

Tourism binds Tahoe and Cuba



Rafael Betancourt and Julie Regan

By Julie Regan

International collaboration was alive and well recently at the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency where Cuban tourism expert Rafael Betancourt spoke to South Shore locals.

Betancourt's lecture, titled "The Cuba tourism engine revs up," included a discussion of Cuba's new wave of American tourists and the steps the Caribbean island nation is taking to accommodate what's projected to be steady growth in the coming years.

TPRA hosted the presentation in partnership with the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority.

What Cuba and Lake Tahoe have in common is the need to grow our tourist-based economies while not loving the place the death.

Sustainable tourism is a matter of global concern. The United Nations declared 2017 as the year of sustainable tourism and

published data that show that approximately 1.2 billion people travel internationally every year. That number has nearly doubled in the last 15 years.

Betancourt shared recent figures on Cuba's tourism, which is essential to growing the country's struggling economy. There has been an "explosion" in cruise ship visits to Cuba in the past three years, with four U.S.-based cruise ship companies bringing tours to the island. He said new procedures are being instituted by the Cuban government to manage this new form of tourism to the island.

Betancourt explained how environmental protection is included in Cuba's constitution and the government has established numerous national parks and marine protected areas. Cuba's biodiversity is known throughout the world and the island nation is often called the Galapagos of the Caribbean. While nature-based tourism is being advanced by Cuban officials, the need for economic development is urgent, Betancourt said.

Julie Regan is TRPA's external affairs chief. Regan met Betancourt in Havana on a trip as part of her doctorate research.