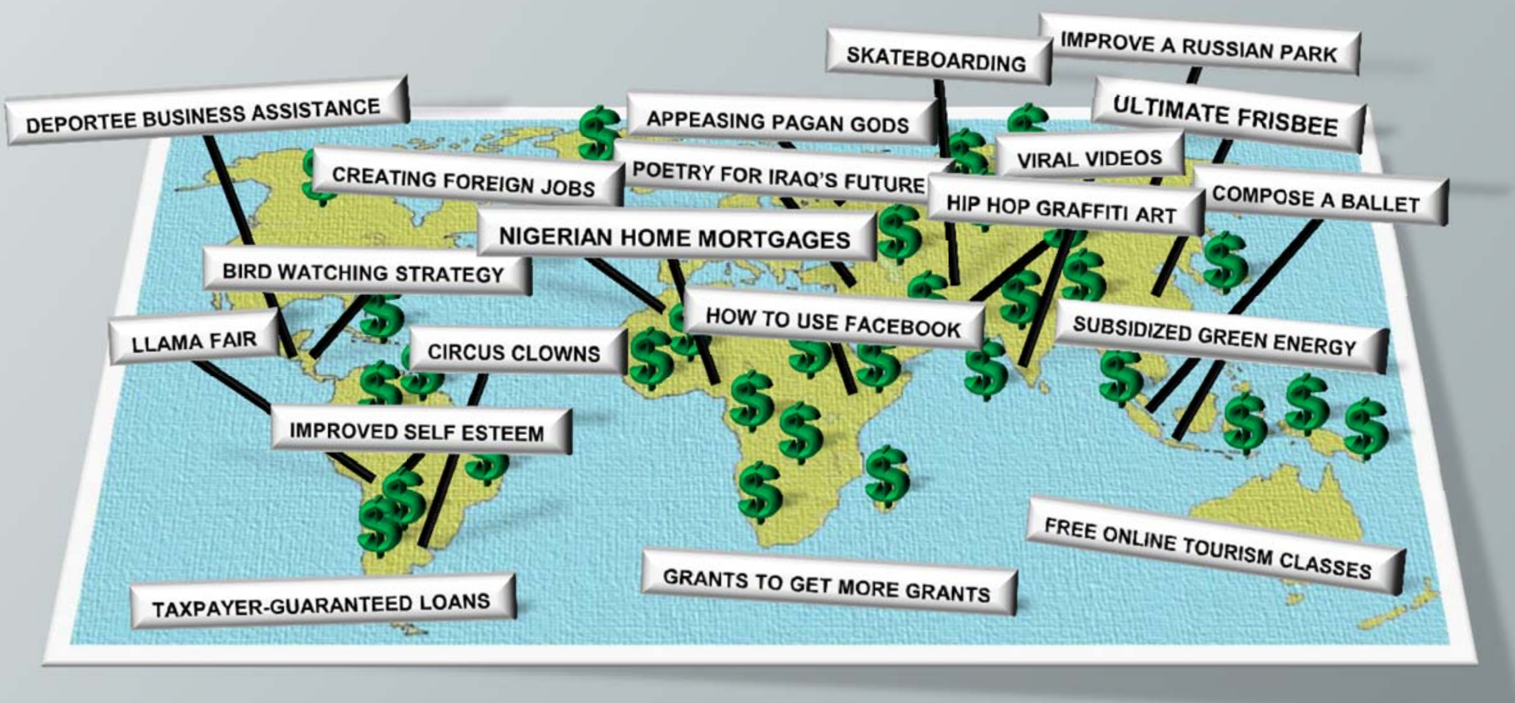
WORLDWIDE WA$TE

HOW THE GOVERNMENT IS USING AND LOSING YOUR MONEY ABROAD

PART VI: FOREIGN TOURISM PROMOTION



An Oversight Report Series by

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"From the American People"

The American people have never wavered in their support for those in need, both at home and abroad. Americans privately gave $373 billion of their own money to charities in the 2015 tax year[1]—more than the total government expenditures of South Korea,[2] Sweden,[3] or Mexico,[4] respectively. These private donations include more than $15 billion[5] for international organizations that respond to disasters or promote development, not to mention countless volunteer hours from Americans around the world. Importantly, though, these efforts must be built on a foundation of accountability—no one would likely support a cause without clear direction, give to an organization that burns money on overhead costs, or like to watch their money wasted. Transparent data helps inform people on the uses of their money and the results of their work. Yet when it comes to the government, the necessary accountability remains lacking. Tax dollars are collected from Americans and sent abroad to advance causes that might sound good to a few government employees in Washington, D.C., but may not enjoy the support of the taxpayers compelled to provide the funds.

