

Speech by Francesco Frangiali
Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization
at the beginning of the working sessions of the
World Ecotourism Summit
(Quebec City, Canada, 20 May 2002)

Distinguished Representatives of the Government of Canada, the Province
of Quebec and Quebec City,
Mr. Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme,
Honourable Ministers,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Summit dedicated to ecotourism opens at a time when the world tourism industry is just beginning to pull out of the deepest crisis in its modern history. For the first time ever, growth in the number of arrivals dropped by 1.3 percent last year, due in part to the downturn in the economy even before 11 September, but above all, as a direct result of those tragic events and their huge media impact.

For tourism however, a sudden crisis does not mean a prolonged recession. Many travel plans were merely postponed for another time or redirected to other destinations. Experience has shown that after every major shock, tourism has always been able to bounce back and resume its previous levels of growth.

This confidence in tourism's resilience, borne out by experience, is backed by clear signs recovery and is the reason why the WTO maintains its long-term growth forecasts. We continue to expect more than one billion international tourist arrivals in 2010, and more than 1.5 billion in 2020, compared with 668 million in 2001.

As I said last November at the United Nations General Assembly, the expected tripling of arrivals within a generation, despite and beyond the current crisis, and the increasing pressure it will inevitably put on the environment, sites, monuments, infrastructure and host communities should lead us to continue to think in terms of environmental, social and cultural impact, and to act in terms of the sustainable development of this activity.

Obviously, the concept of sustainable development applied to tourism cannot be reduced to ecotourism, on which we are focusing today, and which is just one of its components. Ecotourism can be defined as *“all forms of tourism in which the tourists’ main motivation is the observation and appreciation of nature, that contribute to the conservation of, and that generate minimal impacts on the natural environment and cultural heritage”*. It is far from being a fringe activity. It should not be regarded as a mere accessory, or even as a secondary market niche, but rather as one of the trump cards of this “industry of the future” which is tourism. And for a simple reason: it is crucial to the problem of developing a balanced, sustainable and responsible tourism sector.

International tourism has two faces, which although diametrically opposed, cannot be dissociated from each other.

On one hand there is the face of concern that tourism shows when it looks upon the anarchical development of certain sites and the unbridled exploitation of certain destinations. The inevitable growth of tourist flows, to which I have just referred, will likely amplify some of the undesirable effects that ensue from unsustainable tourism development: degradation of fragile areas, coastlines and coral reefs, wetlands, tropical forests, deserts and mountains; mounting demands, competing with those of local populations, on water and energy resources; overcrowding at the most popular cultural sites and monuments; inadequate transport infrastructure; outmoded public facilities; local cultures and traditions under threat...

Let us not lapse into otherworldliness. Ecotourism, nature tourism and cultural tourism, even if practised in a measured and reasonable manner that respects the carrying capacity of sites, will not be completely free of environmental consequences. They cannot fail to make an impact on the areas visited because no human activity is without impact.

But – and this is their remarkable advantage – these types of tourism make it possible to satisfy humanity’s thirst for discovery and travel without incurring in that which is intolerable and beyond remedy. Basically a non-polluting activity, ecotourism equals or outperforms other competing activities in creating added value in local economies, but is much less destructive and disruptive.

Ecotourism is a form of leisure and travel that represents the happy face of tourism. It brings out the best qualities of tourism, such as its capacity to create economic activity in the poorest regions, where there is no other alternative that can take the place of traditional livelihoods such as herding and agriculture, which are fast disappearing. It also opens up new outlets for such activities, as well as for fishing, handicrafts and the local building industry. It helps reduce the burden of the most indebted developing countries and finance their imports. And above all, it creates jobs – lots of jobs – jobs in the categories where they are most needed by young people, women and indigenous populations, jobs for highly qualified workers as well as for those who are less skilled, jobs in more remote areas that are ideal for hiking and discovery tourism, thus preventing the tragedy of the marginalization or forced emigration of young people who are just entering the job market.

As an integral part of sustainable development, ecotourism lies at the intersection of three main areas of concern: the economy, society and the environment. With regard to the economy, it stimulates activity and helps reduce poverty. It benefits society by creating jobs for the disadvantaged, thus aiding their integration. As for the environment, ecotourism provides resources that make it possible to conserve sites, maintain nature reserves and protected areas, as well as to safeguard biodiversity. It also raises the awareness of tourists and local populations with regard to respecting the environment and cultural diversity.

* * *

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tourism has emerged as one of the biggest economic activities of this day and age, perhaps the biggest. With a turnover of 476 billion dollars in 2000, tourism is doubtless the largest component of international trade, surpassing exports of automobile and transport products or even those of oil and petroleum products.

There are people –some of whom are in this very room— who worry that this rising wave will drown wipe out everything in its path. And they have very good reasons doing so. They fight against the phenomenon of globalization, which also applies to this sector, and the inexorable increase in flows that it brings with it. They refuse to accept that no place will remain untouched, not even the Antarctic or Canada's Great North. They see ecotourism as an instrument for the invasion or the profanation of virgin territories.

But this makes no sense at all. Irrational apprehension should not prevail over the reasoned consideration of the world as it really is. As Jean Jaurès wrote, we must "*go towards the ideal, but understand the real*". Who can stop the rising tide, turn back a river's flow or resist the desert wind?

The issue is not about rejecting tourism, since one cannot reject the inevitable. One cannot stop the St. Lawrence with a dam made of sand. It is about making acceptable that which must, and therefore, will occur. It is about making a virtue out of necessity, and turning an inevitable development into an historic opportunity.

By proclaiming 2002 as the *International Year of Ecotourism*, the United Nations is sending out a message to the international community. It is the same message that it conveyed last year in considering tourism as a tool in the fight against poverty at the Brussels Conference on Least Developed Countries, and in supporting the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism put forward by our Organization. And it is a message that I hope it will reiterate this year by including tourism on the agenda and in the conclusions of the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development.

It is a message of determination and hope that reflects a vision of an activity that is an expression of freedom, an activity that has been galvanized by the inrush of new technologies and fuelled by the elimination of barriers to trade and the free movement of people, but an activity whose environmental, cultural and social impacts are kept under control.

This message can be summed up in the conviction, expressed in the Global Code of Ethics, that it is possible – I quote: *“to reconcile in this sector economy and ecology, environment and development, openness to international trade and protection of social and cultural identities”*.

* * *

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Summit that has brought all of us together today, is an unprecedented event in the history of world tourism. This is the first time that representatives from practically the entire world have gathered together in the same room. Also present are all the stakeholders, both private and public, that are connected with ecotourism in one way or another. Before us is a unique opportunity to engage in an open dialogue, in a spirit of understanding, cooperation and partnership.

The discussions that will take place beginning today should allow all of us to better assume our respective responsibilities in order for ecotourism to become a true instrument of sustainable development. Our ambition is to come away with a vision of the future. Starting with ecotourism and moving beyond it, we aim to pave the way to sustainability and responsibility for the tourism industry as a whole.

Thank you.