

Sustainability: What Matters to Students, Educators, and Hospitality and Tourism Professionals?

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Introduction

As climate change gains global attention from events like the summit in Copenhagen held during December of 2009, the need for sustainable tourism is more important than ever; with comprehensive education in sustainability concepts and practices essential, and methods for networking to share information critical. Specifically, sustainability focuses on the triple bottom line of equity, economics, and environment; or people, products, and the planet (Dhiman, 2008); or education, environment, and economics (personal communication with Carrie Blaskowski, Jackson County Green Energy Park, January 12, 2010). All of these relate to sustainable tourism, which can be defined as “an alternative form of tourism that improves or, at the minimum, maintains the quality of experiences for the visitors, life of host communities, and the environment [indefinitely] on which both the host community and the visitor depend.” (McIntyre, 1993, p. 11; Sirakaya-Turk, Ekinci, & Kaya, 2008, p. 414; Tosun, 1998, p. 596).

However, although sustainability is taking center stage globally, it is not receiving significant attention within the curriculum of universities in the United States, and in particular within hospitality management programs. In terms of pressing societal problems, the next generation is inheriting a set of ecological and cultural challenges within communities and across the globe that will shape the world of university students for generations to come, requiring continuous assessment of the responsiveness of the university community and the education provided (Aber, Kelly & Mallory, 2009). Thus, sustainability is fundamentally about education that continually presents questions of value and practice by asking what is best and why, for the long run.

The hospitality industry is a multi-billion dollar collection of businesses consisting of companies within the food services, accommodations, recreation, tourism, and entertainment sectors. The educational programs in this field include a variety of subjects from the management of foodservice and lodging operations to spas, resorts, tourism attractions, sports venues, conventions, and special events. While much has been written about sustainability education in general, very little has been published or taught regarding sustainability concepts and practices within courses in the hospitality curriculum (Deale, Nichols, & Jacques, 2009). Given the depth and breadth of this industry worldwide, the need for future leaders with core values toward sustainability is critical.