

DILEMMAS FOR THE RESPONSIBLE TOURIST

David Peaty

Abstract

An increasing number of tourists are concerned about their impact on the environment and on local communities. However, their concerns sometimes lead to dilemmas. This paper looks at responsible tourism and some of the issues that tourists must confront.

Introduction

International tourism has major impacts on the lives of millions of people and on the global environment. Some of those impacts are positive. For example, tourism creates employment and income and stimulates economic and social development. However, tourism can also damage fragile environments and vulnerable communities and lead to human rights abuses. Awareness of such problems has given rise to what is widely referred to as responsible tourism. It is relevant to all major players in the tourism industry, including the tourists themselves.

History

Responsible tourism evolved from several directions. One was the conservation movement that emerged in the 1970s. In 1972, the Club of Rome published a disturbing report entitled the Limits to Growth (Meadows et al.). In 1980, the IUCN published its World Conservation Strategy. In 1987, the new concept of sustainable development was presented in Our Common Future (WCED). In 1992, the UN Conference on Environment and Development was held in Rio de Janeiro. This led to Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry, published in 1996, which stated that the tourism industry has "a moral responsibility in making the transition to sustainable development" (World Tourism Organization). By that time, eco-tourism was already an established concept within the travel industry, the International Ecotourism Society having been founded six years earlier, in 1990.

Another factor behind the evolution of responsible tourism was growing concern about the impact of tourism on poor communities, and in particular, sex tourism. The Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism (ECOT), founded in 1982, and Tourism Concern, established six years

later, helped raise awareness of such issues.

In 1997, the WTO proposed a Global Code of Ethics for Tourism that was adopted two years later. The code aimed to "minimize the negative effects of tourism on the environment and on cultural heritage while maximizing the benefits for residents of tourism destinations" (www.unwto.org). The Community Tourism Guide (Mann, 2000) helped introduce the concept of tourism initiated by or on behalf of communities; and the following year, a portal named responsibletravel.com was established to provide tourists with access to reliable ecotourism and community tourism operators and tours. In 2002, the World Tourism Organization and UNCTAD formed a new alliance aimed at "poverty alleviation through tourism". This led to the creation of the UNWTO's STEP (Sustainable Tourism for the Elimination of Poverty) initiative. Other relevant developments include the application of fair trade principles to the tourism industry and the evolution of Pro-Poor Tourism.

Definition

The Cape Town Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations defined responsible tourism as

“tourism which: minimises negative economic, environmental and social impacts, generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well being of host communities, improves working conditions and access to the industry, involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances, makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage embracing diversity, provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues, provides access for physically challenged people, is culturally sensitive, encourages respect between tourists and hosts, and builds local pride and confidence” (2002).

Misrepresentation

Like fair trade and other manifestations of ethical business, responsible tourism is presumed to be consumer-driven. Its evolution therefore depends on the level of awareness and concern among tourists regarding the key issues. In 2000, Tearfund carried out a survey in the UK which suggested that a majority of tourists were willing to pay extra for more ethical tours.

However, their later (2001) survey of British tour operators indicated that relatively few felt any pressure for reform. Of approximately 100 operators approached by Tearfund, only two thirds responded, and less than a third had implemented responsible tourism policies. Moreover, while 46 firms reported having donated some of their profits to a relevant charity, the amount was miniscule in comparison to profits. Of the companies that claimed to have responsible tourism policies, many provide little or no evidence on their websites, and some are apparently misleading their customers by, for example, boasting of donations that were in fact made by their clients, and stating intentions rather than actual achievements. It costs nothing for a company to put an impressive set of responsible tourism guidelines on their website; they are only meaningful if implemented.

The most common form of misrepresentation of policy is referred to as 'greenwashing' – attempting to dupe consumers into thinking a company is making efforts to protect the environment. This includes claims such as "We specialize in green tourism," made by a company that takes tourists to view and experience nature, but makes no effort to protect it. Greenwashing has parallels in claims of social responsibility. For example "We believe in giving back to the community" is often a meaningless slogan. Even when an operator can honestly claim "most of our staff are hired locally," that may just be because locally hired staff are cheaper. "Last year we helped build two schools and a clinic" looks impressive, but the company may have merely encouraged their clients to donate money to an NGO raising funds for such projects.

