



Sustainable Travel: Policies, Programs, and Results

What corporations and higher education are—or should be—doing

By Lori Tripoli



A person on a round-trip business-class flight from New York to Beijing is responsible for 3.0 tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, while the average emission per person is 5.5 tons of CO₂ equivalent per year, according to “Sustainable Travel in the United Nations,” a 2010 report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). To make that travel more sustainable, UNEP condenses the solutions to two: travel less and travel more efficiently.

While most organizations won’t face the travel footprint of the United Nations (49 percent of the organization’s greenhouse gas emissions is due to travel, and every year, it buys more than half a million plane tickets at a cost of US\$1.1 billion), some companies, recognizing the challenge that travel poses to their own sustainability goals, have implemented policies on green travel. *Sustainability: The Journal of Record* canvassed a handful of organizations to find out what they’re doing to promote more responsible travel. Some are purchasing carbon offsets, some are encouraging employees to stay in sustainable hotels, some are using videoconferencing, some are encouraging carpooling and use of public transportation, and some are partnering with travel companies to help improve the environments of travel destinations.

As businesses, colleges and universities experience many of the same impacts from their environmental travel footprints—and possibly a few more. As much as a “stay put” edict might drastically decrease greenhouse gas emissions due to travel, remaining isolated on a campus could cause problems of a different sort. “We discussed at some length limiting conferences, but for a small, rural college it’s important to get people out,” acknowledges William Throop, provost and vice president of academic affairs at Green Mountain College in Poultney, VT. Moreover, participation in international studies programs can be a vital part of students’ education. Should those international studies programs themselves be more sustainable?

When F2F Is Necessary

Ultimately, while traveling less might be somewhat desirable, it might not actually be viable for people

in business or for those in higher education, making the United Nations’ solution to travel a more pragmatic choice. Solitary confinement in an office might strain the environment less, but it can certainly tax one’s efficacy. UNEP’s definition of sustainable travel recognizes the importance of mission: “Sustainable Travel is … defined as Travel where the associated environmental, social and economic impact is minimized, without negatively affecting the ability of the organization to deliver its mandate.” In short, face-to-face meetings don’t have to be banished for the cause of sustainability.

The exact means for making travel more sustainable, though, remains a challenge. “I think it is the toughest part of the carbon footprint to attack,” Throop observes. “With, electricity, you know what your options are, you can decide which is most cost effective,” he explains. Transportation is so diverse and so many different constituents travel in different ways that “it’s hard to come up with policies that involve significant reductions,” Throop acknowledges. This year, Green Mountain will be purchasing offsets and meeting the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) protocol for all faculty and staff travel. Green Mountain plans to purchase a lump offset, which “will enable us to ensure a higher quality of offset than one often gets with the trip-by-trip purchases,” Throop reports. Employees have to report their mileage. In the past, they’ve done so via a summary report toward the end of the year, but the school is working on obtaining more timely reports whenever the college itself purchases plane tickets and the like.

To minimize the impact of its traveling workforce, Atlanta-based carpet manufacturer Interface, Inc. works with travel agency partners and calculates the air miles flown by its associates and then offsets the impact of carbon dioxide from those journeys by working with an organization that plants trees. “In 2009, we flew about 9 million business miles, which required us to plant about 8,500 trees,” reports Erin Meezan, vice president of sustainability at Interface. Trees for Travel has been in place since 1997, during which time, Interface employees have flown 200 million business miles, which translates into 106,000 trees, Meezan says.

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Sustainable Suppliers

In addition to offsetting travel emissions with the planting of trees, "there is a lot happening at the business level that is not a formulated program," Meezan explains. InterfaceFLOR, the company's American business, lets its sales force and executives favor green hotels over less progressive ones, even when there's a cost differential. In Europe, Interface's traveling employees are armed with a template letter, the gist of which suggests that while towel programs are great, there are more specific actions a hotel could take—and then names them. Targeted hotels are located near Interface's manufacturing plants, where plenty of Interface personnel are likely to stay. "Eventually, enough letters get through to hotels, so they make some changes," Meezan says.

Blaine, MN-based Aveda, which manufactures hair- and skin-care products, developed green meetings, travel, and events guidelines, in place since 2007, that help employees remain mission-aligned, explains Katie Galloway, manager for the company's earth fund, its corporate giving program. A toolkit helps employees make environmentally preferable purchasing decisions and provides recommendations on how to coordinate large meetings. Resources are provided to help employees find green hotels for work-related events, and hotels themselves are surveyed to determine what they're doing to be more sustainable.

