

Final departure



Tourists and children in Kenya getting to know each other thanks to Into Africa, one of Tourism Concern's approved Ethical Tour Operators.

Simon Birch laments the passing of a pioneering organisation.

It was last autumn that, after struggling financially for many years, the ethical travel campaign group Tourism Concern finally threw in the towel and quietly closed its doors for the last time.

What makes its demise such a blow is that Tourism Concern was the UK's only campaign group to stand up and take on the monster that is today's global mass tourist industry.

With an annual turnover of more than a staggering seven trillion dollars, tourism is now widely accepted as being the world's biggest industry.

Not surprisingly though, such an industrial colossus is not without its share of ethical issues and Tourism Concern was launched back in 1988 to challenge tourism's increasingly negative impact on both people and the planet.

Difficult issues

The group launched punchy awareness-raising campaigns covering a wide range of pressing issues including the exploitation of hotel and cruise ship workers and the ethics of visiting shanty towns.

Plus, they also asked difficult questions such as should you visit countries where human rights are being violated, and is it OK to use Airbnb given of its impact on local communities?

"Our role was to provide information so that people could make better and more informed decisions about their holidays," explains Mark Watson, Tourism Concern's last Chief Executive.

To help people choose less ethically dodgy holidays, Tourism Concern developed a standard for ethical tourism which put benefits to local communities front and centre.

It then published guidebooks for the global ethical traveller as well as promoting its own approved tourist projects via its Ethical Tour Operator Group.

Africa and Asia

But, given that many of the issues that Tourism Concern was campaigning on, such as that Airbnb are now attracting such widespread interest, why did it fail to get sufficient support?

"From a campaigning and marketing point of view, it was always very difficult to communicate compelling messages and stories about tourism's negative impact," admits Watson.

Plus, whilst some of Tourism Concern's work centred on Europe, most of its efforts were focused on the developing economies of Africa and South East Asia.

"This is in itself was a problem as the people who could afford these kinds of holidays invariably were well off. Consequently, it was hard to fundraise for projects to mitigate the impact of wealthy tourists," says Watson.

Flying and carbon

At the heart of Tourism Concern's work, though, was an ethical conundrum which Watson accepts was always impossible to solve:

"The big elephant in the room with the whole of the tourist industry is the environmental impact of flying to your destination and its contribution to climate change," states Watson bluntly.

Simply put, a holiday may be ethical, but the reality is that flying to your women-run community tourist lodge in Nepal is the most environmentally damaging aspect of your whole holiday.

Not that Watson believes that travelling is bad, far from it:

"Travelling itself is a good thing as, rather than being isolationist and xenophobic, going overseas and meeting different people and experiencing new cultures are all positive," believes Watson, adding that:

"Maybe if more Brits or Americans had travelled then perhaps we wouldn't have had Brexit or Trump!"

The challenge, according to Watson, is that we've got to work out how we can get the benefits of travel without the downsides of adding to climate change:

"The current model of an annual two-week holiday came about with the way we worked in the past when whole industries and towns shut down, but is this still relevant today?"

Instead Watson believes that rather than going on holiday overseas for just two weeks every year, we should be looking at getting away every four years but staying for two or three months.

"You'd really get to know a place in that time," says Watson, "and, significantly, it would be better for the planet."