Dilemmas

The issue of misrepresentation is just one of many problems facing tourists who genuinely care about the environment, social welfare and human rights. They also have to confront major dilemmas. A few examples are discussed below.

Flying and CO₂

The most obvious dilemma for the responsible tourist is global warming. We need airplanes in order to reach major ecotourism destinations such as Galapagos, Serengeti and Costa Rica, and to participate in community tourism projects in remote areas such as the Himalayas and the Andes. But airplanes are responsible for some of the CO₂ emissions that are the main cause of global warming, and global warming harms the environment and the poor communities that we want to support. For example, it melts the glaciers that supply water to wetlands and forests, and it is a major threat to biodiversity. It also causes natural disasters such as drought, floods, storms, epidemics and rising sea levels that devastate poor communities. Ironically, it also

threatens tourism: it melts the snow at ski resorts, bleaches coral reefs at popular scuba diving locations, produces insect infestations that destroy forests, reduces biodiversity, increases the risk of cholera and other water-borne diseases, causes landslides that block tourists' access to remote areas and wipes out villages that tourists hope to visit. It also leads to conflicts over scarce resources of farmland and water.

We can 'offset' our carbon emissions by, for example, tree-planting projects. A number of tour operators now offer Carbon-Neutral tours. Some airlines provide carbon offsets (at an extra charge) for concerned passengers. One airline - Nature Air, based in Costa Rica - even claims to be carbon neutral. I myself have offset all my flights since 2002 through a company called Climate Care. However, carbon offsets have become very controversial in recent years. Critics say they are effective only as a means of assuaging the traveller's guilt. Robbins (2006) mentions some of the problems. For one thing, our carbon emissions occur on the day we fly, but our carbon offsets (particularly in the case of planting trees) occur gradually over a period of several decades. For another, some of the businesses involved in carbon offsetting have turned out to be more concerned with profits than with the environment. In some cases, communities have been evicted in order to plant trees for carbon offset projects. Responsibletravel.com initially supported carbon offsets, but rejected them as a solution in 2009.

There are, of course, alternatives to flying, provided we have plenty of time. In 2006 environmentalist Barbara Hadrill, of the Centre for Alternative technology, in Wales, was invited to a wedding in Australia. She compared two ways to get there. By plane it would take 22 hours, cost \$1600, and result in an estimated 5 tonnes of CO₂ emissions.

That would mean she would cause more CO₂ emissions in a few days than she had caused in 6 years of eco-friendly living. On the other hand, if she went by train, bus and ship, it would take 6 weeks, cost \$8000, and result in 1.4 tonnes of CO₂ emissions. She chose the greener option (Este, 2006).

Maldives is a poor island nation threatened by rising sea levels. Before long the population will have to leave. However, the country is a very popular tourist destination. The government is using money from tourism to finance the future resettlement of its people in other countries (Ramesh, 2008). It is also trying to cut its own carbon emissions as an example to the rest of the world. However, flights to Maldives from Europe, North America and Japan contribute significantly to global warming, which is the cause of rising sea levels – the very problem that threatens Maldives' future. It is not practical to go by ship because of the great distances involved. Tourists considering a trip to Maldives thus face the carbon emissions dilemma discussed above.

Ski tours

Many people like to ski in the summer. Europeans can just jump on a train and be in the Alps

the same day. Americans and Canadians have snowy ski slopes nearby too. The problem is, a lot of people like to go somewhere else to ski. That often means a long-distance flight, and carbon emissions. Even if they go to local resorts, there may not be enough snow, because of global warming. So the resorts use snow-making machines powered by generators that burn oil, which also emit carbon. In addition, the construction of ski resorts & ski slopes does a lot of damage to forested hills and often leads to landslides & avalanches. Moreover, ski resorts use a lot of energy for heating, lighting and ski lifts, energy that is usually produced by power stations or generators burning fossil fuels.

