

“Rural tourism businesses need support to engage in sustainability initiatives”

The Rainforest Alliance has now been promoting sustainable tourism for ten years. Ronald Sanabría, Sustainable Tourism Vice President of the organisation, tells us what its activities exactly look like and what advantages businesses have from co-operating.

■ Mr Sanabría, the Rainforest Alliance is above all campaigning for sustainable tourism in Latin America. Why?

Visitation to biodiversity rich countries in Latin America has grown by more than 100 percent in the past two decades, and Latin America has come to realise that it is in its natural and cultural assets where its competitiveness lies. We feel that unless such assets are protected, there won't be a lasting tourism industry. Many small rural tourism businesses have shown an interest in becoming more sustainable, for example by improving their economic viability, conserving natural and cultural diversity, and ensuring the well-being of their communities. To get on the road to sustainability, these businesses need a helping hand.

■ Where exactly is support needed?

In 2009 we conducted research, using data collected from businesses who had undergone technical verifications by the Rainforest Alliance from 2005 to 2008. The most important investment needs identified were consistent across the board: training and consultation; adequate infrastructure construction; acquiring devices and support equipment for sustainability; and obtaining other materials, equipment and maintenance.

■ In which of these areas is your organisation providing support?

We hosted seminars and workshops for rural tourism businesses, providing them with information about sustainable management and offering a series of free tools. In addition, thanks to donations from the Inter-American Development Bank, Fundecooperación, Promes

and Citi Foundation, the Rainforest Alliance was able to provide technical assistance to businesses interested in developing sustainable management plans. These plans allowed participants to identify areas of, and strategies for, improvement, while continuing to prioritise environmental responsibility and socio-cultural development, and developing the technical, financial, and personnel skills required to carry them out.

■ How do you get in touch with businesses that are interested?

We originally took the initiative ourselves and addressed potential candidates. Since then, numerous parties have made recommendations, and a sort of chain has developed in which the hoteliers, organisers, agencies, tour operators, etc. offer packages, are in touch, and wish to get together with others operating businesses on a sustainable basis. Here, it is important that the Rainforest Alliance has signed agreements with tour operators displaying an interest on their part and ensuring that at least 50 percent of their suppliers in a specific destination apply sustainable practices – which needs to be given proof of by a corresponding certificate issued by an independent body or verified by the Rainforest Alliance. The international specialist trade fairs that we regularly participate in with a stand of our own, such as ITB Berlin, WTM London or Travel Mart Latin America, are further acquisition supports.

■ What conditions do the businesses have to meet to obtain a certificate?

Unlike, for example, in agriculture and forestry, the Rainforest Alliance does not



Ronald Sanabría

do any certifying in the field of tourism. We give people advice, train them and assist in introducing sustainable business management. The participants in the programmes are supported in marketing their services, for instance by obtaining access to the corresponding areas of our website, to materials, etc. We promote their efforts at trade fairs, and they are integrated in our communication measures and the like. Provided that they fulfil the required sustainability criteria, they may bear the “Rainforest Alliance Verified” brand. Since our tools and verification criteria are based on the internationally recognised criteria of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), whose launch we have supported for a number of years, we encourage businesses participating in our initiatives to apply for certifications granted by any third party certification programme duly accredited by the GSTC.

■ How often are the respective businesses checked?

The examiners commissioned by the Rainforest Alliance visit the busi-

nesses at intervals of around 12 to 18 months in order to check the status and identify and point to possible improvements, thus ensuring that progress and improvements are constantly being made with regard to the implementation of sustainable business practices. Basically, each auditing programme has its own time sovereignty in terms of audits/monitoring and the term of the certificates. But we know that good practice shows that audits must take place at least every year to eighteen months to ensure continuity.

■ How do you persuade businesses to join your programmes?

If tourism companies want to stay in business and have a sustained operation, they have no choice but to invest in protecting the reasons why people travel to the places where we work in the first place, and those are nature and local cultures. So, we work to make this message clear by informing people about how important sustainability is, for instance in the environmental sector, in the conservation of natural resources, in personnel retention, etc. In addition, we point to the opportunities and risks for the long-term development of the branch or the respective country. One important argument is the corresponding demand on the market. With the brand, the businesses can target trav-

ellers with a simultaneously verifiable and transparent, i.e. qualified offer. In addition, we are able to point out a wide range of concrete benefits.

■ What precisely are these benefits?

Regarding the individual businesses, they clearly become apparent as saving in costs and expenses. For example, by implementing the sustainability standards, water and energy consumption is reduced, but so is personnel fluctuation, which otherwise tends to be relatively high in the tourism branch. For instance, a survey that we conducted among 14 businesses working with the Rainforest Alliance's sustainable tourism programme in Latin America in 2009 showed the following advantages:

- Seventy-one percent of the hotels decreased their water consumption, and 31 percent reduced the amount of money they spent on water.
- Ninety-three percent of the properties reported a decrease in energy consumption, even though 15 percent of them had expanded their installations. The reduction in electricity consumption resulted in lower power costs for 64 percent of the hotels.
- Seventy-one percent of the businesses reduced solid waste, while the remaining 29 percent maintained stable waste levels, even though their occupancy rates increased. The

decrease in garbage production also generated savings, with 79 percent of the businesses repurposing discarded materials, such as glass food jars that were reused as vases.

- All of the hotels purchased goods and services from small and medium local enterprises, and 64 percent of them saved money in transportation costs.
- All of the businesses hired local workers, and hotel administrators found that employees were more motivated after attending training sessions; 93 percent of the hotels reported a decrease in personnel turnover.

A further crucial advantage is increased competitiveness. Rainforest Alliance Verified businesses or tour companies certified by other organisations are significantly more interesting for the tour operators seeking or offering sustainable tour options and cooperating with the Rainforest Alliance or having concluded an agreement with it to this end. This applies to all partners and agencies as well as individual tourists who are looking for "green" tour options. And this demand is continuing to grow. So in a nutshell, this means economising by energy and water saving measures, motivated personnel and greater income.

■ And looking beyond the individual business?

Profits generated stay in the country or in the region, for example through the regional procurement of food, by employing personnel from the region, and also because of opportunities arising for other businesses, such as those trading craft industry products, etc. So there is a positive influence on the surroundings, etc. PLUS: Through the formation of networks by the different businesses, the region as a whole gains more attention on the market. In the long run, therefore, a contribution is made to safeguarding livelihoods and natural resources.

Ronald Sanabría was interviewed by Silvia Richter.

Rainforest Alliance and tourism

The Rainforest Alliance was founded in 1987 and is seated in New York/USA and San José/Costa Rica. In 70 countries, it campaigns for sustainable agriculture and forestry and awards corresponding certificates. For ten years, the organisation has also been campaigning for sustainable tourism across the world. So far, more than 7,000 entrepreneurs have been trained with the aim of orientation on sustainability and, to this end, considering both social and environmental requirements and integrating them in their business practice. 590 hotels and 176 tour operators have benefited from additional assistance in the form of verification services or technical support. Currently, the focus in tourism is on Latin America – with the countries of Mexico, Nicaragua, Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Ecuador and Peru. Further countries are to follow. In order to promote sustainable tourism, the organisation has signed agreements with tourism associations and organisations, UN authorities, travel agencies and tour operators in the countries mentioned as well as in the USA, the United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Denmark, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Switzerland. In addition, various portals have been established for consumers and travel enthusiasts as well as professionals in the tourism branch, such as www.sustainabletrip.org.