

Eco-tourism: A sustainable trade?

VIEWPOINT

James Mair

Can eco-tourism do more harm than good? In the Green Room this week, James Mair argues that it can, and that development of tourism needs to be made sustainable.

What price western-style conservation ethics, when a country is forced to use every available resource to improve wealth and health?

If there is "good money" to be made, then tourism with any eco-twist will attract big investment.

Top of the wish list for eco-travellers, often, are small islands, fringed with picture-postcard beaches and definitively far from any madding crowds.

The regime change caused by the conveyor belt of tourism brings income and employment; the down-side is a drain on freshwater, loss of biodiversity and habitat, and contaminants washed up by seasonal waves or continuous tides of visitors.

My own experience with small islands stems mainly from visiting Latin America over the last decade or so for conservation research purposes.

Ecuador's Galapagos Islands are understandably naturally selected as being high on the tick-list of must-do destinations.

The diversity of conservation designations applied to both the terrestrial and marine areas of the Galapagos gives comfort to many - but what price western-style conservation ethics, when a country is forced to use every available resource to enable its human population to improve their economic wealth and health?

The rapid change in human population and tourist activities are evident to anyone who has visited the Galapagos regularly over the last decade.

Alien invaders

In the Caribbean, the main island of the San Andres Archipelago is one of the most densely-populated places in the region, by residents and by hordes of invasive aliens (tourists).

It is plagued by the endemic problems of freshwater shortages, overfishing to feed the local restaurants, and the inevitable sewage and general pollution.

Panama has various conservation areas at different stages of development.

Some, despite being in a mature state of protection, are still undergoing encroachment by insensitive holiday and predatory second-property acquisitions - for example in the Bocas del Toro region on the Caribbean coast.

Other islands and marine reserves are less threatened due to their autonomous governance, such as the Kuna Indian province encompassing the San Blas islands, or by their isolation, such as Coiba, which used to be a remote penal colony and is now a national park and World Heritage Site.

Islands of the Las Perlas Archipelago (LPA) are characteristic of where tourism and conservation are in an embryonic stage.

Within a two-week period in late November and early December of this year, the LPA Municipality published a decree, with government backing, for the establishment of a hydrological reserve in the largest of the islands to protect over 9,800 hectares of important watershed environments, home to 14 endemic bird species.

Meanwhile the central government promulgated another decree announcing major large-scale tourist development plans.

The left hand protects the ecology, the right hand builds on it.

It will be interesting to follow the evolution of this particular LPA test case in Panama to see if prudence and equitability prevail.

There still is time - but not much - to ensure that potential sustainable tourism can stand "shoulder to shoulder" with long-term conservation efforts. Or will the internal wishes of the local inhabitants be "trumped" by business-as-usual, external, profit-making predators?

Small islands are by definition coastal strips without much terrestrial interior.

Small scale, well-operated eco-tourism ventures have their place and many are widely agreed to be beneficial by most stakeholders; but what are the limits to growth of the wide spectrum of what is being now marketed as eco-tourism?

Many tourists who visit such places become fascinated by, and protective of, reef fish, corals, nesting turtles, migrating cetaceans, whale sharks and so on. They will often actively support conservation initiatives; but they may also be the unwitting necrotic travelling agents of change.

Miles and miles

Environmentally aware travellers are evolving a guilty conscience about their air miles.

George Monbiot in his recent book Heat talks about "love miles"; with increased globalisation, migration and cheap air fares, more people now travel between continents to visit far-flung families and friends.

Further flying is fostered by spawning "leisure miles" out of "business miles" - a "positive" feedback mechanism?

In my working visits to Latin America, I try to salve my conscience by convincing myself that these trips involve "benevolent miles" - a net environmental benefit from the work I do.

Has anyone asked the indigenous peoples what they want for themselves and their descendants?

Nevertheless, sitting in airports, ruminating over a hamburger, waiting for a connection and watching my fellow travellers globally disseminate, causes me now to have an increasing guilt complex - my very own carbonised footprint.

The economic perspective of the recent Stern review on climate change highlights the growing realisation that there is indeed a monetary value to natural systems.

If only enough people can get into the symbiotic mind-set of taking the long term view instead of being part of the current prevailing short-term free-for-all "grab and grow" culture, then might we save our children and grandchildren the mounting parasitic blight of our economic and environmental debts to them.

The sight of small islands drowning under congregations of tourists "thonging" on beaches, and others who could be termed "pleasure-seekers" with opportunistic predatory instincts already springing silently on novel niche destinations, begs the question: when will the organic growth of island eco-tourism reach its carrying capacity?

Tripping out

Where will the ultimate tripping point be reached? Does every potential island need to be westernised as soon as possible? If so, what will we and our grandchildren be losing out on?

And, has anyone asked the indigenous island peoples, with their fragile eco/social systems, what they want for themselves and their own descendants?

A recent conference on sustainable tourism on islands and small states organised by the UN's World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) came up with The Malta Guidelines on Sustainable Tourism 2006.

Understanding the internationalised liberalisation of tourism, UNWTO Secretary-General Francesco Frangialli stated: "We must capitalise on the opportunity to use tourism as a tool for poverty reduction but avoid the irreversible deterioration of sites and over-use of natural resources and the exploitation of workers".

Many economists think conservationists mean "no-development" when proposing "sustainable development".

Maybe it would be a start if both sides could try to agree at least on the definition of "unsustainable" developments. Can the "contracts" that the (possibly well-meaning but often environmentally inept) World Bank or Inter-American Development Bank come up with for what is termed development assistance "converge" with the principles of the UNWTO statement?

Will accounting for the true long-term value of natural systems now become common currency in the science/art/politics of economics?

I, for one, hope so.

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The Green Room is a series of opinion pieces on environmental topics running weekly on the BBC News website

Do you agree with James Mair? If so, how can we ensure sustainable development? Have you ever been an eco-tourist? Send us your comments with the link below:

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