Some ski resort operators have started using renewable sources of energy. A number of US ski resorts get all their energy from wind, either directly or by buying electricity generated elsewhere from wind (Knight, 2006). Solar, geothermal and hydroelectric sources are also being used. Many European ski resorts also are making an effort to be as sustainable as possible (www.responsibleskiing.com). Saas Fe, in Switzerland, decided to be car-free fifty years ago. Lech, in Austria, gets its electricity – including that used for its snow-making machines - from hydroelectric sources. Its hot water supply is provided using biomass. The responsible ski tourist therefore has a fairly green option: to ski at a local eco-friendly resort.

Wildlife tours

Indian villagers used to kill tigers because they killed their cows and goats and sometimes people. Tigers were also killed by hunters for their skins and organs, which remain popular in China. Then the Indian tiger became endangered and in 1970 the government banned people from killing them. Tiger reserves were established and soon became a tourist attraction. There are now 37 such reserves, although many exist only on paper, with insufficient funding and supervision for proper management. Tiger-watching tours can generate income for communities living in or near national parks. Moreover, seeing a wild tiger often inspires tourists to support conservation. On the other hand, tourists who fly to India contribute to changes in climate that are altering the tiger's habitat. Tourism has other serious impacts. Hotels are built in tiger territory, and on wildlife corridors linking tiger populations (Blakely, 2010). In addition, when reserves were created, the indigenous people living there were banned from hunting and gathering, and were of course no longer able to protect their villages and livestock from marauding tigers.

Tourists visiting India will probably not confront the dilemma of whether or not to go on a tiger safari for much longer. In 2008 a survey revealed that the number of tigers had fallen from 3642 to 1411 in the previous six years. In some of the reserves, tigers have not been seen for years. Amid fears that the species would soon become extinct, the Government decided to phase out tiger safaris from core regions of the designated reserves (Blakely, 2010). However, tigers can still be seen in Chitwan National Park, Nepal. The park is well-managed, and the number

of tigers appears to be stable despite the large influx of tourists. Tiger watching tours are generally carried out on the back of an elephant, and the number of elephants is limited.

How about other wild species? Wildlife populations are thriving in reserves such as Kruger National Park, South Africa. Visitors to the Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre at Sepilok, East Malaysia, support the work of conservationists trying to save the species at a time when their habitat is being destroyed to plant oil palm plantations. Likewise, gorilla watching tours in Uganda & Rwanda help conservation by generating income for the local community and giving them a reason to protect the gorillas.

Regulations are essential to ensure that tourists do not endanger the animals they come to see. Serengeti, in Tanzania, is a great place to view some of Africa's most popular wildlife. However, the driver/guides know that the best way to get good tips from their clients is to get close to the animals, especially the lions and cheetahs. Unfortunately, as soon one is seen, a crowd of tour vehicles surrounds it. This is highly stressful for the animals, especially during the mating or birthing season.

In the case of mountain gorilla tours, there are strict rules governing how close the tourists can approach, how long they can stay, and how many members the group may have (www.thefarhorizons.com). Thanks to the strict implementation of these rules, the mountain gorilla populations of the two main reserves in Uganda and Rwanda appear to be stable. Each family of gorillas is carefully habituated to humans before visits begin.

Similar rules are in place in many countries for boats used for whale watching and dolphin watching. However, some tourists want not just to photograph the creatures but also to swim beside them and even touch them. Swim-with-dolphin tours are available in many destinations, including Hawaii, New Zealand, Portugal and the Bahamas. Tourists can also swim with whales in Norway and with whale sharks in Djibouti and Fiji. Research carried out in Zanzibar with dolphins suggests that the presence of swimmers causes the animals stress and may prevent them from feeding their young. It may also be bad for the local community, as the dolphins may ultimately leave the area, leading to a collapse in tourism (Diffin, 2010).