The government's overseas presence has grown vast and increasingly unmanageable. Attempts at transparency can be overwhelmed by the tax dollars put towards the government's foreign assistance programs ($48 billion in 2015 alone[6]), a number that has made oversight unapproachable for the many Americans that do not have the time on their hands to sift through reams of grant data or hundreds of thousands of complex government grants and transactions. The importance of foreign assistance accountability has also been hampered by leaders who try to downplay the size of the government's foreign assistance apparatus. This dismissal tactic portrays valid concerns with foreign assistance as somehow overplayed because foreign assistance only takes up "...about one percent of our entire federal budget," as President Obama has argued.[7]

Only in Washington could $48 billion be dismissed as an inconsequentially small number. That amount represents the average tax liability of 6.6 million Americans[8]—about one-and-a-half times the population of Kentucky.

As a result of these dynamics, taxpayers have lost billions to waste overseas. American taxpayers see their priorities and needs neglected at home while their tax dollars fund solutions to some of the same problems abroad. **By its end, this series will identify over $3 billion in wasteful spending** throughout these programs abroad. Yet this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to foreign assistance.

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The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) uses the slogan "From the American People." While the meaning behind the slogan is technically true—the programs are paid for with taxpayer dollars—the all-too-frequent reality has been that the benefits are more from the American government than its people, with too great of a disconnect between the labyrinth of government assistance programs and the taxpayers that provide the funds. But this series is intended to close that gap—to bring further exposure to the waste within our foreign assistance spending; to equip the American taxpayer with examples of how their money is being used; to offer possible solutions; and, perhaps most importantly, to narrow the accountability gap between the American taxpayer and their representatives who have searched frantically for excuses to protect the status quo when it comes to government spending abroad.

* * *

Please Visit Everywhere: Foreign Tourism Promotion

TAXPAYER FUN FACT

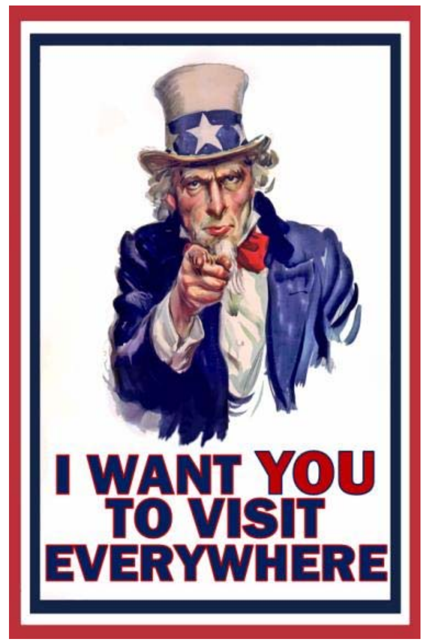
American tax dollars have funded programs to boost tourism to at least 42 countries since 2013—not including worldwide programs.

Analysis of agency spending data via usaspending.gov

For the U.S. government agency looking to promote economic development in a developing country, quick tourism dollars are a frequent choice. After all, the thinking goes, tourist money is direct; it gets spent immediately without as many bureaucratic delays or overhead costs on the administration side; money spent by tourists represents funding from a private source and not a government; tourists will likely visit desirable destinations consistently over the long-term; and tourist dollars will not get bogged down like other economic assistance by fundamental questions about economic conditions or the business climate in a country. So, if the goal is to promote economic development without the pitfalls, then promoting tourism would seem to be the answer—and, as this section demonstrates, it has very much become the answer in the thinking of Washington, D.C.

