

Bethlehem Declaration on Religious Tourism as a Means of Fostering Socio-Economic Development of Host Communities

The representatives of National Tourism Administrations, Cultural and Heritage Administrations, and other authorities of Member States of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), together with representatives of the tourism industry, civil society, religious communities, international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, universities and experts meeting in Bethlehem, Palestine, on 15 and 16 June 2015, on the occasion of the *International Conference on Religious Tourism: Fostering sustainable socio-economic development in host communities*,

Recalling the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, adopted by the UNWTO General Assembly in 1999, and endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2001, whose Article 1 underlines that “the understanding and promotion of the ethical values common to humanity, with an attitude of tolerance and respect for the diversity of religious, philosophical and moral beliefs, are both the foundation and the consequence of responsible tourism”,

Also recalling that the Code highlights the necessity of associating local populations with tourism activities and sharing equitably in the economic, social and cultural benefits they generate; and the need for tourism professionals to “contribute to the cultural and spiritual fulfillment of tourists and allow them, during their travel, to practice their religions”,

Considering the conclusions of the UNWTO International Conference on Tourism, Religions and Dialogue of Cultures (Cordoba, Spain, 2007), the *Ninh Binh Declaration on Spiritual Tourism*, adopted on the occasion of the First UNWTO International Conference on Spiritual Tourism (Viet Nam, 2013); the *Santiago de Compostela Declaration on Tourism and Pilgrimages* adopted at the First UNWTO International Congress on Tourism & Pilgrimages (Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 2014) and the *Elche Declaration on Religious Heritage and Tourism* adopted by the UNWTO International Conference on Religious Heritage and Tourism: Types, Trends and Challenges (Elche, Spain, 2014),

Recalling that religious tourism can make an important contribution to the socio-economic development and empowerment of local communities and that it is a market segment that is more resilient to influences of exogenous factors,

Aware that the sustainable development of religious tourism requires the protection and preservation of religious, cultural and natural assets by all stakeholders,

Mindful of the pressing environmental, sociocultural and economic challenges that may exist along pilgrimage routes and sacred sites as a result of increased tourism demand,

RECOMMEND TO:

Advance research on religious tourism to improve knowledge about its characteristics, motivations and trends, as well as its impacts on host communities;

Develop policies that protect and preserve religious sites, including sacred natural sites, respect the social, cultural and ethical values of host communities, promote their full inclusion in the tourism value chain, while taking into account the special nature, characteristics and motivations of different religious tourism activities;

Incentivize religious tourism business models that uphold the authenticity of religious sites as well as the cultural, religious and ethical values of host communities and support their socio-economic empowerment through tourism;

Promote the valuable contribution of pilgrimages and religious tourism to intercultural and interfaith dialogue and understanding, universal respect for the spiritual values of humanity and socio-economic development;

Develop a network to foster co-operation and exchange of information and good practices on tourism management in religious sites to ensure that the needs of pilgrims, visitors, and host communities are met;

Encourage new policies and approaches to the development, management and promotion of tourism in religious sites, including sacred natural sites, seeking sustainable and inclusive models that enable the adequate participation of traditional custodians and host communities, enhance the socio-economic benefits of religious tourism at the local level and provide a balance between the needs of religious tourists and tourists visiting religious sites for other purposes;

Promote entrepreneurship in local communities by providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills to innovate in the development and management of tourism services, activities and experiences that diversify and broaden the religious tourism product base;

Develop religious tourism routes, cross-country pilgrimages and networks of religious tourism destinations, as effective means to foster regional development and integration, cross-cultural exchanges and understanding as well as self-education and learning;

Foster public-private coordination and cooperation as well as the engagement of local religious communities and civil society, particularly through non-governmental organizations, in the development and management of religious tourism at the local level;

Enhance the quality of visitor experience - spiritual and material - at religious sites and create opportunities for tourists to become aware and respectful of other faiths and spiritual traditions;

Assist in maintaining the integrity of the 'spirit of place' that bestows sites with religious significance and sacred value while providing resources for tourism;

Promote closer coordination between relevant Government administrations, tourism, cultural, natural and religious organizations, academic institutions, private sector stakeholders and civil society to ensure the sustainable development of religious tourism;

And **express** their sincere appreciation and gratitude to the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of the State of Palestine, for the warm hospitality, the excellent arrangements for the Conference and the fundamental contribution to advance religious tourism development and its economic, cultural and social benefits to host communities.

Bethlehem, State of Palestine, 16 June 2015.