

Green Globe has its growing pains, too, including the Caribbean

BY NELSON ALCANTARA | MAR 09, 2009

There were murmurs within the industry that Green Globe International was having a bit of an affliction within its own organization - that there was a dispute where the Caribbean region belongs within its hierarchy; that the Caribbean should fall under the Asia/Pacific region.

Having heard this, I went straight to work and was able to track down Green Globe Internationals' chief operating officer Bradley Cox. The interview is quite lengthy, but you may find it a good read. Well, at least, that is what I am aiming for.

eTN: Explain the role of Green Globe in today's travel and tourism.

Bradley Cox: I think it's the same role that we've played for the past 15 years, and that is we provide third-party audited sustainability certification, or green certification, for many of the different businesses within tourism. At the moment, we focus on 26 different sectors and that goes from hotels, to airlines, to restaurants, to convention centers, and more. So really, we haven't changed our course over the last 15 years, and we are still supported by the World Travel and Tourism Council, and we continue our mission, and we are just excited that it seems the whole world is starting to catch up with where Green Globe has been, for example with the comments coming from the United States, from the president there, etc.

eTN: What are your specific aims as an organization?

Cox: Specifically, we want to make sure that, where possible, travel and tourism businesses are measuring and managing their sustainability footprint – that is the amount of energy they are using, which, of course, is their carbon footprint, but also the amount of water that they are consuming and the amount of waste that they are sending to landfill, hopefully encouraging them to recycle more. This is fundamental. There are a number of different things we can do, but to begin with, around the world, we have to be able to measure and manage those three things to really get on the road towards a sustainable industry.

eTN: How have you been able to manage or quantify these things?

Cox: We are working with a company called Sustainability Intelligence, and they are in a partnership with the Carbon Consultancy, and they have, through their efforts and their connection into the tourism industry, have conducted a number of working groups and various research, and they have come up with not only the online tools to be able to easily capture that information, but also the ability to share that information and show different businesses the level of savings they are making in terms of cutting down on electricity, cutting down on water usage, etc. So it's our partnerships – and Green Globe has always been an organization looking for collaboration and partnership – it's our partnerships that are helping us out in that regard, and Sustainability Index is a certainly a new company that has

been involved for a long time in the travel and tourism industry, but it's new in the sense that it's working with us on creating the indexes or the measurements for the industry.

eTN: Can you talk a little bit more about Green Globe's history and how it came to be what it is today?

Cox: In 1992, the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit was being planned and held, and recently we have had global meetings in Bali, in Kyoto, we've got another one in Copenhagen next year, but Rio de Janeiro was the first meeting of its kind where countries, corporations, communities all got together and discussed environmental concerns. And what they discovered was that problems that were local, had a global impact; problems that were global, had local impacts. So coming out of that international forum, the World Travel and Tourism Council decided that Green Globe certification was the way the travel and tourism industry would contribute to cutting down on pollution, creating more equitable jobs and businesses, and really engaging with the communities where resorts and hotels were being built, where airports were being built, and where millions of people were traveling all around the world. So that's the starting point. Since that time, Green Global has really been a pioneer in this movement, and we have pioneered the establishment of certification standards. A standard is a set of criteria, and these are various measurements and initiatives that must be taken on by a business or by a community to make sure that they are conducting their business or running their community in a sustainable fashion. So, a lot of research development went into that and an organization in Australia called the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Center provided at least 8 years worth of research and development to contribute to that, and that has certainly provided Green Globe with the intellectual power house to be able to achieve these excellent standards and to truly know what defines sustainability. In more recent times, we have taken Green Globe into a public company into the US. For us, that's our latest innovation. We believe the current movement around the world is that countries are now not only looking into climate change, the causes of climate change, and various other environmental impacts, but it's starting to discuss economic sustainability, it is starting to discuss social sustainability, how you keep communities together, and no doubt, what has recently occurred in America, both on the economic front, its impact on communities, and also America's focus on pollution and the environment, has provided Green Globe a chance to bring its message to the United States, which is one of the world's biggest sources of tourists, but also has many famous tourism destinations. So, operating in the United States, we think a public company is an excellent way to conduct our business because it provides people, like individuals or businesses, the opportunity to not only understand what we are doing by our services, but also invest in our company and as we grow and expand, as we believe we will, we will be able to provide a dividend back to those investors. So, not only are we creating green jobs, delivering green services, but we are hoping to be able to deliver a green dividend to those who are investing in our company.

eTN: You are headquartered in the US or in Australia?