The problem comes when promoting tourism becomes too commonplace. Taxpayer-backed projects for tourism in one country are cancelled out by taxpayer-backed projects for tourism in another country. If too many countries have American taxpayers funding some form of tourism promotion, then would-be tourists are being told, effectively, to visit everywhere. But because they can't visit everywhere, it means that taxpayers are likely not getting a very good return on the considerable global expense they have paid to promote foreign tourism. It also means the United States is basically competing for tourists against itself and its own effort to promote the United States as a tourist destination.[9]

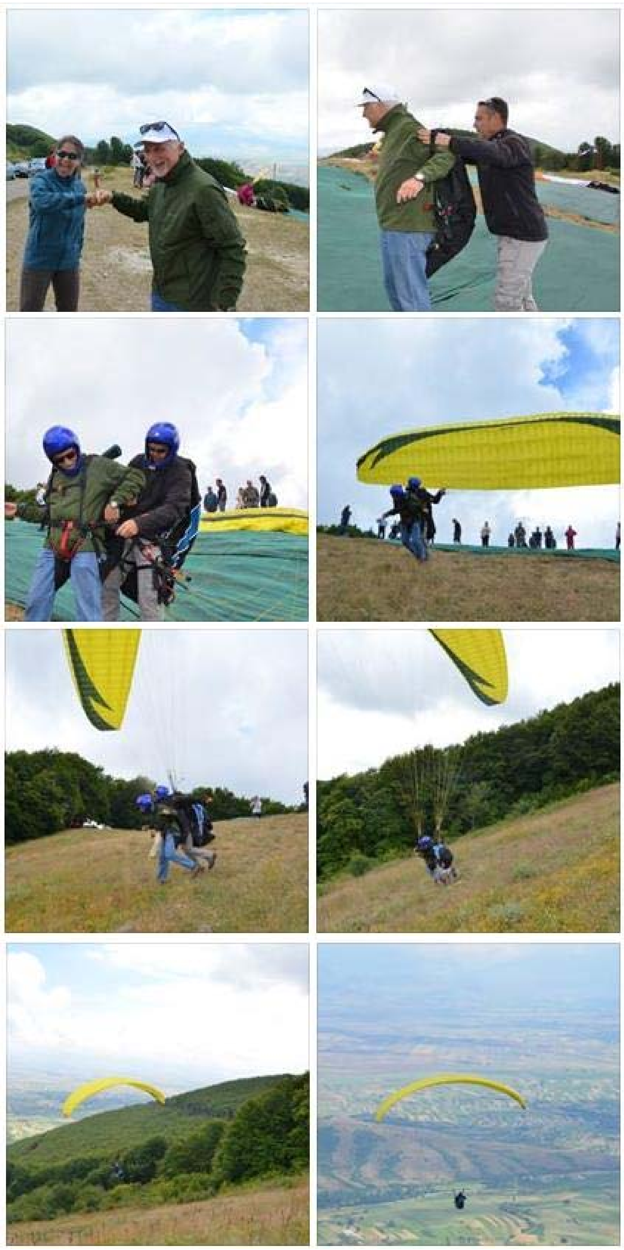
American taxpayers deserve better prioritization than these scattershot programs. There are countless American businesses that are sensitive to the loss or gain of tourism-based revenue. In Kentucky, that might include destinations like the Bourbon Trail or Paducah's UNESCO-recognized quilting and textiles (and the list doesn't end there). The American taxpayers whose jobs are supported by tourism should not have to watch as their tax dollars are given to their foreign competition.



YEARS OF EFFORT TO MAKE MACEDONIA AN ADVENTURE TOURISM HOT-SPOT	
USAID SMALL BUSINESS EXPANSION	$5,000,000[10]
COMPETITIVENESS ACTIVITY	$11,600,000[11]

A small business assistance program in Macedonia, funded by USAID at an anticipated lifetime cost of $5 million,[12] included many tourism initiatives, most notably a USAID project to promote Macedonia as an adventure travel destination. The effort seeks to help Macedonia "...capture a bigger share of this expanding market"[13] and to "...public[ize] its [tourist] offerings abroad and in the international media."[14] To drive the point home, members of USAID's Macedonia mission—including the Mission

Director—took to the skies for several paragliding tandem flights to promote the taxpayer-funded installation of a new weather station at a paragliding take-off site.[15]



Photos of the USAID paragliding adventure in Macedonia (facebook.com/USAIDMacedonia)

The Adventure Tourism project also helped build bike trails[16] and launched the Macedonia Adventure Travel blog (which can be found at http://macedoniaadventuretravel.com). The "About" tab indicates that the USAID Small Business Expansion Project is the author of the Adventure Travel blog and, while the blog remains active and accessible as of February 13, 2017, it does not appear to have been updated with fresh content in two years (since October 7, 2014).