Similarly, event planners for Webster, NY-based Xerox, a document management company, use a green meeting guide to help them select locations and venues. For instance, they'll seek outlets that offer locally sourced food and pitchers of water rather than bottles of it, explains Catherine Reeves, manager of environmental management operations at Xerox. "We work with global purchasing to make sure we're carefully picking our suppliers," Reeves says. Consideration is given to whether hotels recycle and have water conservation programs and whether they offer access to public transportation and shuttle service. Hotels with conservation efforts in place are given preferential treatment. Xerox has also invested in and uses videoconferencing technology to avoid travel in the first place. The company tracks greenhouse gas emissions associated with hotels, rental cars, and flights, and saw a 46 percent drop in greenhouse gas emissions across those services when comparing 2009 figures to those of 2008, Reeves reports.

Green Mountain College does not have a formal green hotel policy, but stays in environmentally friendly lodgings are encouraged, Throop says. "Most faculty/staff travel is to conferences so the lodging is conference-determined," he notes.



Greening Destinations

Corporations, and even travel companies themselves, are working to improve the sustainability of travel destinations. For instance, thanks to a partnership with Toyota, the small cruise ship M/Y Eric, owned by Ecoventura (www.ecoventura.com) became the first hybrid tour boat in the Galapagos Islands, reports Santiago Dunn, president of the Guayaquil, Ecuador-based travel company, which has sales offices in Quito and in Miami. In 2008, 40 solar panels were placed on the boat's bridge and stern along with a couple of wind generators at a cost of about US\$100,000. Fully wind-powered vessels are not a practical option in Galapagos, Dunn says. "We have to follow guidelines from Ecuador's National Park Service," Dunn notes. The National Park Service specifies times that travel companies can bring visitors ashore at various islands in Galapagos. "We can't accomplish our itinerary with sails," Dunn explains. If landings aren't at designated times, he'd risk losing his permit.



Santiago Dunn

Alternative energy provides about 17 percent of the ship's needs. Ecoventura offsets the CO₂ emissions of all of the boats in its fleet and of its offices. Itineraries are printed on 100 percent post-consumer waste, chlorine-free fiber using nontoxic inks. The company has affiliated with the Rainforest Alliance and with the World Wildlife Foundation, recycles its waste, raised money to combat illegal fishing in the islands, and donates to the conservation and environmental education Galapagos Marine Biodiversity Fund, which it helped create.

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—Jennifer Hobson



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—Ben Keene

Dunn's sustainability efforts have paid off—last year, Eco-ventura won *Travel + Leisure's* Global Vision Award for Green Cruising—but he admits to almost giving up the quest because of its cost. The family-owned company, founded in 1990, moved toward more sustainable operations in 1999 “out of a conviction we had to give something back to the earth,” Dunn says. “We just couldn’t be operating in a national park and just comply with minimum requirements.” At the outset, he hoped the company would become a trendsetter by improving its green credentials, and lure more passengers “and oblige other travel companies to follow us, whether they were afraid of losing clients to us or because they thought it was the right thing to do,” Dunn recalls. “We were happy either way, and in the process our hearts became greener,” he says.

Even so, in the early years, money invested converting to greener operations and voluntarily buying carbon offsets could not be linked to more passengers signing on. It wasn’t until about 2007, Dunn says, that the market finally started responding to his greening efforts. After a decade of environmentally conscientious business decisions, Dunn is finally seeing a lot of passengers signing on because of Ecoventura’s green credentials and because they want to help save the Galapagos Islands, not contribute to their demise. “We’ve picked up steam again, and we’re happy we never gave up,” Dunn reports. Earlier this year, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) removed the Galapagos Islands from its world heritage danger list, citing the efforts made to preserve them.

Taking a somewhat different approach to sustainable tourism, Tribewanted (www.tribewanted.com) has partnered with the government and landowners to establish an eco-village community in Sierra Leone, explains Ben Keene, who is based in London. Visitors will spend their time establishing and running the village. Concerned about the sometimes mismatched expectations of volunteers and the host communities they visit (“the reality is that skilled labor in local communities is phenomenal; what they need is your money,” Keene says), he’s developed an approach to tourism that is a bit of a hybrid of voluntourism and resort tourism. Tribewanted “really is cross-cultural community tourism, a chance to come and have a holiday, have an adventure, but the money you are spending and time contributes to the sustainable development of the people who live there,” Keene explains. Tribewanted, which started its first eco-village in Fiji, has invested more than \$1 million in it and brought more than 1,100 visitors to the community since its involvement began in 2006. Keene hopes to make Sierra Leone an attractive destination, but acknowledges that it “has a public relations problem because of its recent history. The challenge of living and building there is

to try and help shift the perception of that country from blood diamonds to beach football to sustainable tourism.” Within five years, Keene predicts, Sierra Leone “could become one of the most exciting green tourist destinations in Africa.”