Cox: We are headquartered in the United States. We have partners in Australia and many other countries around the world. We have auditors and consultants also in many countries. At present, our footprint, globally, would be in 50 countries where we have partnerships. We have accredited auditors, we have consultants, and, of course, we have

our clients, which are the tourism businesses and communities. So, we have been diligently, over the last 15 years, building up our global presence, and now Green Globe International is headquartered in the United States, and we recently have opened our Green Globe Certification Office in Los Angeles.

eTN: So the basic structure is that you are headquartered in the United States, but you have branches in different parts of the world, different regions?

Cox: We have partnerships with other companies and other organizations at this time, and we are hoping that over the next year or so, we will start to be able to convert those partnerships and those alliances into branch offices, if that's possible, but the future is, we are still working on just establishing our US presence at this time.

eTN: You spoke twice about WTTC. Can you explain why this affiliation is significant for Green Globe?

Cox: The WTTC represents 100 or more of the world's largest tourism and travel companies, so hotels, airlines, etc. These companies provide most of the jobs in tourism. They provide most of the services in tourism. They use most of the resources, and they create the biggest footprint. So it's important for Green Globe to maintain our link to WTTC, because every time we do something good or we create new initiatives with those members, we are having the biggest impact possible. So it's to really to have a global impact and to really do a good job of lowering energy usage, lowering water usage, lowering the amount of waste going to landfill; we need to engage with the biggest players, the biggest corporations. So today, we still maintain our connection with WTTC through a 5 percent ownership of our company. That allows us a good connection, but at the same time, we are independent and able to provide WTTC and its memberships with all the innovations that we have become famous for providing.

eTN: As we both know, WTTC is a private tourism organization that doesn't really have any legislative powers or can impact legislation as UNWTO would. What's your take on that?

Cox: I think both organizations provide impetus or initiative from different ends of the spectrum in terms of tourism as a business. Also it touches down in communities, obviously, and in countries, and many developing countries with developing economies, more and more, are seeing tourism as a real generator of jobs, of revenue, etc. So, we have to work with both the peak body, which WTTC represents, and we have to work with the government organizations, which UNWTO plugs into. So, it's not a case of deciding which is better, it's a case of having to do the best with both.

eTN: So you do have a link with UNWTO as well?

Cox: That's correct. We have submitted to be an Affiliate member, and that Affiliate membership will be provided to us, I believe, this year.

eTN: At the UNWTO General Assembly in Kazakhstan?

Cox: I'm not sure of the exact process for that, but we have applied, and we have been informed that we should be able to receive that membership, which is certainly important to us. Geoffrey Lipman, who is one of the originators of the Green Globe brand, who still provides us with ideas and directions, certainly is one of the senior people in

UNWTO, and we certainly respect the work that he has put into Green Globe over many, many years, and we hope that we can get more ideas, directions, and so on from his efforts, just as we respect that WTTC through Jean-Claude Baumgarten, with the originators of Green Globe, and we look for ideas and directions and innovations from them as well.

eTN: You said you've been around for 15 years. Can you tell me some specific achievements that Green Globe has had over the course of 15 years?

Cox: I think the fact that we've been able to create a presence in around 50 countries globally is a major achievement, particularly that in the last 15 years, the environment and the green movement, ideas of corporate social responsibility, were all very much in their infancy in the mainstream, and that we have been able to work with non-government organizations, businesses, communities to take the good works that have been done over that period and land them on the ground, actually make a difference. Where we have certified businesses, those businesses are every day saving water, energy, and reducing waste, and they are also engaging with their communities and creating better opportunities for their employees. So whilst I wouldn't like to point to one major achievement, I would like to point to hundreds of small achievements at the local level that I think are our most important achievements overall. At this time, there are around 500 certified businesses globally, and we have quickly gained more and more businesses wishing to come on board and be certified. There may be regional certification organizations that have more members, but we believe we are the only certification company in sustainability that has an independent, third-party auditing system, which means that to qualify to use our Green Globe mark, you must submit all documentation to third-party auditors, and we think that is both an ethical, but also a professional, way of going about it.

eTN: And who decides the third parties? Is this the organization itself?

