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Re-Inventing the Silk Road:

Wheels for Peace and Sustainable Tourism in the Region

The Silk Roads – linking an area of rich ethnic diversity, dramatic landscapes, and a cultural heritage of colourful traditions and awesome architectural highlights – is it an easily marketable tourism product? Apparently not. And as usual, if things are getting complex, people sometimes escape to the term “re-invent”. Start from scratch. – Re-inventing the Great Silk Road?

Such a project would have all the ingredients of a lifetime-mission: 27 countries that include regions of seemingly impenetrable deserts and insurmountable mountain passes, extreme climate zones, and a multitude of varied peoples with an overwhelming hospitality. Peoples – and people who are often separated by borders, arbitrarily drawn, hard to control, yet painstakingly supervised. Artificial obstacles to free-wheeling travel, on the grounds of or under the pretext of safety and security. Cultural heritage on display, within a culture of suspicion rather than openness. Whether or not this is true, it is the general perception. Is there a way out? Can the Silk Roads be re-invented?

The notorious Great Game of the 19th and early 20th centuries saw a competition of both political intervention and archaeological exploration. Amazing personalities brought about most of those thrilling tales of adventure, secret, vision and wisdom. They filled uncountable books and kept readers out of breath for decades. They told the history of the Silk Roads and Central Asian exploration, including unbelievable tales about the destinies of outstanding European and Asian players. Players of the ‘Great Game’, who wove the fabric storytelling lives from.

The Cold War provided the venue of another Great Game. Silk Road countries were largely off limits. Travel and Tourism played a secondary role in Central Asia, though started to be key elsewhere. After all, travelling freely between East and West was included in the prime demands that eventually lead to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

An authentic network, revitalized since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Silk Roads reveal an early example of globalization, with all its ups and downs, as traders, philosophers, missionaries, envoys took off to either direction, powerful armies fought their battles, and a network of spies kept an eye on

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the area and on one another. Regimes of openness often gave way to regimes of suspicion, and isolation was never splendid.

Nowadays, a healthy step-by-step approach to regional development will be the rewarding option to either resignation or wishful thinking. Energy is the source of life, but fossil energy is dwindling rapidly, nothing to say about accumulated accidents and their impact on climate change. In future, energy and water shortage could figure among most of the reasons to go to war – a gloomy perspective for countries, which to a great degree share the benefits of a sunny weather. Renewable Energy could provide a solution.

The sun has always been the ‘face’ of Tourism, as it is the face of Renewable Energy. With the decline of fossil and nuclear energy, a *‘Solar Age’ is emerging*. In times of climate change and environmental degradation, Renewable Energy is an economic and ethical must. Tourism may seize the opportunity to become its effective ‘viral vehicle’ worldwide.

Renewable Energy in many countries has already been an environmental issue for long, widely discussed and used in scattered so-called ‘pockets’. Having always been part of a long list of requirements for sustainability, even before ‘Fukushima’, Renewable Energy has gained momentum, for sure, but has never been treated as elementary to Sustainable Tourism – not even today. Due to the impact of energy on life, however, Renewable Energy is key to sustainability and therefore poised to a close partnership with Sustainable Tourism. And this approach should become a core issue of master plans accordingly, rather than leaving alone Renewable Energy pioneers in their dispersed ‘pockets’.

Everybody expects that hotel heating, cooling, or illumination are constantly available. However, in rural areas of many developing countries, access to both electrical power and electronic communication is insufficient or non-existing. The mission is ‘to tap the sun’. The great vision is that “everyone can be an unlimited clean energy producer”.

Hence, today, another pageant of travellers’ thrills may evolve: Opening minds, hearts, and borders, Sustainable or Responsible Tourism and Renewable Energy may act like complementary allies, in a joint and innovative venture of playing the *‘Greater Game’* of linking economy with ecology across life-styles as varied as the Silk Roads themselves.

Decentralized, subsidiary, ecological, and autonomous, *Renewable Energy* should be *prioritised as a structural element of Sustainable or Responsible Tourism*, since energy stands at the beginning of everything. In fact, Renewable Energy is not only ‘natural’, it is inherently ‘ethical’. Renewable Energy should become the ‘DNA’ of Sustainable Tourism.

The subject focuses on the idea of cross-promoting Sustainable or Responsible Tourism and Renewable Energy along the Great Silk Road, in order to make it a *‘World Highway of Renewables’*. The peaceful exchange of goods and ideas has always been invoked as a key-feature of the Great Silk Road. Since both Tourism and Renewable Energy claim to be the world’s leading peace industries, the world’s most evocative ancient trade route could provide the evidence of their complementary impact.

Today, there are new opportunities to make the Silk Roads shine as an intertwined network of cultural and natural heritage.

Tourism and Renewable Energy jointly could be the pioneering champions to prioritise the use of Renewable Energy for developing integrated Travel & Tourism clusters, including hotels, caravanserais, shops and electrical transport.

Tourism and Renewable Energy jointly could become the catalyst of a new cultural awareness, to ‘energize’ a trend towards authenticity, through upgrading cultural heritage and restoring or rebuilding

former caravanserais. Look at the extraordinary benchmarks in Spain and Portugal: Ancient castles and fortresses have been changed into *paradores* and *pousadas* – stately accommodation facilities which have preserved the legendary flair of times gone by.

Now, it is time to think it over, and so let's switch to a little Silk Road brainstorming:

Isn't it imaginable the Great Silk Road to become the venue of a Renewable Energy '*chain of innovative oases*'?

Let's energize 'the renewable way' our caravanserais and cultural or natural heritage sights!

Lets go tracking down the routes of legendary explorers through linking road adventure with electric mobility!

Electric mobility along the Silk Roads – couldn't it make the UNWTO Silk Road symbol a ubiquitous, storytelling brand of a new challenging and peaceful '*Greater Game*'?

Why not going 'renewable' through planting trees? One tree per night a visitor spends in a caravanserai, ten trees per solar panel installed, to further 'greening the Silk Roads'!

Would it not be worth initializing Silk Road-related theme-blogs, creative circles and promotion campaigns for something like the '*Silk Road Solar Way of energizing Responsible Tourism*'? –

Wouldn't it be worth enthusing children about past adventures, through both cyber-games at home and workshops at school, so as to prepare them for the Silk Roads' reality adventure some day, as they grow up?

Covering two continents and over two dozen countries, the Silk Roads will re-emerge as a travel network of understanding and peaceful coexistence, with Renewable Energy as its catalyst, solidarity as its guideline, and the New, *Greater Game* of Responsible Tourism as its activity.

How about an idea like this?

'The Regional Initiative – TRI' provides an added value, which is really compelling. It makes up for "TRI's TRicycle", including:

- **T**, like **Tourism, Sustainable and Responsible**
- **+ R**, like **Renewable Energy**
- **Makes the I**, like the '**Inexhaustible Silk Road Adventure**'

Re-inventing the Great Silk Road! Let's make this vision our cause. Let's promote a culture of openness instead of suspicion. Let's remove artificial obstacles! Let's make Silk Road Tourism – renewable! Let's public and private key-stakeholders join in – and, together with 'The Regional Initiative – TRI' be our driving wheels for an intriguing adventure – the *Greater Game* of building up Responsible Tourism through Renewable Energy in the Region.