This past May, the taxpayer-funded program helped facilitate—and even procured a Professional Conference Organizer for—the *AdventureNEXT Balkans* conference in Ohrid, Macedonia.[17] The conference was an opportunity to showcase the adventures available to tourists in Macedonia and other Balkan nations, with Day of Adventure break-out sessions that included caving, hiking, biking, diving, archeology, photography, a treasure hunt, and (of course) more paragliding.[18]

It is all the more troubling for taxpayers that this U.S. policy of establishing adventure tourism in Macedonia is more than a decade old. Going back to at least the spring of 2003, the $11.6 million USAID-funded Macedonia Competitiveness Activity program (2002-2006) provided tourism support in Macedonia.[19] According to the final project report, a group of tourism industry leaders, assisted by the project, developed a tourism strategy to "...attract healthy, wealthy, experienced tourists to 'off-the-beaten-track' experiences by integrating basic assets (mountains, lakes, culture, history) into a unique story lived by the visitor."[20] Thirteen years later, American taxpayers are still paying to attract healthy, wealthy, adventure-seeking tourists to Macedonia.

The Hotel Inex Gorica in historic Ohrid, Macedonia, the host venue for taxpayer-organized "AdventureNEXT Balkans" Conference

TEACHING HOSPITALITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA SKILLS TO TURKMENISTAN'S YOUTH

USAID GRANT **$450,000**[21]

While the U.S. government may not always be known for its own hospitality, USAID nonetheless funded a program to equip young people in Turkmenistan with skills that they can use in the hospitality sector.

A USAID press release describes the training course as providing training on tourism and cultural heritage, marketing, social media, and the latest trends in the field.[22] As with so many tourism projects, though, this 2015 program is not the first iteration of the program. In 2012 and 2013, USAID partnered with Chevron Nebitgaz B.V.-Turkmenistan to host a series of *Tourism and Hospitality* workshops on hotel economics and management.[23 24]

Once again, taxpayers are left to wonder why their dollars are spent overseas on things like social media training for foreign populations when that money could have been left in American communities or in the pockets of taxpayers.

A student receives a certificate from the International Standards in Hospitality and the Hotel Industry training course in 2012 (Facebook USAID Turkmenistan)

SUPPORTING ECOTOURISM AT LAKE BAIKAL IN RUSSIA	
U.S. FOREST SERVICE	**$177,300**[25]

Not to be outdone by the more widely-known foreign assistance agencies, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's U.S. Forest Service (USFS) put forward its own effort at mixing tourism support into an overseas project. Many Americans may think of the USFS as an exclusively domestic agency maintaining national forests and grasslands, but that is not the case. USFS actually supports various projects around the world, and in other instances operates in cooperation with other agencies such as USAID. Yet at a time when USFS cites budget challenges and the cost of fighting wildfires here in the United States,[26] they have steadily provided *Lake Baikal eco-tourism and education* grants as part of an effort to help sustain Russia's Lake Baikal since 2013.[27]

In fact, **USFS reported a maintenance backlog of $5.1 billion in 2014**[28] while funding programs like this to help forests and parks in other countries. This is horrible prioritization, to say the least.

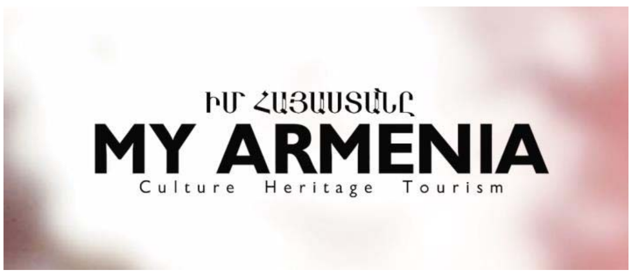
During the duration of the USFS' work with the Lake Baikal Heritage Foundation and the Great Baikal Trail Association, American taxpayers have played a role in "capacity building in the areas of trails building and maintenance and nature interpretation programs."[29] This has included training for park officials, nature guides, and others, as well as providing "engaging and motivational interpretive messages for park visitors."[30]

It is time to reassess whether USFS' international operations are truly necessary; whether the costs are justified given domestic needs like billions in deferred maintenance for America's forests and additional costs for fighting wildfires here at home. Taxpayers should ask whether "...improving the visitor experience"[31] to a Russian park deserves to be anywhere near the top of the priority list for USFS right now.