Cox: In the different countries where we have a presence, there are trained auditors who conduct those audits, and they are trained on the Green Globe system. So each Green Globe auditor has received Green Globe training, and they are independent businesses whose specialty is environmental consulting or environmental auditing under various standards.

eTN: Talk a little bit more about the certification program for hotels and resort properties. Exactly what does that entail and why is it significant?

Cox: It's a journey that can take up to six months, maybe even more. Some properties take a lot longer, depending on what they need to do. It's based on a set of criteria where we are looking at each action in each department within the business to try and make sure that they are, as we said before, saving resources, but also at the same time, engaging with their employees – making sure that their employees are contracted under the local legislation, that they are also engaging in community activities outside the business. So we have our standard set of criteria, which helps the business identify all the different tasks that they need to achieve. On average, a tourism business will have to look at 170 to 180 criteria. But overall, it's a journey moving through the process of first establishing a green team, and

that is a team of individuals within the company whose job it is to not only complete each of the criteria, but to engender and create a sense of purpose around sustainability within the organization. Now, what we have found is that many businesses work hard at getting this certification, but immediately there are benefits in cost savings – cost savings against, again, water energy, waste, etc. There are immediate benefits of raising the morale and enthusiasm of its employees, in as much the employees see the company is taking a very important ethical stance in terms of protecting the environment and working with the people. But also it gives them, through working the criteria, the detailed criteria, they see many, many practical ways that they, at work and at home, can actually contribute to saving the environment and creating a better place. So it is not easy to get a Green Globe certification, but it is very rewarding from the first day they enter into the process, and apart from those benefits, once they complete the certification, Green Globe then has an active public relations campaign to communicate their achievements around the world.

eTN: You are saying that their set of criteria is universal, it's the standard, correct?

Cox: At the moment there is an initiative called the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council, which is supported by the UN foundation. We have participated with them and their initiative. We are working with other certification companies on making our standards universal with all others. So, this is a work in progress for all certification companies, and we are very pleased to be working with both the Stewardship Council and other groups to begin to standardize these criteria.

eTN: Do you think that would be fair, because I'm looking at it as regions, even countries, have different natural resources, they vary greatly from one another. So I am thinking to be able to enforce the set of criteria universally, don't you think there's a little bit of dissonance there?

Cox: That's why we refer to it as a journey, because within the criteria, we also have to include the criteria to match local conditions. Many countries, of course, all countries have a variety of approaches towards employment, environmental conservation, community engagement, etc. So what we are working is to establish a universal set and include in that universal set, the ability to load into our system specific localized criteria to meet those needs. So this is an ongoing challenge and a very rewarding challenge for those engaged in certification to come up with that combination of universality and also the ability for the local people to be able to contribute their criteria, which meets their local needs. So, again, tracing the history of the green movement, if we go back to the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992, we understand that it's always a combination of local and global that actually can bring about the sustainability goals we are looking for.

eTN: Let's say, for instance, "Y" company wants to apply for a certification; what do they do to get certification?

Cox: We have a website, which is www.greenglobecertification.com. They visit the site, register, and then we will be able to contact them, look at the size of their business, and then provide them with the certification necessary for their business and particularly the sector they are in. And then simply it's an online system, which they can work their way

through. Through our office in the United States, through our partners around the globe, there is telephone access available to get telephone help. There are resources online as well. Further to that, there are both consulting groups who are familiar with the Green Globe standards, and they can provide consultancy services to help businesses work their way through the certification process. So, it all starts with the greenglobecertification.com site. All the information is there, and that will easily allow a business to begin the journey of becoming certified.

eTN: Are there any fees involved?

