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Eco-tourism our best bet (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Government will ensure that tourism industry is managed on the concept of sustainable development in the light of the increasing demand for eco-tourism, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Emphasising the Government's support and commitment to accelerate the growth of the industry, the Prime Minister said the growing popularity of eco-tourism had made sustainable development imperative.

He said the demand for nature tourism had even motivated the United Nations to designate 2002 as the "International Year of Eco-Tourism".

"Many believe that eco-tourism is world's best hope to save our fragile eco-systems.

"By establishing a lucrative business which provides an opportunity for tourists to visit and see some of the most pristine places on earth... travel and tourism companies, with assistance from the Government, are helping to preserve part of mankind's natural environment."

Dr Mahathir said this when opening the 50th Pacific Asia Travel Association annual conference at Putra World Trade Centre.

Some 1,325 delegates and media representatives from 55 countries are attending the five-day event themed Proud Past - Promising Future.

He said the tourism industry had established itself as one of the three strategic national industries of the new millennium, together with information communication technology and environmental industries.

He said tourism was a value-added industry, adding that its value rate was estimated at more than 50 per cent.

As a source of foreign exchange earnings, the industry has done better compared to exports of automobiles and electronic goods. Its job-creating potential is also among the highest compared to other industries.

He said tourism was a clean and an environmentally-friendly industry.

In 1999, he said travel and tourism generated - directly and indirectly - internationally 11 per cent of gross domestic product, 200 million jobs and eight per cent of total employment.

He said the World Tourism Organisation had also projected that the number of tourists worldwide would increase to one billion by 2010 and 1.6 billion people by 2020.

Dr Mahathir said the rapid growth of tourism industry had contributed to the overall economic development of countries in the Asia Pacific region.

"Since those involved in tourism industry have clearly benefited, it is only proper and fitting to expect reciprocity from them - in terms of responsibilities and obligations vis-a-vis the host countries, natural environment and consumers of tourism services."

In this respect, Dr Mahathir said the Government had advised those intending to develop tourism projects to adopt a responsible attitude and be sensitive towards environmental conservation.

He said Malaysia had invested a lot of resources in building infrastructure for the tourism sector - a major foreign exchange earner, ranking second after manufacturing.

The Prime Minister said incentives to encourage the development of tourism had been incorporated into the Seventh and Eighth Malaysia Plans.

In 1999, he said, Malaysia registered a total of 7.93 million arrivals and earned US\$3.24 billion (RM12.3 billion) in receipts, the highest ever in the history of the industry.

He said the encouraging growth in 1999 continued in 2000, with Malaysia achieving a new record of 10.22 million tourist arrivals, ranking third in Asia Pacific after China and Hong Kong.

This enabled Malaysia to earn US\$4.95 billion in tourism receipts.

Dr Mahathir was glad to note that many of the issues regarding the rights and responsibilities of stakeholders in the tourism industry which he raised 15 years ago had been addressed in the 10 articles that made up the "Global Code of Ethics for Tourism", formulated recently by the organisation.

He said promoting equitable, responsible and sustainable world tourism in the context of an open and liberalised global economy should be the shared responsibility of all stakeholders in the industry.

"The benefits tourism brings to developing countries far outweigh the negative aspects of it," he said, adding that environmental protection and preservation of culture could be reconciled with economic development.

This could be done if the industry is managed on the basis of sustainable development.

"The preservation of indigenous people's way of life for the sake of tourism should not hinder their rights to a higher standard of living and modern conveniences."

He said tourism represented an important force for peace by fostering friendship between people and communities, thus should be managed in harmony with the attributes and traditions of the host communities, with due respect for their laws and customs.

On their part, Dr Mahathir said Governments in the host countries should ensure minimal regulations for visitors.

The Press should provide honest and balanced coverage of events and developments in host countries to give consumers accurate and reliable information.

The Prime Minister said co-operation and co-ordination, which are crucial for tourism development at the national level, should also be applied in tourism promotion at the regional and sub-regional levels.

"Since Malaysia is not parochial in its approach to tourism promotion, opting instead for a 'prosper thy neighbour' policy, it has participated actively and positively in various regional and sub-regional initiatives on tourism with a view to draw a greater flow of international tourist traffic to the region, and, of course, to Malaysia."