LONG-TERM SUPPORT TO IMPROVE TOURISM TO ARMENIA	
USAID BRIDGES PROGRAM GRANT	**$176,804**[32]
USAID GRANT TO SMITHSONIAN	**$5,000,000**[33]
USAID ARMENIA BRANDING	**$254,850**[34]

The U.S. has supported the Armenian tourism sector since the early 2000s.[35] Given such extended support, it would be reasonable for taxpayers to expect significant results by now. But measuring the effectiveness of scattered tourism promotion programs collectively is not simple and the data not immediately available. Over that period of time, the U.S. has tried to develop a national brand for Armenia, set up a tourist trail, coordinated with cross-border tourist operators in the Turkey border regions, and even brought Armenia's cultural history to the Smithsonian.

According to USAID, the *BRIDGES* program established a network of Turkish and Armenian tour operators to create cross-border tourism packages and to promote the region as a tourism destination.[36] It was preceded by USAID support for the Armenian component of the Black Sea Silk Road, a tourism project to create a tourism trail including Greece, Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey.[37] This was at the same time as USAID funded a project implemented by the Smithsonian Institution kicked-off to "support traditional arts, crafts and music in the country and lead to greater benefits for rural communities in Armenia..."[38] at a cost of more than $5 million.[39] In February of 2014, USAID also announced a $255,000 partnership to develop a "country brand" for Armenia.[40]



The collaboration between USAID and the Smithsonian produced the "My Armenia" campaign with video (above) to promote cultural tourism (USAID)

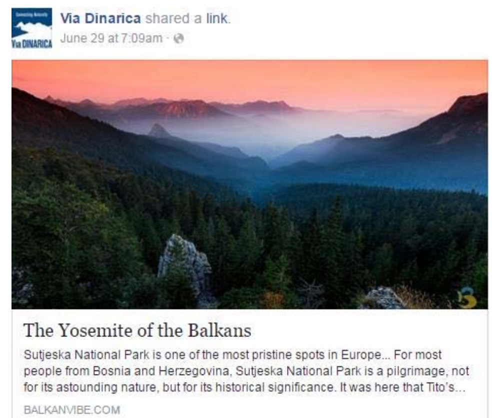
PROMOTING HIKING TRAILS IN BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

USAID/UNDP WALKING THE VIA DINARICA **$984,250**[41]

Macedonia is not the only country in the Balkans that American taxpayers are making a destination for adventure tourists. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, USAID has partnered with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to bring tourists to the region to take advantage of not only the "...world-class hiking, cycling, skiing, fly-fishing, kayaking, rafting, caving, and... lifestyle and cuisine" but also the beauty of the Via Dinarica.[42]

The Via Dinarica is, according to the project's website (http://www.viadinarica.com), a mega trail that extends from Albania to Slovenia. In 2013, USAID and UNDP partnered for a $60,000 pilot project—*Walking the Via Dinarica*—to carry out a "[p]rolonged, high profile marketing and promotions campaign of the Via Dinarica concept to the international and regional audience."[43] The program promoted the destination by hiring a mountaineer and photographer to make "the largest collection of photos and videos that promote this entire region and its local, regional and international touristic offer."[44]

Deeming the pilot program a success—USAID references the Via Dinarica being named 2014's "best new trail" by *Outside Magazine*[45]—the project has expanded to include charting trails, improved tourist infrastructure, and stronger promotion to both domestic and international audiences.[46]



(Via Dinarica Facebook)

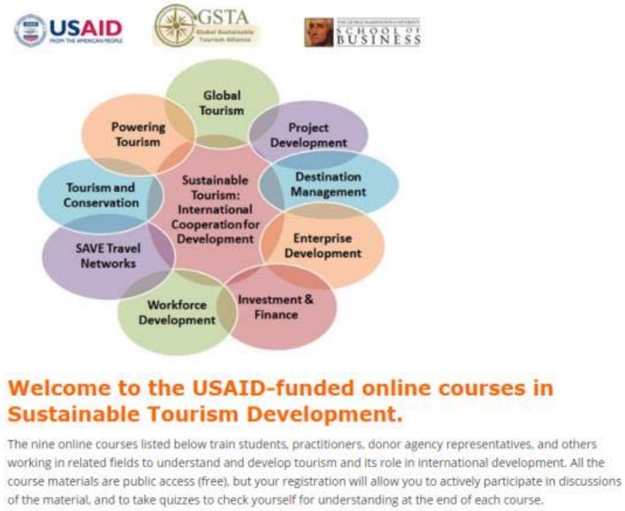
American taxpayers may wonder what benefit they receive from telling hikers to visit Bosnia or promoting its trails as the "Yosemite of the Balkans." It is a concern magnified by the fact that America's own trails suffer from a significant maintenance backlog (a 2013 GAO report put the figure at **$314 million**[47]). In addition, UNDP had already received well over $200 million from American taxpayers in 2015.[48] So projects like these touted as partnerships by taxpayer-funded U.S. government agencies are hardly partnerships as far as taxpayers are concerned—they carry the cost on both ends.

