Op-Ed: The urgency of transforming Caribbean tourism

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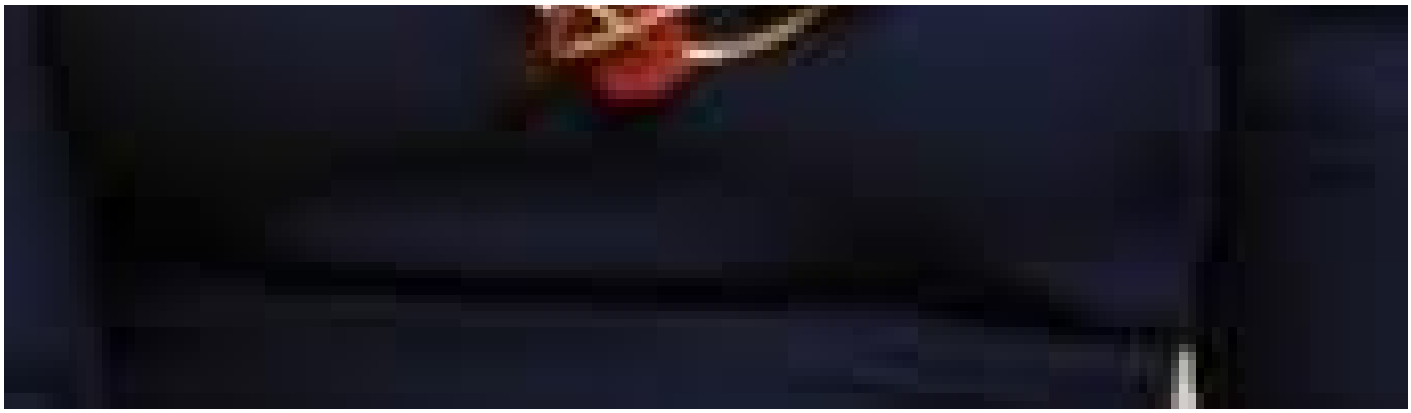
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Therese Turner-Jones.

By Therese Turner-Jones

World Tourism Day, celebrated on Sept. 27, comes at a sobering time for the Caribbean. Travel is unlikely to return to normalcy for another year, or even well into 2022. We need to make this a transformational moment to emerge from the pandemic stronger. We must move away from being merely tourist dependent. We need to harness the industry to make our islands safer, greener and more resilient.

Tourism has had a big but narrow economic impact. Big in that it is our main economic sustenance. Pre-pandemic it accounted for between 34 percent and 48 percent of GDP in The Bahamas, Barbados, and Jamaica. Aruba, Antigua and Barbuda and The Bahamas are the three most tourist-dependent economies in the world. Fourteen of the 15 most tourism dependent nations in the Americas are in the Caribbean.

But the impact is also narrow. Many tourists came in cruise ships and stayed for short periods. Or they stayed in properties on our beaches to enjoy the warm waters and golden sands. There is nothing wrong with this. Nature has blessed us with coastline beauty we can share with our visitors.

We can do much more, however, to make the experience for tourists richer, to the benefit of more Caribbean citizens.

Of course, in the short term, we must continue to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, by supporting individuals who have lost their incomes and protecting our productive assets so we can bounce back quickly. We need to have our hotels and restaurants ready when the visitors return. The staff who have been laid off will need training to engage our visitors in a different way.

We also need to be smart in how we reopen. Many small island states flattened and even crushed the infection curve through social distancing measures and travel restrictions, at a big cost for our citizens, so countries are looking to reopen. This carries risks. Cases spiked in The Bahamas in July, when restrictions were relaxed. We need to base our reopening decisions on the prevalence of the virus in each source country and manage risks by insisting on either pre-testing before arrival or on-site testing upon arrival. Barbados has been particularly strong in implementing these risk management techniques.

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At the same time, we can begin working on a new kind of tourism, more attuned to the future and to the needs of our island economies.

Indeed, environmental sustainability has to underpin any actions as we reinvent the sector. This is the lesson of Hurricane Dorian and so many others. The Galapagos Islands are looking to enhance the local sustainability of tourism by balancing ocean resources and human needs. This includes lengthening the stays of tourists to reduce the number of arrivals, producing more food locally and in sustainable ways, housing visitors in hotels that use renewable energy sources, and using boats that are powered by non-carbon fuels, among other measures.

A second key to the future of tourism is making it a much richer experience than beach trips. According to a consumer research by Euromonitor in 2019, four out of five American visitors would be interested in culture-based tourism. Visitors want to learn and interact more with local communities. They are eager to try local foods and enjoy adventures that become stories they can tell friends upon their return. Getting more visitors in communities generates new revenue sources for local business, enhances culture, community identity and pride. The Compete Caribbean Partnership Facility has worked with the Caribbean Tourism Organization to develop a toolkit for community-based tourism that appeals to the digitally-savvy, adventure-seeker by providing easier access to authentic experiences.

An example of the kind of eco-tourist experience is Barbados' Coco Hill Forest, where visitors learn about regenerative agriculture and organic farming in hiking treks, group planting activities and farm-to-table dining.

The Caribbean has natural resources for nature-based as well as culture-based solutions –scuba diving in the reefs, shark diving in The Bahamas, exploring the rich biodiversity of the forests in Trinidad and Tobago, to cite a few examples.

Several initiatives are looking to help make these riches more locally relevant. IDB Lab, in collaboration with the United Nations World Tourism Organization, has launched a challenge to support innovative technologies to bring new life to the tourism sector in 15 countries in Central America and the Caribbean. We have convened a movement to gather "moonshot" ideas that will transform the Caribbean, including for tourism.

I am confident these will be the seeds that add to an ecosystem of innovation and creativity that has marked our cultures. We have so much to offer to visitors and to the world. Let's turn this pandemic into an opportunity.

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