Cox: Yes, there are. The fees start for micro businesses going up to large businesses, and that's a scale of fees. Our micro business is US\$750, and we scale up to around US\$5,000 for a large tourism venture. Where we have partnerships in different parts of the world, we have fees which match the local economic situation as well, so they will be able to access those from us.

eTN: What is Green Globe's definition of sustainable tourism?

Cox: Sustainability as we understand it is supported by three pillars, and that is environmental issues, economic issues, and social issues. So, whenever we talk about a sustainability certification or sustainable tourism, those activities must always consider those three issues. Is this providing an economic benefit, an economic future? Is it providing preservation for the environment, which is the key offering in many, many of the tourism businesses around the world? And, importantly, does it engage the social aspects, and that is people both at work and also people who live in the community, which hosts the tourism business? So those three considerations are where we start with sustainability. To investigate and to deliver against those three is a journey, and it's not something that can be achieved simply by getting our logo. It's an ongoing, annual set of initiatives to constantly improve those three aspects – the economic, social, and environmental. So, it's simple, but it's very, very engaging, and it's almost a lifetime's journey, I think.

eTN: What strides, if any, are being made to address the issue of climate change?

Cox: Again, it's our presence in the local areas in the countries where we are working with businesses to actually allow them to reduce their sustainability footprint that provides the biggest contribution to climate change. Climate change, regardless of the debates that have gone on, is symptomatic of carbon pollution. And, again, the debate still, for some people, exists about that. But there is no doubt that the amount of carbon we are putting into the atmosphere is greater than at any other time, and that can't be a good thing. So in working with individual businesses and their communities to reduce that, has to be where it starts, where the ability to improve begins. Further to that, the most important part of Green Globe's certification is our indexing, that is the measurement of the resources that are being consumed, the creation of those data bases, and being able to compare and share that data around the world is vitally important to show large corporations who are planning tourism ventures, to show communities who are planning on hosting new tourism resorts and destinations. We need to show them that data, to show them where the best practice is so that they can, from the beginning in the planning stage, they can look to try and achieve the best possible outcome before the building starts or the business begins.

eTN: Food crisis is also a major issue these days. Is it a concern for Green Globe?

Cox: It certainly has to be. The fact that many people are going to countries with the developing economies and being provided with world-class or first-class services and facilities, only speaks to the point of distribution of resources; just being able to provide food, etc. around the planet. We have to look at these issues, not only to meet the tourists' needs, but the needs of everybody who supports those tourism businesses. So we are very concerned in a macro sense with the distribution of resources around the planet, and the natural fit, the natural engagement of tourism, where we are sending people to different corners of the planet. We are providing the transportation, we are providing the accommodation. We should, as an industry, be able to assist in the distribution of resources and the provision of basic services to not only the people within our industry, but the host countries that provide those opportunities.

eTN: Water will be what oil is today. Somebody said this recently. Do you agree?

Cox: That's a very, very broad sort of statement. It's hard to agree with the, I suppose, just that statement; it's a little bit too simplistic. But certainly, to answer your question, water is a precious resource, water is an essential resource. While we may find alternatives to oil, we will never find an alternative to water. So in that regard, water is the fundamental. So, we have to do all within our power to bring conservation techniques, re-use techniques, recycle techniques to the use of water wherever we can, particularly some of the most spectacular, natural areas, locations for tourism around the world are critically concerned about water use. So, again, we need to work with the local governments, the national governments that are there to insure that we are not overusing, but, in fact, providing stewardship in how to be better users of water resources.

eTN: How have local governments been? Have they been receptive to your message?

Cox: Over the course of 15 years, we have engaged with numerous local governments. Some have even decided to work with us to become Green Globe destinations. I'm thinking of in Brisbane, Australia, the Redland City Council is only a small council, but they are the custodians and managers of very important and fragile eco-systems in their bay area, which hosts, dugongs, which I think in America are manatee. Do you know these animals?

eTN: Yes.