USAID PRESENTS: FREE ONLINE COURSES ON SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

USAID GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ALLIANCE **$950,000**[49]

USAID has devoted at least $950,000 to the Global Sustainable Tourism Alliance (GSTA), a partnership program to "...apply a holistic and market-driven approach to sustainable tourism development."[50] Partners in GSTA are "jointly designing, co-financing, and implementing tourism activities..." to promote project goals, such as optimal use of environmental resources; fair distribution of socio-economic benefits; and investment in sustainable tourism products.[51]

To carry out these goals, one component of the project is the Sustainable Tourism Online Learning Program, a set of nine courses to "...help better understand how tourism can be developed sustainably."[52] The courses are free to take—at least, as long as one ignores the fact that they have already been paid for by American taxpayers.



(USAID Online Learning Management System)

SIGNIFICANT ASSISTANCE TO JORDAN'S TOURISM SECTOR	
USAID TOURISM ASSISTANCE	**$62,000,000**[53]
B.E.S.T. PROGRAM	**$36,000,000**[54]

Jordan has been and remains a friend in a region where the United States has few. Amidst regional instability, a flood of refugees, a civil war in Syria and the threat of ISIS terrorists across its border, Jordan has been pledged at least $1.275 billion in bilateral assistance from the United States in 2016.[55] Yet despite the many security demands in the region and their escalating costs to American taxpayers, the United States also remains a steadfast supporter of Jordan's tourism sector.

Since 2005, USAID has poured tens of millions of taxpayer dollars into efforts including improved management at the Wadi Rum Nature Reserve; hygienic food-handling instruction; improved customer service at tourism establishments; developing "...parades [and] festivals"; tourism promotion and marketing; and streamlining diploma programs in tourism and hospitality.[56]

Jordanian students were also awarded taxpayer-funded scholarships to study hospitality at the Jordan Hotel School.[57] The National Tourism Awareness Painting Competition was started to help students learn about the impact of tourism on their country's economy.[58] American taxpayers funded a public awareness campaign to distribute 10,000 flyers and brochures throughout Jordan making Jordanians more aware of the role of tourism in their economy.[59] [60] A marketing campaign targeted Virtuoso travel agents to emphasize the luxury travel potential of Jordan.[61] The Jordan Trail will be sustained by a USAID grant to make Jordan an adventure tourism destination for hikers[62] (as USAID apparently believes the world has too few adventure tourism destinations).

Despite these efforts over the past decade, tourism in Jordan is hitting hard times as threats to security in the region undermine tourist confidence. The U.S. State Department's own travel advice for U.S. citizens notes (among other things) that the U.S. Embassy in Amman had to be closed for ten days in 2013 due to threats, that ISIS and al-Nusra pose a threat, and that the "potential for terrorist activity was heightened as Jordan took an active role in the coalition against [ISIS]."[63]


Entries in the National Tourism Awareness Painting Competition (USAID-Siyaha)

American taxpayers might wonder if now is the time to put precious resources toward tourism to Jordan, given that any "strategic communication" marketing campaign would face significant resistance from tourists anxious about the security situation. With the defeat of ISIS a high priority for both the U.S. and Jordan, would money be better used toward that end? Or simply saved for the taxpayers? Instead, taxpayers are ponying up more and more money to plug the leak in Jordan's sinking tourism—in fact, USAID has only recently started the *Building Economic Stability Through Tourism* (BEST) program, a new commitment of $36 million over five years to support Jordan's tourism sector.[64]

HELPING KYRGYZSTAN BECOME A TOURIST DESTINATION

USAID BUSINESS GROWTH INITIATIVE **$6,598,646**[65]

In looking at the world of USAID economic development initiatives, a clear pattern emerges that many are rooted in tourism or have the goal to promote tourism. The Business Growth Initiative (BGI) in Kyrgyzstan is no different.