It is clear that African safaris, gorilla watching tours and whale watching trips have the potential to generate income for people who would otherwise regard wildlife as a nuisance or a legitimate source of food, and thus to support conservation. However, it is important for tourists to choose responsible operators in locations where proper regulations are in place, and to make sure guides obey the rules.

Burma tours

Burma (officially known as Myanmar) has great tourism potential and a large number of poor people who could benefit from a strong tourism industry. However, it has a serious image problem: it has been run by a brutal military dictatorship since the only free elections were

held in 1990. Because of this, there is an international campaign to boycott Burma (www.burmacampaign.co.uk). Supporters of the campaign claim that the Burmese tourism industry (resorts, hotels and transportation) is owned by the military regime and its supporters, and that any money spent by foreign tourists on transport, accommodation and food, visas and entrance fees helps to support and prolong the dictatorship at the expense of the ordinary people (Eriksson et al., 2009:34). They also point out that the efforts of the regime to boost tourism have resulted in the systematic abuse of human rights. For example, over 5000 residents of Pagan were forced out of their homes without compensation in order to 'beautify' the World Heritage site. Beautification involved destroying homes and building hotels and golf courses. The same thing has happened in the south, where an 'eco-park' was established: communities that had been there for many generations were expelled and their villages burned down. In Mandalay, prisoners - including children - were forced to work on new tourism projects (Eriksson et al.).

People who are opposed to the campaign – mainly tour operators - say that tourists should come, spend their money in local communities and give them a chance to communicate freely with the outside world. However, only 'a tiny proportion' of Burma's population work in the tourism industry (Eriksson et al.); most live in villages untouched by tourism. Moreover, free communication is not feasible under the current conditions; with police agents everywhere, ordinary people are afraid to speak to foreigners. It is highly unlikely that community-based tourism could function in such conditions.

Antarctica tours

Antarctica is one of the most remote and inhospitable tourism destinations on the planet. However, since the first tourists arrived in 1957, the number has grown steadily, and in the 2007/2008 season, there were 46,069 (IAATO). Although the vast majority were responsible tourists who kept to the IAATO (International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators) voluntary guidelines, the sheer number worries environmentalists. Moreover, a growing number of adventure tourism operators are bringing visitors on skiing, trekking and climbing tours that have a greater impact on the vulnerable ecosystem. In addition, there is concern about the increasing number and size of cruise ships, some carrying as many as 3000 passengers. In November 2007, a cruise ship carrying 100 passengers and 54 crew sank after hitting an iceberg, and released 185,000 liters of diesel oil into the sea.

In 2007 the IAATO introduced new regulations preventing cruise ships carrying over 500 passengers from approaching land, allowing no more than 100 visitors ashore at any one place, and requiring one guide per 20 visitors. These rules have been adopted by the Antarctica Treaty nations; and the International Maritime Organization has gone a step further, banning cruise ships from using or carrying heavy oil in the Antarctic region (Cruise Critic, 2009). Since light

oil is considerably more expensive, the number of large cruise ships visiting Antarctica is likely to fall significantly, as is the number of visitors.

Can Antarctica benefit from tourism? Certainly not in terms of social welfare – there are no indigenous communities. However, it might be argued that many tourists who experience the awesome splendor of Antarctica are profoundly influenced by the experience, and as a result, become dedicated conservationists who will join the fight against the most serious threat to Antarctica's fragile environment: global warming.

cruises

Cruise tourism has been a major element of the tourism industry for many years. Until fairly recently, however, it has not been well-regulated.

This is partly due to the use of 'flags of convenience' whereby operators register the vessel in a country with weak regulations and low taxes. Operators have been criticized for polluting the sea with sewage, garbage and oil, damaging coral reefs with their anchors, importing alien species and overwhelming coastal communities with hordes of tourists. Cruises are normally all-inclusive, and the only financial benefits to the communities they visit are in the form of port taxes, wages to port workers and any souvenirs bought by tourists during their brief time ashore.

The treatment of cruise ship workers is also a major issue. They are generally not unionized, are poorly paid and are often made to work over twelve hours a day in miserable conditions. Once a cruise is over, they have no further income until they are hired for another cruise.

