

LATIN FLYER

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People, Planet and Profits: Balancing Tourism with Sustainability

BY MARK CHESNUT

*I recently wrapped up covering the **Americas Summit**, a global tourism conference organized by the World Travel & Tourism Council that took place at the Grand Velas Resort on Mexico's Riviera Maya. This is one of my reports from the event.*

It is more than possible to combine sustainable practices with tourism growth — it's actually crucial in order to ensure continued success in the long run, according to an expert travel industry panel presentation called "Succeeding with Sustainability".

Moderated by Shannon Stowell, president of the Adventure Travel Trade Association - a global network of tour operators, destinations and other travel industry partners — the session took place during Americas Summit, organized by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC).



Getting local communities involved in the process of increasing sustainability is key, according to José Koechlin, chairman and CEO of Inkaterra, which won the Tourism for Tomorrow Award this year. "The people have to be involved," he said. "If you do not involve communities in the long term, they will not have a social memory" about conservation.

José Napoleon Duarte Durán, El Salvador's minister of tourism, agreed that local involvement is crucial — and can also bring about other benefits. "Commitment to eliminating poverty will always be a priority for me," he told delegates, indicating that a project to educate local residents about how to protect mangroves was a "win-win effort," since "it was about creating direct relationships with these people".

Protecting mangroves was also a goal for Andrés Pan de Soraluce Muguero, president of OHL Developments, which designed the Mayakoba resort complex in Mexico's Riviera Maya. "The challenge was to develop without affecting the mangrove," he said, noting that his company did extensive research and contracted experts including biologists and geologists. "Today, Mayakoba's mangrove is the healthiest mangrove in the world".

"I personally take the view that these are the most exciting times for sustainable tourism", said Robin Tauck, founder of R Tauck & Partners. She said that her family's eponymous company has found success in partnering with associations and also offering volunteer programs that benefit the environment.

Chris Brophy, vice president of corporate sustainability for MGM Resorts International, provided a decidedly Las Vegas perspective. "The challenge for us is we clearly don't have the tropical rainforest, the beautiful reefs," he noted. "What we do have is roughly 40 million people coming every year to the middle of the desert trying to have experiences. We clearly start from a much less sustainable place."

"We are trying to shift our way of thinking, and it had to start with how we develop and how we build in Las Vegas," Brophy said, noting that designing with sustainability in mind can actually produce extra savings for the industry. "It's about using your resources wisely. Small changes have a huge impact not only on the environment, but on the bottom line".

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