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'Responsible Tourism', they say, is poised to soon become the pulse of the 21st century. And, Oman hopes to stay in step with this trend that's already gaining momentum globally. SALIM JOSEPH discovers that the seeds of RT have already been sown in the Sultanate.'

Community commune

IF YOU take a stroll along the beach to enjoy the cool breeze, these days, you often come across tourists (men, women and children) engaged in a peculiar task that you'd never have expected to see... Together with the locals, these visitors are busy picking up trash and cleaning up the beach!

That's, actually, just a glimpse of a totally new approach to tourism – Responsible Tourism (RT), which has started emerging in Oman. And, industry sources say, it would catch up like wild fire once the authorities choose to come out with a clear-cut RT policy.

A few tour operators and hoteliers including, Eihab Travels (Discover Oman) LLC and Six Senses resort at Zighy Bay in Musandam have already taken some serious initiatives, engaging RT specialists from even abroad while Omran (Oman Tourism Development Company SAOC) is giving finishing touches to its own RT policy. "Omran has adopted RT and we are in the final stages of finalising our RT policy," says Dana Sarhan, Omran's CSR and marketing manager.

Omran has had several sessions with Prof. Harold Goodwin from ICRT (the International Centre for Responsible Tourism, at Leeds Metropolitan University in UK), to introduce the concept to each and every staff member. "He will be in Muscat, in November, for discussions with officials from the Ministry of Tourism. I think, it will take a year to implement RT in Oman but, we

can start from today, effecting changes through the decisions we take," she adds.

It's an approach, a movement

The Sultanate is set to host an international conference on sustainable tourism next year, which will deliberate on the RT concepts as well, Dana points out.

Intended to minimise the negative economic, social and environmental impacts in various destinations, RT is not a product but an approach. It aims to generate greater economic benefits for local people and enhance the well-being of host communities, involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and make positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage. "And Oman stands to gain a lot as the most significant host community in the whole of Gulf to lead the rest of the region in formulating and propagating the principles and practices of responsible tourism," says Robby George, Manager (Tours and MICE) of Eihab Travels.

"In Oman, there is a timely opportunity to introduce RT, explain what it is and highlight to people the potential benefits," says Claudia Eckardt, RT consultant for Five Oceans Environmental Services. "There's a lot of things to do initially. But, Oman is starting up and we have examples from elsewhere to show how local

people can get involved in the tourism industry in various ways," she adds.

Eihab Travels had been organising 'honey tours', to benefit traditional beekeepers in Northern Oman and has launched a new initiative to promote the Sidab Women's Sewing Group, a non-profit community organisation engaged in developing sewing skills of local women from the fishing village of Sidab. "We also have plans to support weavers in Wadi Ghul. Even though these traditional weavers are part of many operators' itinerary, there has not been any coordinated effort to ensure economic benefits to them," Robby says.

The 'sixth sense'!

The best example of successful RT in Oman could be at the Six Senses Hideaway resort at Zighy Bay, in Musandam, where the resort's environmental and social initiatives of 2009 included a carbon offset programme, water management, waste management, environmental awareness for hosts, beach cleaning, local purchasing, English classes for children, dental society's visit to Zighy Bay, rebuilding houses in Zighy village and local employment.

"The tourists feel that they are contributing to preserving the local environment and community by staying with us as we contribute 0.5 percent of



Tourists take part in beach cleaning at Zighy Bay
— Photo by Sebastien Le bon

our total monthly revenue to social and environmental projects on a local, national and global level," says Tara Hammond, Environment and Social Responsibilities Officer - Six Senses.

The local people are also getting benefited as the company re-builds their houses and employs most of the men from Zighy Village at the resort while their children are taught English and given proper guidance, she adds. In Six Senses, the visitors find themselves in harmony with the environment and the local community. Programmes like 'Build a Smile' (rebuilding of houses), with the participation of both, the villagers and the guests, have strengthened relationships between the resort and its neighbours.

