



MBA SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP - MANAGEMENT PRACTICES



Assessment One
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British Virgin Islands Tourist Board – Greening the Economy Through Green Travel and Eco-Tourism

The British Virgin Island's Tourist Board (BVITB) is the organization charged with showcasing the British Virgin Island's tourism product to a wider audience. As a statutory body of the BVI Government, the Board's main focus is the development and promotion of a sustainable and viable tourism industry. The BVITB promotes the BVI around the world as "Nature's Little Secret."

The Sustainable Future

The British Virgin Island's tourism product is at a cross road – having been knocked down close to the halfway mark by climate change events; while still being pushed to compete with regional competitors that are way ahead of the game.

As the industry rebuilds and restores, a plan for the growth and development must guide efforts to rise to the top. This of course falls on the shoulder of the BVI Tourist Board which is tasked to sustainably sail the Territory into prosperous waters.

It should be noted that the Government through the Tourist Board is on a quest to develop the BVI's tourism sector "based on sustainable tourism principles and practices, including the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) being spearheaded by the United Nations Foundation."

As a means of ensuring that sustainability remains a central focus going forward the British Virgin Islands Government in August 2018 invited qualified consultant firms to express interest in developing a National Sustainable Tourism Master Plan for the Territory. (Government Information Service, 2017).

However, in close examination of the industry it is suggested that the Tourist Board strikes a balance in its development and conservation/preservation through the promotion of eco-tourism; and by focusing more on marine activities.

At this junction it is important to point out that added interest in the marine sector is by no means a stretch, since the British Virgin Islands has always been regarded as the sailing capital of the Caribbean; and since the marine tourism leg of the industry was the first to rebound following the 2017 hurricanes.

Nonetheless, in this positioning it behooves the BVI Tourist Board to consider Principles Three and Four of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which suggests that advancements should equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations. BVITB should also note that Principle four suggests that countries keen on sustainable development consider environmental protection an integral part of the development process.

Present Reality

Tourism touches every life in the British Virgin Islands. It is the second economic pillar of the Territory with responsibility for some 40% of the Territory's overall revenues. In fact, tourism accounts for some 37% of the BVI's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). (BVITB, Ministry of Education and Government of BVI, 2015-2016)

Every sector of the economy comes into contact with aspects of the tourism pillar and majority of the residents of the BVI are employed directly or indirectly in a tourism linked job. Therefore, it stands to reason that the day this industry is no longer sustainable - is the day that a large portion of the population becomes unemployed; and a number of social ills plague this Territory. This is a significant reason why the BVI Tourist Board must maintain a sustainable strategic plan in order to ensure the viability of this critical and vital industry.

Challenges to the Industry

Over the last 15 years the industry has been dealing with issues such as beach erosion, climate change related mega hurricanes and struggles to meet infrastructural demands.

In 2010 there was an invasion of the lionfish, which feeds on various sea creatures; and not only affects the fishing industry, but tourism activities such as diving as well. (Lionfish spread fast in VI waters, 2011).

Then in 2015 there was a heavy influx of sargassum seaweed which resulted in the death of fishes, blockage of the seawater intake at strategic locations throughout the Territory; and disruption to navigation in some affected harbours. (Pickering, 2015)

However, the greatest challenge came in 2017 when the British Virgin Islands suffered a trio of natural disasters – a flood in August, and two category five hurricanes in September. The hurricanes resulted in a major setback for the tourism sector.

Whereas in 2016, the Territory recorded one million visitors to its shores. This was historical since the number reflected an increase in visitor arrival in all aspects of the tourism sector. The Territory even recorded a visitor expenditure in the region of \$482million USD, which is an impressive feat for a jurisdiction that is only 24 square miles and a population of 30,000. (Smith, 2018)

In 2017, the industry experienced a pummeling that resulted in the wiping out of all but one major resort and the crippling of many villas. At the end of 2017 the visitor figures for arrivals was 756,151, which represented a drop of 387,922, and represented a decline of 33%. This decrease was reflected from all sectors of the tourism industry as cruise related visitors dropped by 289,382, which was a 41% decrease from the figures of 2016. Similarly, the number of day-trippers dropped by 5,713 which was 33% decline. The same was recorded for overnight visitor figures which saw a drop by 73,134 or a decline of 18%.

