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Eco-spas: The Sustainability Agenda in the Spa Industry

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Introduction

As concerns about global warming, climate change and greenhouse gas emissions increase, businesses are actively looking for ways to manage their impact on the environment. Environmental issues are not a new topic in the leisure industries. Stipanuk (1996) notes that the leisure sector has been involved in environmentally friendly practices at least since the late 1920s, though sustainable management has become a key business imperative in the last three decades. Despite this increased attention towards sustainability, the term itself remains broad and ill-defined (Chawla and Ndung'u, 2014). Gardetti and Torres (2016) articulate sustainability as an open concept that continuously leads us to change our objectives and priorities. In this sense, sustainability has been viewed as a journey rather than the destination. Mowforth and Munt (2009) note that sustainability has long been associated with environmental concerns and natural resource management. This statement is reflective of the view that everything we need for our survival and wellbeing depends directly or indirectly on the natural environment. For others, sustainability encompasses the totality of the environment including both the economy and the people within the environment (Elkington, 1997). Sustainability seeks to improve human quality of life by reconciling environmental and ethical concerns with economic growth (United Nations Convention on Climate Change, 2009). In other words, the sustainability concept is underpinned by prudent management of natural resources, economic development and social progress.

The Climate Change Summit in Paris concluded in December 2015 and firmly established sustainability as a prime global concern. However, the indications that industries are building the concerns into their strategic planning is less evident. Porter *et al.* (2008) urge businesses to accept responsibility and suggest that they are in a position to make a substantially greater positive impact on social issues than most other institutions. Porter and Kramer's concept of shared value rests on the assertion that sustainable business practices themselves could be a source of added value and hence competitive advantage (2011). The new yardstick of a businesses' success is not measured by net worth, but by 'net good' (Global Wellness Summit, 2015). Sustainability therefore is increasingly being viewed as an opportunity rather than an obligation that must be fulfilled.

Sustainability in the spa industry

Spa services are an integral component of the tourism system and wellness is increasingly being paired with every travel category possible (Global Wellness Summit, 2015). The industry is witnessing strong growth due to greater interest in personal wellbeing. Wellness has long been framed as a lifestyle choice, though this image is changing in light of the cost of healthcare, chronic diseases and ageing (*ibid*). This image makeover is further likely to fuel the growth of the spa industry. The projected growth of the sector is positive news, though it also implies higher demand for non-renewable resources and greater impact on the economy and society. In many ways, the spa industry and sustainability share a unique relationship. Johnson and Redman (2008) suggest that people see spa as serving social purposes and improving quality of life, thereby contributing in its own way to sustainable living. At the same time, the sector depends on natural resources such as clean water, fresh air and uncontaminated soil as the 'spa experience' relies on these. Hence, preservation of the environment is very much in the interest of the industry. Cooper (2009) argues that the physical and social environment directly impact the spa industry. The physical environment can enhance a sense of isolation and peace. The social environment itself can be therapeutic. It can promote wellbeing through learning, de-stressing and social exchange, thereby providing greater sense of fulfilment. Therefore, it can be argued that personal wellness is dependent on the wellness of our planet and everything around us. McMichael (2005) suggests that human experience – that is, happiness, fulfilment, well-being and health – is the actual 'bottom-line of sustainability'. Hence, sustainability in many ways represents a 'back to roots' approach to the spa industry. It may therefore neither be possible, nor desirable to separate spa experience and sustainability.

In its early days, sustainability was adopted by the industry in response to increased pressure by stakeholders such as consumers, employees, governments

and communities. Now, the spa sector is strategic in approaching this issue, and sustainability is often embedded in the corporate goals of 21st century businesses. A simple online search reveals detailed sustainability policies of major players such as The Peninsula, Jiva by Taj and Canyon Ranch. Interestingly, independently operated properties such as Rancho Le Puerta (Mexico), Gayana Eco Resort (Malaysia) and The Scarlet (Cornwall, UK) are equally enthusiastic about sustainability. Many other spa businesses have gone a step further and branded themselves as 'eco-spa'. Eco-spa as a business concept is built on the principles of sustainability.

Eco-spas: Living the triple bottom line of sustainability

John Elkington (1997) is widely credited for presenting a holistic view of the sustainability agenda through the triple bottom line (TBL) framework. There are many ways of understanding TBL. It can be seen as an accounting or reporting framework that challenges the popular view that the impacts of an organisation should only be measured on the financial bottom-line (profits). As per TBL, the impact assessment must include social (people) and environmental (planet) bottom lines as well. At a broader level, TBL refers to the entire set of values and processes that organisations must address not only to minimise potential harm, but also to create social, economic and environmental value. TBL advocates a balanced approach (Elkington, 1997; Franknel, 1998), and stresses that true sustainability can only be achieved when profits are made with the purpose of social progress, and without harming the environment. It is easy to conceive of TBL as a sound business philosophy. Figure 4.1 depicts the TBL concept.

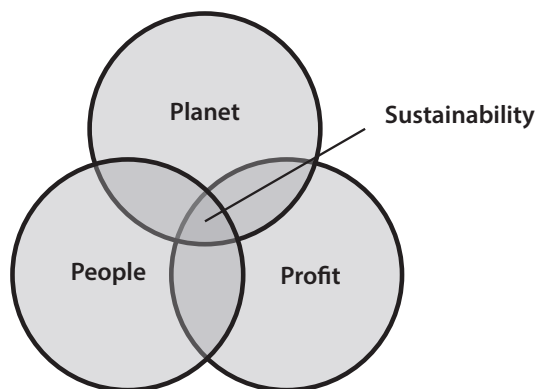


Figure 4.1: The triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997).

There is, as yet, no universally accepted definition of eco-spa. The term eco-spa is often used interchangeably with green spa, sustainable spa or socially responsible spa (Burkholder, 2007), the basic principle being the need for balance