The BGI provides assistance across Kyrgyzstan's economy, but includes taxpayer-funded efforts to "improve riverfront property, organize and promote cultural festivals" and to "[i]mprove signage, sanitation, [and] experiences for visitors to [a] 9th century religious monument."[66] Of course, no tourism initiative of USAID would be complete without some form of adventure tourism. Just like seemingly every other country with an outdoors, Kyrgyzstan's mountains and rivers present opportunities for USAID to tout adventure tourism, and they represent a key element of the tourism marketing funded by American taxpayers.[67]

The Burana consortium, under the leadership of CSR Central Asia, plans to improve the tourist experience at this ancient monument in Chui oblast.

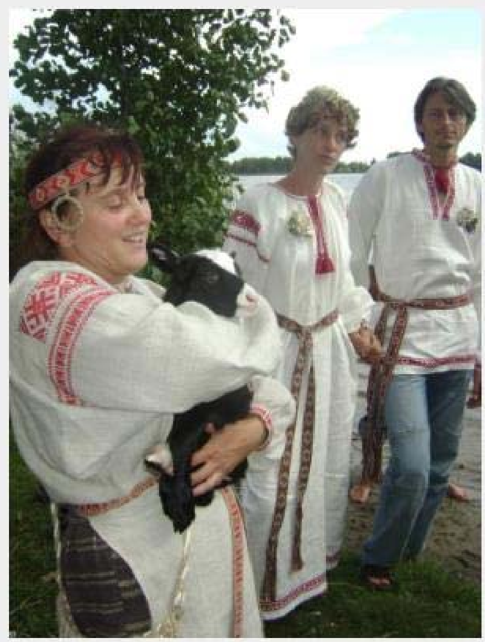
(USAID BGI Newsletter)

USAID APPEASES A PAGAN HARVEST GOD IN THE NAME OF AGROECOTOURISM

USAID / UNDP LEED **$1,946,000**[68]

As USAID moves into more expansive tourism promotion, it has also in some instances pushed the boundaries of comprehensible tourism branding. In Belarus, this effort did not stop at simply tourism. In that country, USAID has pushed not just for tourism, and not just for *eco*-tourism, but for *agro-eco*tourism.[69] At this rate, tourism projects may one day combine other government-driven, possibly-invented concepts to become *sustainable-green-agro-eco-adventure* tourism.

Nevertheless, U.S. taxpayers are almost $2 million deep in helping attract the doubtlessly lucrative agroecotourist segment to Belarus to enjoy the many natural wonders it offers as part of an economic development program. USAID has also funded programs to assist first-time bed and breakfast (B&B) owners and to develop what has been termed a "greenways" approach to develop land along tourist routes.



Volha Makhanenka, a coordinator of a regional greenway, is engaging tourists into the Harvest Granddad rite that seeks to appease the field and the harvest god.

Picture taken from a page hosted at USAID.gov, promoting rural agro-eco tourism in Belarus. USAID chose to depict tourist participation in rituals to a harvest god at a bed and breakfast supported with U.S. taxpayer funds.

One B&B that took advantage of the greenways plan was featured on a USAID Belarus page, on which the owner thanked USAID for the assistance her business received and for the pleasure of hosting tourists from the U.S. and Europe.[70] Oddly, though, USAID made the decision to include a picture of the same B&B owner leading tourists in a rite to appease a field and harvest god on the same web page. To be clear, this was not posted on social media, but hosted on a **.gov** government domain site.

One would think that promoting pagan ceremonies that give the appearance of goat sacrifice would be high on the list of things not to put on a government website, but it apparently did not make the list. Taxpayers, then, should take this opportunity to remind agencies like USAID that they are wasting precious tax dollars on trendy tourism amalgamations like this *sustainable-green-eco-pagan* tourism initiative.