One might think that traveling by ship is more eco-friendly than traveling by airplane. However, data has shown that cruise ships emit about three times more CO₂ per passenger per kilometer than airplanes (Starmer-Smith, 2008). On the other hand, cruise ships make it possible to avoid the problems of poorly-regulated resort development in ecologically sensitive areas such as the Caribbean and Galapagos: when tourists arrive on cruise ships, they don't need hotels, discos or swimming pools. It is therefore somewhat ironic that some of the worst examples of resort development, such as Cancun, are also among the most popular cruise destinations.

Slum tours

An article published a few years ago in the Big Issue, a magazine sold by homeless people, introduced an unusual tour in the Netherlands in which the tourists were taken to meet homeless people and spend the night with them. The guides themselves were homeless; and profits were used to support people living on the street. Despite the obvious benefits for the

homeless, some critics suggested that this tour was offensive in that it treated the homeless like animals in a zoo. This is reminiscent of criticism directed at hill tribe tours in Thailand. Similar objections have been raised to 'slum tours' such as those on offer in Rocinha Favela (Rio de Janeiro), Soweto (Johannesburg) and Dharavi (the location in Mumbai for the film *Slumdog Millionaire*). However, provided the community approves and the benefits are fairly distributed, slum tourism can be viewed as socially responsible.

Conclusion

It is clear that the tourism industry will have to become more responsible if it is to survive, not just because its clients are demanding more responsibility, but also because it is, at present, ecologically unsustainable. It is also clear that greenwashing is no solution: the changes have to be substantial. However, tourists face major challenges in weighing the issues and in penetrating the facade of social and ecological responsibility that the industry has created. International conferences on responsible tourism will contribute nothing unless they are backed up by legislation (such as carbon taxes on plane tickets) and a proper system of accreditation for responsible tour operators and their products, managed transparently by independent experts. In the meantime, it is important for the mass media to report critically on the world's biggest industry, exposing greenwashing and drawing attention to operators and projects that are genuinely responsible.

References

- Blakely, R. 2010. India to stop tiger tourism in attempt to prevent species extinction. *The Times*, 28 April, 2010.
- Cape Town Conference. 2002. www.rtd4.com/
- Cruise Critic. 2009. Antarctic Cruises Not Impacted by Regulations Yet. Retrieved on 24 September 2010 from www.cruise critic.co.uk/news/
- Diffin, E. 2010. Is it wrong to swim with dolphins? *BBC News Magazine*. 19 March, 2010.
- Eriksson, J., R. Noble, P. Pattullo and T. Barnett. *Putting Tourism to Rights*. Tourism Concern. 2009.
- Este, J. 2006. Travel goes radical for the carbon conscious. *The Australian*, 2 September, 2006.
- IAATO. 2010. The International Association of Antarctic Tourism Operators. Retrieved on 24 September 2010 from: www.iaato.org/tourism_stats.html
- Knight, W. 2006. Eco-Resorts Turn White Slopes Green. *The New York Times*, 19 November, 2006.
- Mann, M. *The Community Tourism Guide*. Earthscan, 2000.
- Meadows, D. H., D. L. Meadows, Jorgen Randers and William W. Behrens III. *Limits to Growth*. Universe Books, New York, 1972.
- Ramesh, R. Paradise almost lost: Maldives seeks to buy a new homeland. *The Guardian*, 10 November, 2008.
- Robbins, T. The Great Green Rip-off? *The Observer*, 10 December, 2006.

Starmer-Smith, C. 2008. Flying three times greener than cruising. *The Telegraph*. 19 January, 2008.

Tearfund. 2000. Tourism – an Ethical Issue. Market Research Report. Retrieved on 24/9/2010 from <http://tilz.tearfund.org/>

Tearfund. 2001. Tourism – putting ethics into practice. Retrieved on 24/9/2010 from <http://tilz.tearfund.org/>

WCED. *Our Common Future*. World Commission on Environment and Development. Oxford University Press, 1987.

(本学文学部教授)