Environmental campaigners have got it wrong – the industry may have some concerns about the environment but most customers are simply looking for the cheapest deal, says NOEL JOSEPHIDES, managing director of Sunvil Holidays and deputy chairman of AITO

**Ethics don’t interest clients**

THE ENVIRONMENT is suddenly back on the agenda after years of not being necessarily.

So what has changed?

Well basically, Tony Blair is attending the Rio+10 conference in South Africa later this year and needs to say what different nations of US business are doing in the field of environmental protection.

This is the year of the environment and the government is looking to us to say what we’re going to do.

So the Sustainable Tourism Initiative (STI) has been set up to lay down the ground rules.

It has been wrongly reported that AITO, the Federation of Tour Operators and AITO had opened with Tourism Concern, the Worldwide Fund for Nature and Earthlife.

These non-governmental organisations have contributed to the STI but, ultimately, it is the travel industry which will decide what form any environmental initiative will take.

Those of us who feel the need to improve the industry’s environmental performance have been working on it for a long time. I have been attending meetings with people such as Hilary Robinson from Thomson for years, and what AITO is doing now was conceived before we knew the name of the initiative intended to give a progress report in South Africa in September.

Certainly, AITO’s increased interest in environmental excellence has been a year in the making.

But if we can use this year as a catalyst to bring all the threads together then all the better.

I must put a few things in your though. Developing countries have absolutely no interest in supporting a host country’s economy, protecting local culture or acting responsibly while on holiday.

Sunvil generally carries middle-upper-class passengers and, when we used to ask whether our environmental initiative encouraged them to book with us, only eight per cent said yes.

The Beachlife Buildings were awarded the most environmental hotel award in 2002, but that six per cent of our clients are interested in finding out from agents about how they could support a host country’s economy is laughable.

What if you have not been asked about environmental issues by a customer? And how many of you were told by travel agents who were dispatched around agencies last month to ask what your view of environmental issues?

With the exception of a handful of niche players, environmental awareness among operators does not result from pressure from clients but from our wish to reassure them.

Customers simply want a memorable holiday at a five-star hotel on an unspoilt beach, and they do not care how this is achieved.

I almost forgot – they also want it cheap so, make no mistake, I am not going to hell with who or what is expected to get the price down.

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