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Climate change threatens ski and beach resorts, reefs and ecotourism

The tourism industry will be severely impacted by climate change, according to a new report from the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL), the Cambridge Judge Business School and the European Climate Foundation, which summarises the latest findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Among the warnings highlighted are:

- The threat posed to some ski resorts by rising temperatures and shorter winters
- The threat to coastal tourism of sea level rise. For example, an increase of 1m would damage up to 60% of resort properties in the Caribbean, destroy or damage 21 airports, and inundate land around 35 ports.
- The negative impacts of changes to biodiversity on ecotourism. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, up to 40% of species in national parks could become endangered by 2080
- The threat to coral reefs, which contribute USD 11.5 billion annually to global tourism revenues, as a result of sea-temperature rise, and ocean acidification

In addition to these direct impacts, the tourism industry will suffer indirectly from increased scarcity of clean water, a higher prevalence of disease, and reduced security and higher social unrest in poor countries as a result of climate change.

Eliot Whittington, Climate Change Director at CISL, said: “The aim of this report, and the series of which it is a part, is to help businesses make the most of the highly valuable information in the IPCC reports, by distilling them into accurate, accessible, timely, relevant and readable summaries.”

There are a number of ways in which the tourism industry can adapt, for example by marketing its ‘shoulder seasons’, manufacturing artificial snow or beaches, or relocating to new areas, but many of these options are likely to add costs and offer only short-term relief. Similarly, while climate change may lead to some new tourism opportunities, including ‘last chance’ visits to see melting glaciers, these will be by definition short-lived.

The tourism industry accounts for between 3.9% and 6% of human contributions to greenhouse gas emissions, but on current trends this will rise to 10% by 2025. Tourism is thus likely to come under significant pressure to reduce its emissions, with a probable focus on transport, which accounts for 75% of the of the sector’s climate impact. Opportunities exist in the form of more efficient vehicles and alternative low-carbon fuels.

Stephen Farrant, Director of the International Tourism Partnership, which is hosted by Business in the Community (BITC) said: “This is an extremely important and valuable summary of the IPCC findings for the tourism industry. Every part of the industry needs to take note of its warnings and think about what more can be done to adapt to climate change, as well as how to continue the process of reducing the impact of their operations on the environment. This is a question of business continuity over the medium term as much as a question simply of business responsibility.”

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Notes to editors

The report can be downloaded at: www.cisl.cam.ac.uk/ipcc

The family of summaries, of which this report is part, is not meant to represent the entirety of the IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) and they are not official IPCC documents.

The University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL) brings together business, government and academia to find solutions to critical sustainability challenges.

Cambridge Judge Business School (CJBS) is in the business of transformation. Many of our academics are leaders in their field, creating new insight and applying the latest thinking to real-world issues.