Call for new initiatives

Six Senses have been successful in establishing the fact that luxury and environment can go hand in hand, says Robby. "RT has a multiplier effect. It benefits directly the hoteliers and tour operators but we have other subsidiaries like laundry and coffee shops and it's a big chain. Anybody who is in that chain get benefited and they can contribute positively," he points out. The tour operators, he says, would like to see emergence of smaller/boutique accommodation facilities run by communities or local individuals. "This would enhance the quality of the experience, in addition to compensating for the lack of hotel rooms," he adds.

The government can take a leading role in implementing an RT policy for the country, says Claudia. "The destinations need to be managed in a way that it's responsible. There are different ways RT can be promoted and encouraged and it's a big undertaking." Since an international conference is coming up in Oman, next year, tour operators and developers are fervently awaiting the new policy and are prepared to start changing for the better to make tourism more responsible, she added.

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Expect a snowball effect

Dana Sarhan,
CSR and Marketing Manager, Omran

“The essence of RT is to create better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit. More with emphasis on the host community utmost care is taken in managing natural resources and cultural heritage.

RT advocates all the UN guidelines on sustainable tourism. Omran held talks with key players in the industry, with the help of the Ministry. Hopefully we can expect an RT policy soon. When it starts with the ministry and is passed on to developers, it's natural that there would be a snowball effect on the industry.

In the Asian Beach Games project in Musannah, we make sure that people hired are from the very locality as much as possible. We go in for pro-poor employment and hire the underprivileged to do unskilled jobs.

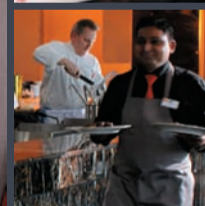
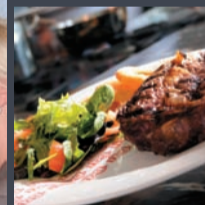
Omran in the last year had two community events in Musannah as well as a public event involving the local community and we made sure that we bought every bottle of water from the local store. The local people benefit directly from us and it minimises our carbon footprint as we have low emissions if we purchase locally.

Some of our hotels are being built in a traditional style with the help of experts in the field, environmentalists and designers to make sure that the cultural heritage of Oman is being preserved.”



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FOLKS



Let them be proud, Prof.

I have not spoken to him for nearly 10 years, so it was a pleasant surprise when I got to hear him over the phone this week. It seemed he had not changed much over the years. Intact were the familiar energy and a sprinkling of sarcasm that spiced up our discussions in the past.

Ten years was way too long. There was a lot to catch up with but the sparks were missing. He is no more the footloose-and-fancy-free youth he had been. A certain refinement reflected in his voice and choice of words and topics.

As the element of surprise died down I got bored with his new avatar and thought of sort of provoking him into his old, wicked self. But somehow I couldn't quite bring myself to doing it. Just then he began talking about sports... and the old sparks came alive. The difference this time was that he spoke about sports in Oman. Ten years ago he spoke about Manchester or Milan.

He was proud of Oman's achievements in sports. Even I am. Being a citizen of this country he has more reason to be happy about what Oman has achieved in the last few years than an expatriate. His love and devotion is born out of patriotism, and my joy and goodwill stem from the years I have spent here.

My past will not vanish when I cross the borders of this country eventually. Perhaps this is why I could not applaud the universalism expressed by Prof. Venkataraman Ramakrishnan who was born in the same country as I was, some 15 years apart. Having studied in India up to his graduation in physics, and inheriting the tradition and wisdom of his ancestors who were Indians, as well as enjoying the facilities of the Indian nation that laid the foundation for what he became in the future, it was disgusting that the Nobel prize-winning scientist sought to belittle his origins ("The fact that I am of Indian origin is even less important.").

