IWRM Action Hub

CASE STUDY

Jamaica: Implementing environmental management systems for sustainable tourism

Summary

Tourism has placed great pressure on the natural environment of Jamaica. Action was taken through a USAID funded project that aimed to increase water use efficiency and improve environmental management. The key lessons are the value of demonstrating the benefits locally as well as to institutionalise the programme.

Background

The Caribbean remains the world's most tourism-dependent region, with the sector accounting for a quarter of all export earnings, 31% of Gross Domestic Product and nearly a half million jobs. Energy and water costs tend to be higher than in the U.S. and other OECD countries, representing a significant expense to hoteliers. Solid waste is becoming an increasing issue for hotels due to the closure of dumps in favor of sanitary landfills and attempts to increase reuse and recycling.

Finally, as most tourism development is located within sensitive coastal ecosystems, it is imperative for its own self-preservation that Jamaica's tourism industry addresses the impacts of its operations on the natural resources that sustain its business. Recognizing this issue, in 1997, the CAribbean Hotel Association formed the Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism (CAST) to undertake collaborative environmental activities in the hotel and tourism sector, to promote effective management of natural resources, to provide access to expertise on sustainable tourism, and to assist hotel and tourism operations in the Caribbean region to achieve the goals of Agenda 21 for Sustainable Tourism.

At the same time, environmental initiatives were underway in Jamaica, many of which continue today.

Environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) located in all of the major tourism areas and the Jamaica Hotel and Tourist Association (JHTA) pursued a variety of environmental initiatives. The JHTA published a book on environmentally conscious hotel practices. Additionally, there was a leader among the hotel industry that had received numerous Caribbean and international awards for its environmental stewardship.

Actions taken

With both regional and national-level organizational support in place, in 1997 USAID launched a new partnership with JHTA to fund the introduction of environmental management and bestpractices in small hotels. The project funded by USAID has improved environmental management in over 30 hotels in Jamaica, reducing resource consumption and minimizing the environmental impacts of the hotels. A program of water use efficiency activities was successfully designed and implemented as part of this environmental management system (EMS) project, which has institutionalized "best

practices" in the tourism industry in Jamaica.

These best practices include equipping all areas of the hotel with water conservation devices, installing drip irrigation and low pressure sprinkler systems in landscaped areas, installing sub-meters to monitor water use in key areas, and implementing voluntary towel reuse programs in guestrooms.

These measures contributed to water savings of over 41.4 million Imperial Gallons among the participating hotels as well as reduced energy and chemical use. Significant improvements in water use efficiency and reduced chemical use help protect the sensitive coastal ecosystems that attract tourists. In addition, the project focused on training and awareness building.

The project has served as a model throughout the Caribbean for industry programs to meet voluntary environmental standards for the protection of water and related land resources and has established Jamaica as a leader in sustainable tourism in the Caribbean.

Outcomes

In the early phases of the EAST Project, hoteliers were skeptical about the concept of environmental management. From their perspective, environmental management was complicated and very expensive. After the first round of properties implemented their EMSs and started seeing dramatic cost savings as well as improved management and staff morale, it was much easier to sell the concept and benefits of environmental management to other hotels and organizations throughout Jamaica. The EAST Project has successfully institutionalized environmental management into the hotel industry in Jamaica. Due to the competitive nature of the industry and the continual improvement philosophy inherent in EMS, the gains that have been made to date can be expected to continue well into the future.

Lessons Learned

Create incentives for voluntary action: EAST project initially had difficulty identifying 15 volunteer properties because there was no clear incentive to participate. Introducing the Green Globe Certification created an incentive for continuous improvement.

Demonstrate the benefits locally: There was little or no information on the environmental performance of Jamaican hotels prior to EAST project. Using specific examples of audit findings and EMS results from nearby hotels was much more powerful.

Publicize the results: The hotel industry in Jamaica, as in other places, is very conscious about public relations. Coverage of the EAST Project, including documentary videos and press coverage, has greatly raised awareness about benefits of environmental management.

Institutionalize the programs: Introduce EMS as part of industry-wide initiative. On-site technical

assistance needs support by awareness and training activities. Housing program in a hotel association like JHTA provided an excellent way to expand membership services and redefine industry`s reputation.

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