

# Some Fundamental Truths About Tourism: Understanding Tourism's Social and Environmental Impacts

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Tourism's effects on the social, cultural and physical environments in which it operates are well known. Yet, it appears that little research has been conducted examining the underlying reasons why such impacts appear to be inevitable. This paper argues that a number of structural realities or 'fundamental truths' about tourism that explain why adverse impacts are felt, regardless of the type of tourism activity. Eight such truths are examined. They are: (1) As an industrial activity, tourism consumes resources, creates waste and has specific infrastructure needs. (2) As a consumer of resources, it has the ability to over consume resources. (3) Tourism, as a resource dependent industry must compete for scarce resources to ensure its survival. (4) Tourism is a private sector dominated industry, with investment decisions being based predominantly on profit maximisation. (5) Tourism is a multi-faceted industry, and as such, it is almost impossible to control. (6) Tourists are consumers, not anthropologists. (7) Tourism is entertainment. (8) Unlike other industrial activities, tourism generates income by importing clients rather than exporting its product.

## Introduction

Tourism enjoys a love-hate relationship with its host community. It is both a much sought after and much reviled activity. On one hand, it has been identified as an economic saviour, generating employment, income and tax revenue and acting as a catalyst for regional development (Grey, Edelman & Dwyer, 1991). On the other hand, it has been identified as a pariah that destroys host societies and cultures and cuts a swath of environmental destruction wherever it goes (O'Grady, 1981; Rosenow & Pulsipher, 1979). Of course, both arguments have some validity. Tourism carries with it the potential to inflict both beneficial and detrimental impacts on host communities and host environments.

But tourism, or more precisely the process of tourism development, is a much misunderstood activity. While the body of literature documenting impacts is extensive (and mostly damning) (Pearce, 1989; Schwartz & Nicholson-Lord, 1990a, 1990b; Elias, 1991), few, if any authors have attempted to seek out the underlying reasons why tourism development seems to bring with it the inevitable potential for adverse impacts.

This paper rectifies that situation by identifying eight such underlying structures or 'fundamental truths' (Table 1) associated with all types of tourism development. It argues that the very process of tourism development, in itself, provides the catalyst for a wide range of potential impacts. The 'fundamental

Table 1 Some fundamental truths about tourism

- (1) As an industrial activity, tourism consumes resources, creates waste and has specific infrastructure needs.
- (2) As a consumer of resources, it has the ability to over consume resources.
- (3) Tourism, as a resource dependent industry must compete for scarce resources to ensure its survival.
- (4) Tourism is a private sector dominated industry, with investment decisions being based predominantly on profit maximisation.
- (5) Tourism is a multi-faceted industry, and as such, it is almost impossible to control.
- (6) Tourists are consumers, not anthropologists.
- (7) Tourism is entertainment.
- (8) Unlike other industrial activities, tourism generates income by importing clients rather than exporting its product.

truths' explored below are both the inherent and unavoidable consequences of embarking on the path of tourism development.

The recognition and understanding of these 'fundamental truths' can play a key role in developing future sustainable tourism policies. As a minimum, acknowledging their existence will offer valuable insights into understanding the causes and nature of most impacts. More importantly, by accepting their inevitability as a condition of tourism development, planners, policy makers and industry leaders can begin to develop effective policies and programmes to minimise impacts. Moreover, an awareness and understanding of these 'fundamental truths' can play a critical role in reducing community animosity to tourism.

Clearly, the influence of these 'truths' on host communities and host environments will not be uniform. Different tourism activities will tend to amplify some factors and reduce the influence of others. Similarly, host communities and host environments will vary in their susceptibility to the impacts of tourism. Factors such as cultural distance (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1990) and environmental malleability (Hendee, Stankey & Lucas, 1978) will influence the level to which some 'truths' affect impacts. In a similar fashion, it may be possible to harden host communities and environments to make them more resistant to adverse impacts.

**Truth (1): As an industrial activity, tourism consumes resources, waste and has specific infrastructure needs**

That tourism is a major, legitimate industrial enterprise has only recently been recognised (Strang, 1989; Krippendorf, 1982). Traditionally, service sector enterprises, including tourism, were considered to be commercial, but not industrial activities (Rodenberg, 1989). But, Hiller (1977, as summarised in Rodenberg, 1989), observed strong similarities between industrialised mass tourism and other heavily capitalised industries especially in respect to the search for economies of scale and in the necessity of transforming backward societies into modern industrial ones.

