surplus and even exports power to neighbouring countries. Not all countries have the benefits of geothermal power, they do all have the ability to use renewable energy sources more though.

The success of Capetonians in reducing water consumption in the city is well documented, but perhaps not sufficiently celebrated. No other city, anywhere in the world, has reduced their use of water so dramatically. This education needs to be shared globally so we all benefit as this is not an African problem, it is a global issue. For example, the US city of El Paso will be drinking treated sewage water as part of their solution to water shortages, such as the dire situation in which they find themselves.



Robin Fredericks 13 Aug 2018



Economic sustainability

For changes to the business and economic practices for environmental reasons to be widely implemented, they need to be coupled with economic benefits. Reducing the dependency on tourists who have flown thousands of miles is an example; spending money on new light bulbs, that last longer is another; reducing the cost of energy by using less, at minimal impact to your guests is yet another.

All of these initiatives have been implemented across many businesses in Africa and those businesses are the most sustainable.

The next stage of economic sustainability will come in ensuring more goods and services are purchased locally. Staff must be trained locally to an international standard. This will give them the opportunity to have rewarding careers in the hospitality industry and to progress to management positions. It also ensures the economic benefit of employment is retained locally. This will boost local in national economies significantly. Local produce must be used wherever possible. We are lucky enough to have some amazing ingredients throughout Africa, so we must use them. Let us celebrate what we have and not just look to imitate others. Similarly, local produce, grown locally benefits local farmers and logistics providers again benefitting the local community.



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Travel and accommodation must be aimed at more local people. Travelling by train rather than flying will have an impact. The new train across Kenya is allowing locals to reach the coast in a safe, quick and cheap manner. More reliable, long distance mass passenger transport options are required. Taking cars off the road will reduce pollution and make the roads safer.

Mid-market hotel brands priced at \$100 rather than \$250 will allow more locals to travel for both business and leisure. Historically the cost of accommodation has restricted demand from local guests, this low demand deterred investors from constructing mid-market hotels. However, many African economies have now developed sufficiently for investors to see the potential in this sector of the hotel market.



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Positive approach

Winston Churchill once said: "The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty." That is the way we must view building sustainable businesses in Africa.

A truly sustainable business, anywhere in the world, but particularly in Africa must be both environmentally and economically sustainable. The good news is that these two aspects work together and are equally important. And put together you will end with a much stronger and more balanced business.

ABOUT TIM SMITH

Tim Smith is the managing partner of HVS Cape Town, a consulting firm specialising in providing services to the hospitality industry. He is responsible for work carried out throughout Africa. He is involved with feasibility studies, valuations, general consultancy work, operator search and selection and executive search throughout the African continent.

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