Cox: So these are very rare animals. They also, on the land, they have one of the last colonies of koalas next to urban habitat. So they are custodians of some beautiful, natural areas and some very important iconic species of animals around the world. So, their desire to be a Green Globe destination is a new challenge for us, and we've been working with them over the years, and we continue to try to discover better ways of actually not only working with the tourism businesses, but actually seeing if we can certify destinations.

eTN: What is Green Globe's perspective on the economic crisis?

Cox: Well, certainly, the economic crisis as it exists today, shows that, like the environment, local issues can quickly become global issues, within not only a lifetime, but maybe within a generation, or in this case, within a couple of years. So, almost in following the issues we have with the environment, the economy shows us that we live in a

global age. Again, for Green Globe, it is not our role to develop policy, it is not our role to look at or try and create economic legislation that governments can adopt, or anything like that. What our role is, is to work with the businesses who undergo our certification; to let them figure out the best way to preserve jobs, preserve well-paid jobs, provide rewarding experiences for the people who they employ, encourage the people they employ to look into perhaps starting their own businesses, to grow community wealth. These are the kinds of initiatives that flow from our certifications. So, once again, while we don't participate at the UN, we don't participate as an advisor to large governments, what we do is we work the businesses and the communities on the ground, and, again, that is where the solutions always come from.

eTN: The Green Globe's destination, that you just spoke about earlier, that is something that you haven't really quite put together yet, correct?

Cox: We are still working on it, and we've developed what we call the Sustainability and Carbon Neutrality Plan for destinations. And what we have recognized is that whilst we don't advise on legislation that governments might have, we need to understand the legislations that they have, we need to understand in detail the local law, we need to understand the policies of government. So the Sustainability and Carbon Neutrality Plan is devised to allow us to understand the legislation and policy positions of the government and what are their implications for tourism communities and tourism businesses. In doing that, we think we can start to make a bigger contribution by linking different resort areas into one large destination, or linking different cities, which have a large tourism component, to be stewards to demonstrate good work and good initiatives in, again, saving water, saving electricity, reducing waste. So this is our desire, is to deliver our Sustainability and Carbon Neutrality Plan to destinations here in America, and at the moment, we are considering using that plan as the basis for green business programs in a number of cities in the US that we are just beginning to talk to.

eTN: So, Green Globe is a public company, whereas most organizations that are addressing climate change or food crises or the other issues that we spoke about, are nonprofit organizations. What, if any, is the advantage of a publicly-traded company to that of nonprofit organizations in dealing with these issues?

Cox: I think there's a perception that all of the organizations who work in the green space or environmental issues are not-for-profit when, in fact, just about all sectors of business, government, etc. are working on green initiatives. Governments are working on green initiatives, charitable organizations, not-for-profits, businesses are all working on green initiatives. So it's not strange or different for a public company to be established to work in this space. The advantage, I think, is that as we see this green economy evolving with green jobs as spoken about by the US President and by other governments around the world, there needs to be public companies set up where people can invest and support those green initiatives. We can't depend on the government's taxation, charitable group's donations, or businesses' profits to fund all of the work that needs to be done. We have to have a new platform, or another platform, and a public company platform provides that. It means that people can invest, those investments can be turned into excellent initiatives, which save energy, save water, reduce waste, but it also creates savings for

businesses, creates more efficient businesses, creates better communities through better social engagement through green business programs, etc. So, I think it's just a natural development that the green movement, or people who have been involved in the green movement, would be looking to establish platforms in all areas beyond government and commercial and not-for-profit and, of course, as I said, this is one of those platforms.

eTN: What is the current value of Green Globe?

Cox: As a public company, we have got to be careful, like all public companies, that we don't make projections on our value, but what they can do, in just complying with FCC rules, obviously, is visit our green website, which is www.greenglobeint.com. And from there, they can click on our ticket symbol, which is our stock symbol, and they can get all of the information regarding the market capitalization and all other financial information from there.

eTN: There have been some ethical issues raised recently about nonprofit organizations profiting by holding summits or what have you. What is your take on that?