TOURISM SUPPORT TO EGYPT

USAID LUXOR PROJECT **$4,422,262**[71]

American taxpayers devoted millions to creating jobs in Egypt through projects to preserve Egyptian tourist destinations via USAID's Cultural Resource Management program in Luxor, Egypt. Primarily a job creation program, some of the tourism objectives (according to the USAID final project report[72]) included improving access to tomb sites in Qurna, increasing the capacity of conservators to document archaeological site excavations and conservation techniques, and training local photographers in techniques to document archaeological sites. In the end, taxpayers ended up employing hundreds of Egyptian temporary workers, and even replaced the air conditioner at the Visitors Center of the Karnak Temple.[73]

PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN ALBANIA

USAID TOURISM AS A LEADING EDGE **$6,000,000**[74]

The concerted effort to promote everywhere as a prime destination for tourists continues today, as USAID is currently seeking applications for multiple awards to help Albania's economy through the *Tourism as a Leading Edge* program. Among the priorities for the program awards, according to grant documents, are strengthening agro-tourism; planning for sustainable tourism; and increasing Albania's tourism potential through infrastructure improvements and reform.[75] While the program will be split up among six-figure awards, the total U.S. taxpayer contribution toward the program effort could go up to $6 million, subject to future appropriation.[76] With the money still pending for future years, there is still time for taxpayers to salvage several million dollars that might otherwise go toward agro-tourism in Albania.

For all those potential grantees considering how to win this grant (and perhaps tourism development programs to come), the best suggestion might be to submit a concept paper that includes as many trendy terms attached to "tourism" as possible. In the meantime, taxpayers should push to protect their tax dollars from being sent overseas to be spent on unnecessary programs for eco, agro, green, sustainable, adventure, extreme, cultural, or luxury tourism—or any such combination.

* * *

Notes:

- Grant awards referenced can be viewed by Award ID number at *http://www.USASpending.gov* unless otherwise indicated.

[1] Data from Charity Navigator: http://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=42#.Vz8WDYQrKUk
[2] CIA World Factbook: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ks.html
[3] CIA World Factbook; https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sw.html
[4] CIA World Factbook; https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html
[5] ibid
[6] Lawson, Marian; Tarnoff, Curt; *US Foreign Assistance;* Congressional Research Service; January 21, 2016
[7] President's speech on fiscal policy; George Washington Univ., Washington, DC. April 13, 2011. YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu3RyUKP828
[8] FSO subcommittee calculation of Federal tax data
[9] http://www.thebrandusa.com/
[10] AID-165-C-12-00101
[11] http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdaci642.pdf
[12] https://www.usaid.gov/macedonia/fact-sheets/small-business-expansion-project
[13] https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.670600263016738.1073741869.110116725731764&type=1
[14] http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00KS2P.pdf
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[17] http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00KX9V.pdf
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[24] https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/usaid-chevron-junior-achievement-conduct-training-tourism-industry
[25] 13DG11132762253
[26] http://www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/2015-Fire-Budget-Report.pdf
[27] ibid
[28] http://www.crs.gov/Reports/R43997?source=search&guid=be9c672c92b34f15979fbd390b87c058&index=0
[29] http://www.fs.fed.us/about-agency/international-programs/where-we-work/russia-europe
[30] ibid
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[32] AID-111-A-14-00006
[33] AID-111-T-15-00001
[34] Data provided by USAID in response to FSO inquiry
[35] http://armenia.usembassy.gov/news082615.html
[36] ibid
[37] https://www.usaid.gov/armenia/press-release/partners-announce-opening-of-black-sea-silk-road-tourism-trail
[38] https://armenia.usembassy.gov/news112015.html
[39] http://www.Facebook.com/usembarmenia June 28, 2016
[40] https://www.usaid.gov/armenia/press-release/usaid-supports-armenia-brand-development; USAID response to FSO inquiry
[41] AID-168-IO-15-00001
[42] https://www.usaid.gov/bosnia-herzegovina/fact-sheets/dinarica-platform-sustainable-tourism-development-and-local
[43] AID-168-IO-13-00003
[44] http://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia_and_herzegovina/en/home/presscenter/articles/2013/09/18/walking-the-via-dinarica.html
[45] http://www.outsideonline.com/1921701/2014-travel-awards-best-new-trail
[46] ibid
[47] http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-13-618
[48] http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/funding/top-contributors.html
[49] AIDEPPA000600002; AID518A000700023
[50] https://rmportal.net/library/collections/gsta
[51] ibid
[52] https://lms.rmportal.net/course/index.php?categoryid=48
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[54]
[55] https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33546.pdf
[56] ibid
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