Krippendorff (1982) and Butler (1986) assert that tourism is essentially a resource based industry. Indeed, in rural areas, it is almost totally dependent on a high quality resource base for its survival (DASETI, 1990). Three discrete types of tourist resources exist. They are resources such as land, air and water, man made resources including the built up heritage and cultural resources (Travis, 1982).

As a resource based industry, tourism is a voracious consumer of resources (Cronin, 1990; O'Grady, 1981; Rosenow et al., 1979). The construction of developments located in areas with unique and fragile ecosystems can cause a permanent restructuring of environments, often effectively destroying the original ecosystem (Anon, 1991; Singh, Theuns, Go, 1989; Pearce, 1989). In addition, the provision of infrastructure, especially the construction of roads and electricity right of ways, can extend the environmental impacts of tourist developments far behind the development site. But, as will be discussed elsewhere, it is the activities of the tourists themselves who are arguably the greatest consumers of resources.

Tourism represents an insidious form of consumptive activity. Unlike most other industries which enjoy virtual exclusive rights of use over their resource base, tourism resources are typically part of the public domain or are intrinsically linked to the social fabric of the host community. As such, the most common of tourist activities, shopping, sightseeing and souveniring, can be the most invasive, especially when the perception exists that they are imposed on host communities (Gorman, 1988).

The industry itself has been slow to accept that its activities consume a wide range of resources. Traditionally, tourism has been portrayed as a clean alternative to traditional smoke stack industries and as one that preserves, not consumes resources (AITA, 1990a). Added to this is the historic lack of willingness on behalf of the industry to assume responsibility for the activities of tourists themselves away from the tourist property. Fortunately, this attitude is changing (AITA, 1990c; NCCNSW, 1987).

As a consumptive activity, tourism produces a variety industrial wastes. But again, its wastes vary significantly from those of other industrial sectors. Tourism produces waste products that are more typical the type of waste produced by urban communities, rather than that normally associated with by traditional industrial activity. Sewage, garbage and automobile exhaust are among its most common and most problematic by-products (Geffreys, 1988; Rodriguez, 1987). Again, because they are so intrinsically linked with modern societies, controlling and reducing tourism waste is as challenging as controlling and reducing urban waste (Beder, 1989).

**Truth (2): As a consumer of resources it has the ability to over consume resources**

Each of the three tourist resources outlined above is at risk of being over consumed. Like most forms environmental degradation, however, degradation of the tourism resource is rarely catastrophic; it is more likely to be typified by

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cumulative threshold effects. Once a threshold has been reached, adverse effects rapidly occur over large areas (pigram, 1990).

Tourist destination areas under stress exhibit a wide range of social, cultural and environmental impacts that can be linked to the over use of the resource base. Increases in traffic flows and traffic congestion, rising land prices, urban sprawl and wide spread changes in the social structure of host communities are all indicative of a social system and social infrastructure under stress as a result of high tourist pressure (Pearce, 1989; Hall, 1991). Similarly, many of the cultural changes noted in host communities (Singh *et al.*, 1989; O'Grady, 1981; Duffield, 1982; Painton, 1991) are indicative of a tourist resource that is being over consumed. Tourism's impact on the physical environment has been well documented (Geffreys, 1988; Schwartz *et al.*, 1990a, 1990b; ESDWG, 1991).

Indeed, the greatest challenge facing sustainable tourism development is to ensure that tourism's assets are not permitted to become degraded (ESDWG, 1991). The working group for ecologically sustainable tourism in Australia has made numerous recommendations to the Prime Minister for the preservation and enhancement of the social and cultural integrity of tourism communities, as well as for their environmental protection (ESDWG, 1991).

**Truth (3): Tourism, as a resource dependent industry must compete for scarce resources to ensure its survival**

Tourism is a fiercely resource competitive activity. To survive it must often gain supremacy over its competitors. Unfortunately, all too often, tourism's demands are in direct competition with the wants and desires of residents of host communities. It is when incompatible demands are placed on common assets that conflict between tourism and host communities are likely to arise.

Tourism is an extension of the leisure and recreation paradigm, varying from them only in terms of distance travelled, time spent away from home and intensity of pursuit of activity (Mathieson & Wall, 1982). Tourism and non-tourism oriented leisure and recreational activities often share the same resources and facilities and compete for the same space, government grants and consumer dollars. Two people may be participating in exactly the same activity in exactly the same location at exactly the same time, and yet, one will be defined as a tourist, while the other will not.