Promoting Sustainable Tourism

Recognizing customer demand for environmentally appropriate destinations, tourism boards are promoting sustainability—both for business and leisure travelers—in their own jurisdictions. “A lot of corporations and large organizations are taking it very seriously,” observes Andrew Weir, vice president for communications at Tourism Toronto, which promotes travel to the city. “Toronto’s metropolitan convention center has been offering zero-waste meetings since about 2006,” Weir says. Aware of interest in sustainability, Tourism Toronto, when moving into new offices a couple of years ago, designed its space with sustainability in mind. The offices were designed to allow maximum natural light, and the organization changed its printing of magazines and visitor guides to 100 percent recycled paper and vegetable-based ink, Weir says. Carbon offsets are purchased for media and clients that Tourism Toronto flies in over the course of a year, he reports.

Stateside, New Mexico has recently launched a sustainability tourism initiative (www.newmexico.org/ecotourism), reports Santa Fe-based Jennifer Hobson, deputy cabinet secretary and ecotourism director of the New Mexico Tourism Department. The department is identifying ecotourism opportunities and helping to package and promote them. “People are dying for experiential travel where they can feel what a place is like,” Hobson says. One of the department’s goals is to help establish tented safari-style camps throughout the state. “We want to offer opportunity for individuals to come and wake up in the middle of nowhere and say, ‘I get it,’ ” she says.

Student Travel

“Some colleges and universities are offering sustainability study abroad programs, often in partnership with private companies, as an option for students to participate in,” reports Niles Barnes, a project coordinator at the Lexington, KY-based Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). A list of programs is available from the organization’s website (www.aashe.org/resources/study-abroad-programs-sustainability).

Students participating in one of Living Routes’ study abroad programs in eco-villages (www.livingroutes.org) can earn college credit from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, explains founder Daniel

Greenberg, also based in Amherst. Applications for its Costa Rica program on tropical ecology, development, and social justice at Monteverde Institute are being accepted through Nov. 20. Students in the program will study the ecology and biology of the tropics at the Monteverde Institute, an environmental research, conservation, and community development organization, while also living with local families. The program is worth 16 college credits from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Living Routes and UMass-Amherst offer other accredited eco-village- and sustainable community-related courses for the January break, summer, semester, and the entire year.

Global Leadership Adventures (www.experiencegla.com) has partnered with Seattle Central Community College so students can earn college credit when participating in its programs. Global Leadership Adventures operates several student service learning programs in the Dominican Republic and will be adding a program in Bali, Indonesia, in 2011, reports San Diego-based Andrew Motiwalla, cofounder and president of the company. "It's very much Sustainability 101," says Dave Addison, who runs the program in the Dominican Republic. Students "see

agricultural runoff, trash, chemicals, animal waste, and what happens when it feeds into the ocean," Addison reports. Students will do a day of snorkeling and observe the damage this pollution has done to coral, he says. Students also learn about peak oil and the use of fossil fuels, about what resource extraction is doing to developing countries, and how some nations that receive International Monetary Fund loans are being guided toward more monocropping rather than having a diverse agricultural system, requiring them to import foods, Addison says.

Addison leads students on a challenging hike up a steep mountain where they see local children running up and down carrying water in containers on their heads. "We do it once; these kids do it multiple times a day," Motiwalla notes. Students are encouraged to make a communal social contract with their fellow travelers to commit to taking action when they return home. "I tell them they'll all end up as business and political leaders. I tell them I hope they think back to the people on the mountain," Addison says.

—Additional reporting by Alan Naditz



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High School Student Travel in the Amazon: An Environmental Education

By Nicholas Medina and Bayard Faithfull

In February, 2010, 26 high school students from New York City's Beacon School traveled to Ecuador's cloud- and rainforest regions for an education in environmental sustainability. The education took them on long hikes with nature guides and introduced them to Ecuador's leading environmentalists like Luis Yanza, a lead attorney in the world-renowned Chevron-Texaco lawsuit, and Esperanza Martinez, who developed the clause in Ecuador's Constitution that protects nature's inherent rights. Dylan Turk, a student, stated that overall, the trip revealed "environmental activism on a much more personal and moral level."

The trip complimented the Global Environmental Politics senior elective at the Beacon School, a public high school. Global Exchange, organizers of dozens of "reality tours" worldwide, helped the teachers craft the 10-day itinerary. The cost of the trip was \$1,800 per student, including flight, food, and lodging. One-third of students received partial travel scholarships, but funds mostly came from parents, the students' summer jobs, and school fundraisers like bake fairs and a benefit concert.

Students met with environmental groups that work to stop strip-mining in the cloud forest and toxic dumping and deforestation in the Amazon. The students also witnessed experiments in sustainable agriculture by staying with the host families of an organic farming cooperative in Yunguilla, and in ecotourism at the Yachana Lodge in the Amazon, which includes a school for local indigenous children. Lixmer Ventura, a student, said the trip filled him with hope: "If a small community like Junín can take down a big-name mining company, imagine what more and more people can do."

Nicholas Medina is a senior at the Beacon School in New York City. Bayard Faithfull is a history teacher at the school.