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Cyprus tourism eyes options as climate warms

Wed Sep 30, 2009 2:49pm EDT

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1 of 1 [Full Size](#)

NICOSIA (Reuters Life!) - Sun and sea tourism to the Mediterranean could feel the brunt of climate change and the industry should start diversifying if it is to survive, say scientists.

The Mediterranean basin attracts about 20 percent of the world's tourists each year, but its appeal as a sunny holiday destination may diminish as temperatures inch higher.

"Climate change is going to affect this region in a relatively strong way, and differently than northern Europe," said Jos Lelieveld, a professor in atmospheric sciences at the Energy, Environment and Water Research Center at the non-profit Cyprus Institute.

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Cyprus has a tourism intake of more than two million each year, attracted by its almost year-round sunshine and stunning beaches. The sector represents about 11 percent of its economy. But its key selling point, the sun, could be a malady if forecasts on changing weather patterns prove to be correct.

"For the tourist sector the summer seasons may become less attractive," said Lelieveld, who is also a director at the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry in Germany.

"However other seasons may gain attractiveness, and that is something the tourism industry should consider .. and consider the products they are offering," he told Reuters.

Industry stakeholders and scientists have launched a dialogue on how the tourism sector fits in to the changing weather landscape. That could include shifting marketing focus into niche markets like cultural and religious tourism.

Research by the Cyprus Institute has shown the average temperature in the Mediterranean and Middle East region rising by one degree Celsius in the past twenty years. It is forecast that temperatures will go up by an additional four degrees until the end of this century. Rain will fall by 20 and 40 percent.

The data applied both for Cyprus and the wider Mediterranean and Middle East, Lelieveld said.

While temperature increases may be perceived as a welcome respite for populations in northern Europe shivering most of the year, temperatures exceeding 40 degrees in already warm countries could be excessive, said Lelieveld.

"There is a lot of tourism in Egypt, but people avoid it in the summer because it is too hot," he said.

Titina Loizidou, head of the Cypriot Women in Tourism Association, said feedback and dialogue with scientists was important for the industry to prepare for the inevitable.

"We will have to diversify into different seasons, and different products," she said. "We need to utilize the scientific work and make sure it reaches the public, and decision makers in the industry, she said.

(Reporting by Michele Kamhas. Editing by Paul Casciato)

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