It is this competition for the same sets of resources that fuels much of the conflict that is evident today. Local residents often see tourism development as something that happens to them; that is beyond their control. As such a sense of resentment can develop (Gorman, 1988). This sense of resentment can be exacerbated when tourism interests alienate once publicly available resources for exclusive use by the tourism industry. Prohibiting local use of beaches, or the influx into local markets of new commercial activities aimed specifically at tourists, not only creates animosity, but can also result in fundamental structural changes occurring to host communities.

The recognition that tourism is a very effective resource competitor and that its resource demands may be incompatible with of other user groups is

fundamental to understanding and resolving potential resource use conflicts before they occur. In some instances, discrete tourism precincts may have to be established to isolate tourism from other user groups. In others, provision must be made to provide alternative resources for local residents who have been disadvantaged by tourism developments.

**Truth (4): Tourism is a private sector dominated industry, with investment decisions being based predominantly on profit maximisation**

While tourism may be influenced by government, it is essentially a private sector driven industry. As such, development decisions will be based on the ability of the enterprise to function at a profitable level. The quest for profit maximisation will result in preference for investment in profit centres (such as swimming pools) rather than in cost centres (such as sewage systems). Example abound in the Caribbean, Mediterranean and throughout Asia Pacific of international calibre tourist developments that pump their raw sewage directly into the ocean (Geffreys, 1988; Schwartz *et al.*, 1990b). Mitigation protection programmes will receive lower priorities, unless there is an opportunity for profit generation or a legislative imperative forcing such investment (Strang, 1990).

Ironically, although government plays a significant role in the promotion, development and marketing of the tourism product, it plays an inadequate role in policing these developments to ensure they operate in an ecologically appropriate manner. The track record of governments throughout the world controlling, reducing or mitigating the adverse impacts of tourism development is poor (Panton, 1991).

The very nature of the tourism industry makes voluntary compliance with environmental protection programmes virtually impossible. The industry is fragmented, highly competitive, seasonal in nature and is typically comprised of many small, marginally profitable operators (Butler, 1986). Operators may simply not be able to afford the high cost of installing appropriate pollution control systems. Wide variations in the type and application of environmental protection legislation across state and national boundaries often act as a disincentive for industry to act in a more environmentally sound manner (Corkill, 1988; Grey *et al.*, 1991). Finally, strong evidence has been presented that environmental concessions are negotiable as part of the development process (Corkill, 1988).

Programmes designed to avoid impacts prior to development or to mitigate them after construction can only be effective if they are applied in an across-the-board fashion and are implemented in a consistent and equitable manner. The Australian Tourism Industry Association, for example has strongly supported government efforts to develop consistent national environmental protection and assessment legislation (ATIA, 1990b, Grey *et al.*, 1991).

**Truth (5): Tourism is a multi-faceted industry, and as such, it is almost impossible to control**

The tourism industry is an incredibly diverse industry, of suppliers and producers of products, a vast array of government agencies and, in Australia, over 22 million domestic and overseas tourists who consume the product (ATC, 1990). The fragmented nature of the tourism plant, uncoordinated and ineffective government controls and the of the tourist themselves mitigate against the industry ever being effectively controlled.

About 45,000 tourism businesses operate (Grey *et al.*, 1991) in Australia. The vast majority of these businesses are small, independently owned family operations. The only source of unity that exists within the tourism industry is found in tourism trade associations that have evolved to represent various sectoral interests. But even here, a multitude of local, state and Commonwealth associations exist, often operating at cross purposes to one another. While, for the most part, these organisations ably represent the needs of their members and develop and promote policies that support ethical operations, none has any real enforcement control. Membership is voluntary and, member businesses can choose not to support industry directives with impunity. As a result, the only real regulatory role that trade associations can play is one of policy provider.

The problem is exacerbated by the fragmented nature of government involvement in and control over tourism activities. Various Commonwealth, state and local government agencies all play significant roles in approving and monitoring tourism development. In Tasmania, eight federal, state and local agencies have direct control over coastal management issues (Anon, 1991). Similarly, along the Murray River in the New South Wales-Victoria border area, 17 Commonwealth and State bodies, plus local shires are involved in the approval process (NSWTC, 1990).

This multi-jurisdictional nightmare creates much confusion and controversy over which agency can and should control a wide range of tourism activities. As a result, in some areas, gaps in legislative control exist, while in others, control efforts are duplicated. Often no one jurisdiction is willing or able to exert effective control over tourism.