On the other hand, the charter yacht and bareboat sector prior to the hurricanes had a total 3, 800 berths, but as of March 2018 that number had dwindled to 1584. Before the hurricanes the Territory had a total of 2,700 rooms but by March, 2018 that number was reduced to 336. In fact, Director of the BVI Tourist Board Sharon Flax-Brutus stated that initial damage calculation for the tourism sector was estimated at over three billion dollars (Flax-Brutus, 2017).

Future Path Leads Back to Basic

There is no need for the BVI to adopt or spew sustainability metaphors such as “the pristine beginning” because the Territory has remained relatively close to its natural origins with all stakeholders – government, citizens, business owners and even investors championing the cause for “Nature’s Little Secret to remain as it is.”

Being cognizant of its place in this world, the BVI Tourist Board must turn the heads of its stakeholders back to its roots; as looking at the beginning will assist in ensuring a cohesive approach to the reinvigorating the sector.

In looking back stakeholders must consider the history of the Territory which shows that the tourism product of today mainly commenced in the 1960’s with the development of Virgin Gorda, the Territory’s second largest island. This development was largely done by wealthy American Laurence Rockefeller.

It is safe to say that this tourism interest was spawned by a need for economic sustainability; and is a fitting note for this ‘Strategic Plan’ which is placing ‘sustainable development’ at the helm at the 2025 plan for the BVI’s tourism sector.

The tourism history chronicles that in 1954 during the period of a prolonged drought in the BVI that caused the death of many livestock; and had a devastating effect the then agricultural dependent community, a man named Malvin Flax turned to future Leader of the Territory Ralph O’Neal and said: “Ralph Boy if Mr. Laurence Rockefeller don’t come in here and do some development we cannot make it with weather like this.”

(Ralph T. O’Neal, 2003)

The BVI is a tourism destination that is unspoiled and remains pristine due to the conscious effort to keep symbols of modern metropolis at bay. In fact, the territory which comprises of 60 islands and cays is marketed under slogan of nature’s little secrets. Even before eco-tourism was a catch phrase and a global phenomenon these islands fashioned its tourism in an environmentally focused manner.

It seems like providence as it was stated that four years later Mr. Rockefeller spotted and fell in love with an area of Virgin Gorda as he sailed past. It was mentioned that Rockefeller returned to the US and made plans for the establishment of Little Dix Bay, a renowned resort in

the British Virgin Islands that is now more than 50 years old after opening its doors in 1964. A resort that for many years was a major feature of the Territory’s overnight tourism product.

Laurence Rockefeller is considered a pioneer of eco-tourism and Little Dix is at the center of this conservation history. It should therefore be noted that the environmental importance at the start of the industry has continued to be the main selling point of the sector over the years and should be at the center of the sustainability plans going forward.

Cognizant of this environmental importance the Government in 2017 commissioned a study on the Total Economic Valuation of its natural resources that is due in 2019. This study is being carried out by the Wolfs Institute and overseen by the United Kingdom's Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). The scope of this project already stated the importance of the eco-system on tourism. "The main attractions in the BVI include dive tourism, boating services and yacht charters, all of which directly benefit from services provided by local ecosystems such as coral reefs, sea grass beds and mangroves." (Company, 2017). The completed report will be fodder for the BVI Tourists Board's eco-tourism marketing campaign.

Environmental Sustainability –The Heart of BVI Tourism Development

Over the years the BVI Government has taken Principle Three of the Rio Declaration into consideration by ensuring that all major tourism development includes an environmental impact assessment, which has served to ensure that the Territory's quest for economic advancement maintains and preserves the environment; and in the process sustains the quality of life of citizens.

This approach is most popular now that the population consists of a large percent of vocal millennials who are futuristic in every sense of the word and therefore rubbishes the opinions of those like Milton Friedman as it relates to organizational responsibilities. This section of the community openly demands that current development effectively safeguard the future. Therefore, it would be wise that the BVI Tourist Board avoids a public relations nightmare by angering this vigilant group by carefully considering the environment in its sector development plans.