I refuse to subscribe to the view that patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. There may not have been a more misunderstood statement than the one made by the 18th century thinker who never got his due in history. Samuel Johnson did not offer context to his famous line but it is not incorrect to think that he was referring to the pseudopatriotism prevailing during his time. In that sense, both patriotism and universalism are the sides of a coin... and both could be the last refuge for some.

Prof. Ramakrishnan is not the first Indian or of Indian origin who got the Nobel prize. There were six before him. I hope the professor would find a way to curb his irritation over his mailbox getting clogged because people from India are now bothering him, and forgive his countrymen – oops! we aren't his countrymen but men of his country of birth which was purely accidental — for feeling a little proud of him. After all, he was born in a country that gave birth to an epic which said Janani janmabhoomischa swargadapi gariyasi (Mother and motherland are greater than the heaven).

One could migrate to the heaven of one's choice, but could anyone change janani or janmabhoomi?

— Prasad Panicker

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'For meaningful visits'

Claudia Eckardt,
RT consultant, Five Oceans
Environmental Services

“**T**OURISM in Oman is just at the beginning stage, so there is an opportunity to influence it now. Good examples already exist in Oman like Six Senses. We need to create more awareness and impart knowledge to people to understand RT. Six or seven years ago, the situation was similar in the UK, where RT has now made huge progress.

“It's growing. It needs to go into the mainstream of the tourism industry. It's not something to be run parallel, not a niche market, not just a trend or not like eco-tourism. It's about people understanding that everyone in the industry has a role to play to make it more environmentally, socially, economically viable and sustainable.

“RT is also about making the experience for visitors more meaningful and more enjoyable through interaction with local people, who should be involved in decision making. It's making tourism accessible to local people.”



Long-term sustainability

Tara Hammond,
ESR Officer, Six Senses
Hideaway, Zighy Bay

“**R**ESPONSIBLE Tourism is extremely relevant in Oman. The Sultanate has invested heavily in eco-tourism options combined with steady responsible tourism development and this is having a positive effect. The visitor numbers are climbing and profits are being generated but not at the expense of anything or anyone.

“Oman has also been able to maintain the prices of tourism products at a high level so that local community would be benefited. Additionally, the natural beauty and cultural fabric of the country are being preserved and celebrated, thus, ensuring the long-term sustainability of its tourism projects.

“The Sultanate is already doing a great job in ensuring responsible development. However they must grow the industry slowly, ensure the local communities are the ones getting benefited from tourism and that the natural environment is not being compromised. We are however lucky that we have Omran, which looks after much of the development across the region and that they have a strong focus on CSR and responsible activities.”



Tara Hammond with some of the villagers employed at Six Senses Resort

'Should catch like fire'



Robby George,
Manager (tours and MICE)
Eihab Travels LLC

“**T**HE success of tourism doesn't depend on the number of tourists or the amount of money they spend. It's the money, which is actually retained in the destination that makes tourism more meaningful and successful. UNWTO statistics reveal how the money tourists spent in various destinations 'leaks' to their own countries through foreign supplies or contracts.

“Responsible tourism is gaining momentum. The World Travel Market (London), a leading travel trade exhibition, has introduced a RT Day observance and this year it will be on November 11. We need people with a passion for RT while implementing this new policy. All the stakeholders need to understand the concept, so education and creating awareness is important.

“Though RT has great relevance in Oman due to its unique culture, heritage, wildlife and marine vegetation, RT initiatives remain very limited or few. We have been the one who took the initiatives seriously and in a meaningful way. Attending international conferences helped us a lot to learn more about it. RT, however, is nobody's monopoly. It's a movement and should catch like fire.”

RT (as per Cape Town Declaration)

- Minimises negative economic, environmental, and social impacts
- Generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities, improves working conditions and access to the industry
- Involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances
- Makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, to the maintenance of the world's diversity
- Provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues
- Provides access for physically challenged people and
- Is culturally sensitive, engenders respect between tourists and hosts, and builds local pride and confidence