Controlling tourism is the most difficult challenge facing industry and government agencies. The development of strategic plans and control mechanisms are only as effective as the will to implement them. In a free market system, such a diverse and highly unregulated industry as tourism will likely continue to defy most efforts to its expansion. Effective control measures can only occur through integrated programmes that incorporate federal, state and local legislation and policy a nation-wide programme. While such programmes are cated by the environmental movement, (ACF, 1989), it is unlikely, however, that they will ever be formalised in Commonwealth policy.

**Truth (6): Tourists are consumers, not anthropologists**

It is a mistake to assume that most tourists are anything more than consumers, whose primary goal is the consumption of a tourism experience. Even eco-

tourists, who may have strong ethical and environmental motives for travel, still consumers when they participate in eco-tourism experiences. As deKadt (1977: 136) stated 'the normal tourist is not to be compared with an anthropologist or other researcher. Tourists are pleasure seekers, temporarily unemployed, and above all consumers.'

To expect most tourists to act otherwise is naive, although apparently widespread (Anon, 1984; NCCNSW, 1987). While a limited number of people will be prepared to modify their actions according to the environment they enter, the vast majority of tourists appear to be uninterested in doing so. The opposite appears to be the case, as mass tourists tend to exhibit atypical behaviours through over consumption of alcohol, excessive sexual activity and Conspicuous spending patterns (deKadt, 1977).

It must be remembered that tourists are seeking an escape from their everyday existence. While on vacation, they do not want to be burdened with the concerns of the normal world. Moreover, it appears that many mass tourists are ignorant of or indifferent to the needs of host communities and as such their actions have placed enormous stresses on both host communities and host environments (Cronin, 1990; Cleverdon, 1979; Stalker, 1984).

#### **Truth (7): TOURism is entertainment**

Tourism, especially many forms of 'cultural' and 'environmental' tourism, is entertainment, striving to satisfy tourists' needs, wants and demands. To be successful and, therefore, commercially viable, the tourism product must be manipulated and packaged in such a way that it can easily be consumed by the public (Eden, 1990; Cohen, 1972).

To satisfy the tight schedules of tour operators and sightseeing coaches, the product must often be modified to provide regular show times and a guaranteed experience. As one ex-president of the HaWaiian Visitors Bureau stated 'since real cultural events do not always occur on schedule, we invent pseudo-events for tour operators, who must have a dance of the vestal Virgins precisely at 10 am every Wednesday' (Stalker, 1984: 8). The same pressures have resulted in the soaping of New Zealand's Lady Knox Geyser to ensure its performance at 10:15 every morning (pers. obs.). While these forms of pseudo events have been assailed by some aspects of the sociological fraternity (Cohen, 1988), they remain a necessary, if somewhat distasteful requisite for efficient tourism operations.

Early, learning opportunities can be created from the tourism experiences provided. But, in spite of protestations, the primary role of tourist attractions is to entertain. Even large museums and art galleries that are ostensibly developed to provide educational and cultural enlightenment opportunities have recognised that they are in the entertainment business and have arranged their displays accordingly (Zeppel & Hall, 1991; Tighe, 1985).

Tourism has been accused of leading to the bastardisation of local cultures through the commodification of traditional cultural activities (O'Grady, 1981). This assertion is unfair. Entertainment provided for the enjoyment of the tourism industry must not be confused with the preservation and continuation of tradi-

tional cultural activities. Each has fundamentally different objectives. One is designed to be consumed without great mental or physical effort, the other is usually ephemeral and spiritual in nature and has great meaning to the participants.

Communities wishing to effectively exploit tourism opportunities and to reap the benefits of tourism, must adopt accepted marketing principles and strive to satisfy consumer demands (Kotler & Turner, 1989). This means that the existing product, be it a traditional dance, festival or naturally occurring geysers, may have to be modified to satisfy this demand.

This fundamental truth is arguably the most difficult one for host communities to accept, but when recognised, positive productive and profitable links can be made between tourism and host communities (Cleverdon, 1979). Unfortunately, what is more likely to happen is that change is unwillingly imposed on host communities and environments by the tourism industry, often without adequate controls. When this occurs, the likelihood of adverse impacts occurring is dramatically increased.

#### **Truth (8): Unlike other industrial activities, tourism generates income by importing clients rather than by exporting its product**

In understanding the inevitability of change occurring to host communities and environments, it is important to recognise the unique aspect of tourism when compared to all other industrial developments. Tourism derives wealth not by exporting a product to its clients, but by importing clients to consume the product in situ. The consumption of the product is usually concentrated in a small geographical area, making it appear to be even more conspicuous (deKadt, 1977), often exacerbating a wide range of core-periphery issues (Keller, 1987).