Stakeholder Confidence Holds

Following the 2017 disasters the Board was able to maintain stakeholder confidence. This was done through collaboration with key government agencies to accelerate building permissions, and the support of applications for Hotel Aid.

Additionally, BVITB facilitated special concessions for the granting of construction materials as well as furniture, fixtures and equipment needed for the tourism partners to get back in business.

The BVITB through The Trade Department even organized the establishment of a Small Business Loan Program to assist businesses to reopen. The Board also reached out to the Labour Department to ensure that skilled construction and relief workers were able to legally assist in the rebuilding.

The BVITB Plan

Sustainable tourism is not new to the Territory. In fact, the Tourist Board previously launched a sustainability initiative in November 2011 called the Sustainable Tourism Environmental Programme (STEP); which aimed at introducing sustainable tourism initiatives to the Territory's sector. STEP was geared at implementing environmental management systems within the BVI hotel sector; and sought to earn the BVITB Green Globe Certification.

The BVITB must despite its difficulties prepare to meet the government issued mandate of 2018 and 2019; which will lay the tracks for the near future. This 2018 mandate surrounds four areas of tourism that the BVI Tourist Board is expected to concentrate on. Among the four areas is the call for the BVI to "Leapfrog wherever possible our competitive advantage in areas such as environmental

management, yachting, private islands, unique restaurants and beach bars, resort development and island-hopping capabilities.” (Smith, 2018).

Looking ahead it must be considered that the geographical location of the Territory and the issues of climate change and global warming puts the Territory at risk, and therefore plans for the sustainable future of the Territory needs to include fast turnaround following a disaster which would require stakeholder support.

Water Tourism Key to Sustainability

Innovative offerings is key to the re-establishment of the Territory as a major player in the Caribbean tourism space. Therefore, noting tourism trends and bearing in mind that sustainability is an integral part of Tourist Board’s strategic plan it makes sense that the Territory positions itself to benefit from the increase of green travels.

This is a trend with tourism benefits that is quickly gaining traction. In fact, Dr. Kelly S. Bricker in the presentation titled Trends and Issues for Ecotourism & Sustainable Tourism considered consumer behavior trends and announced that the evidence shows that “Green travel is here to stay.” (Bricker, n.d.)

Dr. Bricker stated that the figures show that green travel is the highest it has ever been in 10 years; with interest remaining constant. Of interest in the presentation by Dr. Bricker was the mention of popular green destinations and the observance that no Caribbean destination was mentioned. This means that the British Virgin Islands has an opportunity to make green tourism a niche area; and become regional leader in this regard.

In the fulfillment of this vision it is suggested that the Territory builds on its reputation as the sailing capital of the Caribbean and leverage the current stakeholder synergy to begin with the offering of eco-friendly yacht charters.

It should be stressed that here in the BVI ‘going green’ is no business metaphor, but is actually a sustainability way of life and a hallmark for future conscious individuals. It therefore makes sense that Nature’s Little Secret would go further into environmental conservation and protection by extending efforts to reduce carbon “footprint” to its waters as well.

Consider that becoming a green sailing destination is within fingertips as industry operators have already ventured into this area. For instance, the Moorings, which has been operating in the BVI for some 50 years and is a world renowned yacht charter company is already promoting the green sailing message to its guests. The company in its marketing is offering its clients an opportunity to “go green while reaping the benefits of a blissful getaway in a premier destination.” (6 Ways to Go Greener While Sailing, 2018).

On the other hand, Voyage Charters which has been operating in the Territory since 1995 announced this year that it has in its fleet the new Voyage 480 vessel; which is a totally electric catamaran. The company said that this catamaran is eco-friendly and aptly named “Electrified” because it does not have diesel engines and therefore is much quieter. The company said that Electrified also does not have the fumes associated with fuels; and has rechargeable hydro and solar power to assist with speed.

The British Virgin Islands Tourist Board ought to consider that the greening of the sector will be a great value added feature to the 2019/2020 plan especially since for the first time in almost ten years the Board has received a budgetary increase and government support to penetrate the European market.

Time to Brain storm on our green marine tourism future!

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