

Tourism and conservation and sustainable use of the environment



Norway is famous for its beautiful fjords, mountains and scenery. They are major tourist attractions. In fact, some of the Norwegian fjord landscapes are on the World Heritage List.

Ours is therefore a precious heritage. A heritage that belongs not just to present day tourists and Norwegians, but to future generations as well. It is our duty to take good care of this heritage. And it is not just the Ministry of the Environment's responsibility. It is a joint responsibility with the tourist industry, local authorities and other stakeholders. They together must base their activities on principles of good, sustainable use of resources and best eco-practice.

In other words mutual cooperation between public and private interests and authorities at all levels, from global to national and to local is necessary to make tourism and tourist destinations greener.

The market for green tourism is growing. I am very hopeful about the possibilities for ecotourism development.

Tourism can be a blessing to a region. It can strengthen the local economy and enable local communities to take even better care of places with special values.

But there are dangers. Even ecotourism cannot be allowed to grow in an uncontrolled way. Many popular destinations can only cope with limited numbers of tourists. Beautiful places can be ruined by large scale tourism. Too many tourists may spoil the local culture, disturb the wildlife, cause degradation of natural areas and erode cultural monuments.

We must treat our landscape with care. Great care. In my view conservation of the landscape, of our natural and the cultural heritage is a key precondition for local development and ecotourism.

Conservation is important for all sorts of reasons - from conservation of biological diversity, cultural heritage and landscapes to public health benefits of outdoor recreation.

The scale of the challenge is very great. For example, today we are losing biodiversity at an alarming rate.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, countries agreed to "reduce the loss of biodiversity within 2010". The European - and Norwegian - target is to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010. The Convention on Biological Diversity has drawn up voluntary guidelines for sustainable tourism. These guidelines focus on tourism in protected areas and vulnerable natural areas.

The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has focused on linking tourism and conservation. A recent initiative is to work for the establishment of a funding mechanism for management of protected areas.

France has followed up The Convention on Sustainable Development by taking an initiative to establish a task-force on tourism and sustainable consumption and production. Norway is participating in this work. In fact, this conference will contribute to this work.

Long distance travel -especially air travel - is a challenge to all of us. We know that it has serious impacts on the climate. The tourist industry should

give priority to developing ecotourism in markets closer to home and to promoting environmentally friendly forms of transport.

It is the policy of the Norwegian government that our national parks and other protected areas can be used for tourism to a greater degree than today. We must, however, be careful not to destroy the protected values. Cultural heritage is a distinctive element in Norwegian landscapes and is important in marketing Norway as an interesting tourist destination.

We need a better knowledge of the limits for tourism and outdoor recreation activities in protected areas. Local authorities, landowners, industries and other stakeholders will be involved in making the management plans for these protected areas. Together we will create win-win situations between protection and the development of local communities.

In 2006 we started the programme “ Creating New Assets on the basis of the Cultural Heritage”. The programme has been a success so far. It shows that our cultural environment can be an important resource in the development of vibrant local communities, and a good basis for new economic activities such as tourism.

The government has put special attention on coastal areas, the mountains and wilder unspoilt countryside. Norway has a special responsibility for the wild reindeer, being the only country in Europe where they still roam free.

We want to keep the coastline open and free for the public for outdoor recreation. We now run a restrictive policy on building on the shoreline.

Norway also has very strict regulations on motor transport in mountains, forests and smaller watercourses. We want to give priority to simple outdoor recreation. The wilderness should be kept as peaceful as possible.

Norway has joined The European Landscape Convention to support better caretaking of our landscapes. Local authorities are responsible for physical planning. They must follow guidelines and targets set by government agencies. Impact assessment analyses have been integrated in the land use planning process.

Ecotourism of good quality must be secured. People who choose an ecotourism experience should be confident that the product is genuine. And not just green propaganda. Ecotourism standards and certification will help to develop new tourist products, to make tourism greener and to keep it green.

The government is taking these challenges seriously. We are working on a national tourism strategy. The strategy will have a strong focus on sustainable tourism and rural development. You will hear more about this strategy on the last day of the conference.

The GRIP Foundation for Sustainable Production and Consumption has for many years produced important tools to Norwegian tourism to help it become greener. As you have heard, we support GRIP's work. In the development of Ecotourism Norway GRIP has taken an important step to promote sustainable tourism development.

Ecotourism should be a safe option for responsible tourists and people who want something genuine and environmentally sound. It should be an offer

with a good reputation that is near/close at hand for tourists all over the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope that this conference will be an important forum for setting high standards for ecotourism. Not just in Norway or in Europe, but throughout the world. We must all protect our common heritage - our natural environment - for future generations.