

# Saving the Heart and Soul of Tourism Destinations

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Why are tourism destinations becoming so crowded and what is being done about it? Politico Magazine stated in early 2017, “Amsterdam tries to stem tourist flood and save its soul” and “Barcelona declares war on tourism.” The Independent reported on “the death of Venice” in 2015. These cities have seen dramatic escalation in visitation that needs attention. Global travelers and the industry are taking note. In the well-appointed conference rooms of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) Summit meeting in Bangkok this year, industry leaders expressed growing concern. WTTC has hired McKinsey and Company to research this question and search for a path forward. The study will certainly reveal what many tourists know, there is little crowd control and poor management in many destinations.

But consider this — if some of the richest municipal governments in the world are struggling with the capacity to analyze, regulate and manage what is known as “**overtourism**” what will happen in burgeoning economies where double digit tourism growth is not uncommon. This is the ticking time bomb.

Edmund Bartlett, the Minister of Tourism of Jamaica spoke at the WTTC Summit about the clear need to change how nations govern tourism. In Travel Weekly he said, “tourism has to subject itself to some academic rigor. We just wanted ships to come in, planes to land, and hotels to be built.” Mr. Bartlett speaks truth here but neglects to note that Jamaica has sought to address this issue for decades without success. Around the world there are many nations embracing tourism revenues with open arms that are unprepared and not likely to act, just as Jamaica has done.

Most countries will never slam the door on tourism and few will seek to slow it down either. Instead, there will have to be a new formula that accommodates growth, but ensures destinations are net revenue winners. That is demonstrably not the case, as I document in my book, Sustainable Tourism on a Finite Planet. At present, most tourism policy makers only look at gross revenues and do not evaluate the expense to manage tourism. As a result budgets are not allocated for the excess demands on local resources, and nearly all destinations in emerging economies fail to use regulatory systems of land planning which could slow spiraling real estate costs, overbuilding, and require environmental protection.

While Ministries of Tourism manage national policies, environmental and socio-cultural protection efforts are left to voluntary organizations and NGOs. Local authorities often have little power or budget to manage the industrial growth of tourism on their landscapes.

In future, there must be a national system to support the evaluation of costs for managing tourism destinations that brings local authorities to the table, with revenue and investment proposals based on projected costs. This may seem a tall order, but the unprecedented changes in tourism landscapes require policy reform. Open season real estate market development policies and virtually no data on the cumulative and social impacts of tourism growth leaves destinations so defenseless they are “sitting ducks” for unabated exploitation.

Why is it that one of the fastest growing industries in the world is not protecting its own vital resources? This requires a review of how much revenue tourism generates in taxes and how it is used. It is known that marketing tourism is the prime responsibility of tourism policy makers. There is no global study to document exactly what percentage of tourism tax revenues goes towards marketing tourism, but good academic estimates suggest 80%. The total global spend for destination marketing was \$4.2 billion in 2009 according to Oxford Economics. Huge events around the world, where tourism is promoted at great cost, are contributing to the overheated growth of tourism worldwide. Think of it this way - If a factory were to allocate all of its revenues to marketing, what would happen? There would be no maintenance and the factory would be destroyed.

## How Do We Protect Our Most Beloved Landmarks?

Destinations almost inevitably grow to the point that visitor numbers exceed local capacity to preserve the beautiful environments and culture that brought travelers there in the first place. Fabulous beach regions are converted from cabanas to high rises. Very frequently local people become so disillusioned with the overcrowding of their paradise that they can become angry and even jaundiced about prospects of arresting unsustainable growth. It is difficult to have our dreams sullied when destinations begin to decline. But why is this the standard cycle? What can be done to stop it?

Precise measurements, yes with “academic rigor” are needed to anticipate the exact demands of tourism growth on common pool resources, such as water and coral reefs. As billions of tourists per year, both domestic and foreign, visit emerging economies in ever increasing numbers, a tragedy of the commons ensues. Few destinations are prepared, despite the fact that countries like Jamaica have been struggling with overtourism for decades.

There is only one way to avoid the worst aspects of insistent demand, and that is to anticipate it and budget for the requirements of tourism as part of the plan.

For many communities, little has been done to evaluate how to maintain quality of life and affordability for local citizens. Venice’s well paid gondoliers cannot afford to rent an apartment in their own city. Affordable housing is a problem tourism destinations face around the world. A new approach is needed that protects destinations for citizens, part time visitors, and tourism corporations alike. Reinvestment in housing reserved for local communities at prices that accommodate their needs is one essential step that maintains local culture and allows historic communities to thrive rather than being subsumed by overtourism. Investment in ecosystems and green space via green taxes is another well known tool to preserve open space, which contributes to the health and well being of local people, and protects beaches, dunes, important forest and wetland reserves from over-development. Countries such as Belize, ask every visitor pays a fee to a trust which reinvests in both community culture and protection of their natural assets.

## Maintaining Green Space and Placing a Value on It

As our global population increases above 7 billion there are many reasons to develop land and increasingly few to preserve it. Tourism should be viewed as a primary economic reason to allocate higher budgets for federal and state protected lands, and also urban, semi-urban, and rural green corridors. Such green corridors, known as green infrastructure, can enhance efforts to provide open space, recreation lands and natural areas that retain the unique character of communities.

More than 100 years ago, Frederick Law Olmsted, the founder of the field of landscape planning and the designer of New York’s Central Park conducted a study of how parks help property values. To justify the expense of the \$13 million spent by New York City on developing Central Park, Olmsted provided Manhattan with a 17 year study which demonstrated there was a \$209 million increase in the value of property impacted by the park. Can you imagine what the value of that land is now? This landmark study has been confirmed hundreds of times. Municipal revenues are increased if green corridors and green spaces are both created and maintained.

There needs to be a genuine, bankable, net value placed on preserved tourism assets, which can be financed via both tourism fees and taxes, bonds, and international investment from the private sector and international donor funds.

The development of such a system requires many minds and concerted will. It requires a realization that there is no adequate system in place, and a serious discussion that acknowledges the requirements for policy reform to ensure our globe’s most precious places have legitimate protection strategies in place.