Cox: It has always been a challenge for not only not-for-profits, but for charitable groups, to find a way of maintaining their status, but at the same time, being able to get their good initiatives, their ideas, etc. out there to be able to extend their knowledge, extend their good work out to the community and so on. So, in that respect, finding ways and means of getting that knowledge out there, a challenge can arise in terms of whether fees are being paid, etc. I think what we see and what we know and the NGOs that we work for and the not-for-profits, is that they do an excellent job of maintaining a very careful watch over their activities, and it's the same for public companies. We have to, under the FCC rules here in the states, have to constantly be vigilant about our activities and make sure they comply with the status of our organization. So, it's a challenge; it's not easy, but I think as long as you work in an ethical sense, it's very achievable to do the right thing in that regard.

eTN: I need you to confirm or dispel some talk that's been going on [that] we've heard about recently. There is talk of a dissonance within the Green Globe hierarchy because of a dispute regarding the Caribbean as a region - that the region should fall under the category of Asia-Pacific. Is there any truth to this?

Cox: At the moment we are working with our partners in the Caribbean, in the Asia-Pacific, and all other areas to find the best possible partnerships and solutions. So, we have had various talks with a number of industry people, a number of partners, and we are finding the solutions that best fit everybody. So, I think it's really an issue of, as we move forward, as Green Globe grows, which it's doing remarkably, we are going to have to work with partners in all of these regions. So, it's a challenge, but I think we are having some success.

eTN: So we can expect that the Caribbean will be put under the Asia-Pacific Green Globe?

Cox: At the moment, with all of the different regions, we'll be having a look at who is the best manager and what are the best partnerships. So, at this time we have no real idea or real decision in place. We are doing a lot of work to find out the best way to move forward on that.

eTN: What do you expect to achieve in the short term, maybe this year?

Cox: I think to create really vital partnerships in all of the regions of the world – the world is a big place, and that sounds trite to say that – but it's for any company that's trying to have a global presence, we're going to have to meet the different cultural and entrepreneurial differences, as well as the different governmental laws and legislations in every one of these areas. So, every area will be a challenge. I think in the short term, just to have a very positive, efficient global network is going to be our achievement for this year, and having done that this year, that means that we'll provide even better service for all of our clients, as well as a great investment for any people that want to invest in green business into the future.

eTN: How are you reaching out to hotels and resorts for this certification program; how are you advertising this?

Cox: Our website, www.greenglobecertification.com, certainly promotes all of our services. We work with Travel Mole. We are having discussions with eTurboNews, of course, yourselves, and we also have our own public relations affiliate. This is a company that is contracted to us.

eTN: So you don't have an in-house public relations?

Cox: No, it's an affiliate public relations, as it has to be here in the United States, and they provide us access to a variety of international wire services and online new services. So, at this time, we have to balance our marketing and communications efforts with our research and development efforts with the cost of our certification services. So, we are trying to do as much as possible within the resources that we have at this time.

eTN: What is Green Globe's vision for peace through tourism in the next 20 years?

Cox: We were just discussing that the other night. It comes back to the point that travel and tourism in itself is a mission for peace and harmony around the world, inasmuch that tourism sends people, whether it be for business or for leisure or if they're migrating, it's the airlines which take them to a destination; it's the hotels, the guest houses, the friends and relatives who accommodate these people; it's the restaurants, the cafes who feed them – all of the components of travel and tourism can bring better international understanding. So, Green Globe, needs to, we believe, maintain our base in tourism and work to show that tourism is actually a generator of sustainable jobs, a generator of sustainable businesses; tourism protects the environment, and tourism provides meaningful activity, meaningful employment, meaningful engagement for the people who host those tourists. So, that seems to be where we are at this moment, is to actually expand our business but base ourselves on the experience of tourism as the best way to create peace and harmony, as you mentioned.

eTN: Excellent. Is there anything else you'd like to add to that?

Cox: No, we don't have anything to add, just to say that we really want to emphasize that, like any new business and particularly one that's got global aspirations, we're going to have lots of challenges, lots of people talking about this, that, and the other thing. The issue is if we can create a positive atmosphere and environment and keep discussions

going, we will be able to find those solutions very, very quickly. So, we just hope you can appreciate that and help us with our mission here so that we can keep the positive momentum going.