Tourism cannot exist in social isolation from the host community. As tourists are rarely restricted to the physical confines of the tourist resort, inevitable interactions between local residents and tourists must occur. The actions of tourists, their desires to consume similar products as local residents and their demand to share the same facilities result in the entire community sharing the benefits of tourism development. It also means that the same residents will similarly share the adverse costs of tourism.

In planning for tourism, local governments in particular, must be aware that a massive influx of visitors will inevitably place a variety of stresses on physical and social infrastructure of the area (Cronin, 1990). In order to minimise adverse effects, it is often to control tourism development. Unfortunately, once begun, tourism growth often takes on a spontaneous and unpredictable life of its own. Attempts to control spontaneous or catalytic development are rarely successful (Pearce, 1989; Panton, 1991).

Regions that fail to recognise the unique aspect of tourism are guilty of either gross ignorance or gross *naïveté* about the fundamental nature of tourism development. Before contemplating tourism as an economic option, host communities must be made aware that the influx of large numbers of tourists will create a wide range of impacts that will affect the entire community.

## Conclusion

The eight fundamental truths about tourism development discussed in this paper explain why many of the social, cultural and environmental impacts associated with tourism development appear to be inevitable. The severity of these impacts can often be minimised through an understanding of these truths and of their implications for host communities and host environments.

Tourism is an industrial activity that exerts a series of impacts that are similar to most other industrial activities. It consumes often scarce resources, produces waste by-products and requires specific infrastructure and superstructure needs to support it. As a huge, broadly based, diverse industry, that lacks clear market leaders and a clear legislative focus, tourism defies attempts to control its impacts. Moreover, as an industry that is highly integrated into host communities, tourism is both dependent on the host communities for its survival while exerting impacts on all sectors of the host community. Tourists themselves must be recognised as consumers who are looking to be entertained during their vacation experience. It is the unique nature of tourism, however, and its necessity to import clients rather than export its finished product that often results in conflicts with host communities.

For sustainable tourism to occur, it must be closely integrated with all other activities that occur in the host region. Tourism, as a competitor for scarce resources is highly resource dependent. Integration can only occur if there is a broadly based understanding of some of the 'fundamental truths' about all types of tourism development. It is only through this understanding that the costs and benefits of tourism development can be fully assessed and understood.

## Note

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## An Environmentally-based Planning Model For Regional Tourism Development

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The report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) in 1987 advocates the integration of the two in the form of sustainable development. However, it makes no reference to the environment and tourism. It is argued here that the two can be integrated through environmentally appropriate planning for tourism development and tourism activities. Area development planning models are briefly reviewed as well as those applicable to environmental conservation and protection planning. A new regional sustainable development framework called the Environmentally Based Tourism Development Planning Model is described. It is grounded in environmental conservation and seeks to advance environmentally compatible sustainable tourism through the identification of 'significant features', 'critical areas' and 'compatible activities'. Although incorporating aspects of the rational approach to planning, the role of people as part of the ecosystem is emphasised, and the opinions of managers, tourists and the host community are included as an essential part of the process. Zoning is used to maintain environmental and tourism values and includes sanctuary, nature conservation, outdoor recreation and tourism destination zones.

### Introduction

The growing concern for conservation and the wellbeing of our environment over the last two decades has brought about a closer relationship between the environment and tourism. The relationship has incorporated several phases over the last four decades and include it being viewed as one of coexistence (Zierer, 1952), conflict (Akoglu, 1971) or with symbiotic possibilities (Romeril, 1985). Recently the relationship has been described as being 'integrated', that is, having potential for both conflict or symbiosis (Dowling, 1992a). This view suggests that environmental conflicts caused by natural area tourism developments may be reduced and that environmentally compatible tourism developments may be achieved through sustainable development. Such an approach will only be attained through environmentally appropriate sustainable tourism planning. The base of this partnership is resource sustainability and to achieve this, tourism planning must be fully integrated within the resource planning and management process. This integration will require the adoption of resource conservation values as well as the more traditional development goals within tourism planning. Central to the goals of environmental conservation and resource sustainability is the protection and maintenance of environmental quality. To achieve this primary goal requires planning which is grounded in environmental protection and enhancement yet fosters the realisation of tourism potential.