Postcards from Paradise

Whose Paradise?
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Feel like a break? How about going on holiday to an exotic locale, snorkeling in clear blue waters, and lying around on the beach while being served cocktails by the gorgeous locals? Or how about a package tour? You could visit 5 African countries in less than a week, and see all those animals in the wild that you usually only see in the zoo, all from the air conditioned comfort of a bus! Or maybe an adventure trek is more to your taste. How about elephant trekking in Thailand, followed by a visit to the hill tribes? It all sounds great, and you’re guaranteed to have a fantastic time, but how does your wonderful holiday affect the country and people you’re visiting? This edition of Global Issues takes a look at the impact of tourism and some of the ways you can be more mindful on your travels.

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At first glance, being a tourist seems like a simple, blameless activity, but tourism can present a number of ethical challenges. For example, Burma and Tibet are two places that are very appealing to tourists, but if you go there you might be supporting human rights violations. Would you go?

**Burma:** Since 1996, Burma's illegitimate military regime has encouraged international tourists (and tourist dollars) to Burma. Burma is promoted as a new and exotic holiday destination but it has one of the world’s worst human rights records. Many tourism-related projects have involved forced labour, property seizures, compulsory relocations, and other human rights abuses - all to make areas more attractive to tourists.

Despite the National League for Democracy (NLD) winning elections (and 82% of the seats in parliament) in 1990, the ruling military junta has refused to hand over power. Additionally, NLD leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Aung San Suu Kyi, was placed under house arrest in 1989, and has remained there, with brief periods of freedom, ever since. Her supporters, as well as those who promote democracy and human rights, are also regularly harassed or jailed by the junta. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD have asked tourists to boycott the government’s tourist drives until democracy is restored. As a result, many travel agents and tour operators have decided not to book or operate tours to Burma.

Since 1989, the military junta in Burma has promoted the name Myanmar as the name for their state; however this decision was not approved by any sitting legislature in Burma, so supporters of democracy continue to call it Burma. Nevertheless, the name Myanmar has been accepted by the United Nations.

**Tibet:** In 1950, China invaded Tibet. Tibet’s borders were then closed to travellers until 1985. Now Tibet is open to tourists again, but the continuing Chinese occupation raises ethical questions about travel to Tibet.

The Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, has encouraged travellers to go to Tibet, saying that it is good for foreigners to witness the oppression in Tibet and to inform people of their experiences on their return home. However, some people believe that tourism supports the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

There is also concern that Chinese-run tourism in Tibet promotes Tibetan culture as a ‘tourist attraction’ rather than as a living culture.

Furthermore, the Chinese government encourages tourism in Tibet in order to boost the Tibetan economy. However, because the airlines and hotels are government owned, most of the money tourists spend in Tibet ends up in the government’s hands, making it difficult to travel in Tibet without supporting the Chinese regime.

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**KEY WORDS**

- **BOYCOTT:** refuse to buy or handle goods, as a punishment or protest.
- **ETHICAL:** being in accordance with the principles of right and wrong that govern conduct.
- **ILLEGITIMATE:** not in accordance with the law or accepted standards.
- **INFRASTRUCTURE:** the roads, bridges, rail lines, and other public works that are needed for an industrial economy, or portion of it, to function.
- **JUNTA:** a military or political group ruling a country after taking power by force.
- **OCCUPATION:** having taken control of, and remaining a presence within, a place by military conquest or settlement.
- **OPPRESSION:** an unjust or excessive exercise of power.
- **TOURIST:** a person who travels for pleasure.
- **TOURISM:** the business of providing tours and services for tourists.

The Impact of Tourism

So what do tourists want? Unspoilt countryside, wildlife, ‘exotic’ culture, beaches and clear waters ... relaxation ‘away from it all’. In return, tourism can be a significant source of income for many countries, leading to economic and social development. Tourism can provide employment, improve transport and access, and support local culture and economies. However, tourism also has the potential to adversely affect the very things that tourists travel to see.

TOURISM HOTSPOTS

Goa: “Over the last ten years, hippies and similar backpack tourists have virtually taken over (...) They live here without visas or passports. ... They lie around nude on our beaches and practise and propagate free love and free sex. Drugs are an integral part of their relaxed way of life. They are parasites who thrive by sucking the life-blood of our nation ...”


Caribbean: Filling in of wetlands, mangrove destruction from resort construction, beach loss and lagoon pollution from sand mining, near-shore dredging and hotel sewage dumping; and reef damage from diving, yacht and cruise ship anchoring and marina development; have transformed coastal environments, and reduced ecosystem productivity.

Nepal: The demands of trekkers for hot showers (heated by wood fuel) has increased deforestation in the Himalayas.

Venezuela: Safari camps have been fenced off for nature walks and jaguar shoots without the permission of the Indians who have rights over the forest.

Masai Mara National Park, Kenya: development for tourists including roads, hotels, resorts and camping are negatively impacting on wildlife habitats and the ‘naturalness’ of the Park.

Thailand: Many tourists come to Thailand on sex tour package trips, leading to an increase in prostitution, growth of the sex trade, and spread of HIV/AIDS. AIDS, prostitution, and child prostitution were ignored for many years in Thailand for fear of damaging the tourism industry.

Worldwide:

GREEN GLOBE 21 is a global benchmarking, certification and improvement system for sustainable travel and tourism. GREEN GLOBE 21 works with tourism and travel companies and communities to achieve and maintain good environmental and social practice.
The Good and the Bad

So, with tourism growing every year, what is being done to make sure that tourism is sustainable for the people and environments in destination countries?

Aotearoa New Zealand: Dev-Zone, the Pacific Island Association of NGOs, and the South Pacific Tourism Organisation have created a Responsible Tourism Code for the Pacific in order to promote sustainable tourism (see back page).

Belize: Local fisherman, Lionel Heredia, has won a 30 year battle to create a protected reserve for manatees on a small island. Tour guides coming to see the manatees must now turn off their boat engines and use poles to steer their boats through the reserve.

Kenya: The Conservation and Research Initiative in Samburu, allows travellers to experience the environment and wildlife while helping to conserve both.

England: The Centre for Environmentally Responsible Tourism runs an award scheme for tour operators working toward high environmental standards.

Fiji: The Coral Gardens Initiative is a community-based organisation devoted to coral reef management and marine resource recovery. The Initiative has active involvement in ecotourism promotion and commercial coral aquaculture as project incentives.

The idea of experiencing difference, that leads so many tourists to visit other countries and cultures, centres around contrasts like ‘primitive’ vs. ‘civilised’, exotic vs. mundane, and rich vs. poor – i.e the civilised, rich tourist leaves his or her mundane every day life to visit primitive, exotic, poor cultures in other parts of the world (and then returns to the safety of home). This way of viewing other people and cultures as attractions can lead to stereotypes and racism.

“It is two years ago that my wife, who is white, and I were enjoying a swim in a pool at one of the more prestigious resorts on the first day of a well-earned holiday. I was the only Aboriginal in the water, but blissfully unaware of this fact, until the manager loudly ordered me from the pool, refusing to believe I was a paying guest.”

What is a stereotype?

• What kind of stereotypes about tourists led the resort manager to order Ernie Dingo out of the pool?
• In what ways could some racial stereotypes be reinforced by tourism?
• What are some strategies you can use to avoid stereotyping?

TOURIST BEWARE

When developing relationships with people on your travels, it is important to be aware that different cultures perceive things differently – what might seem like a casual relationship to you, might be something much more important to them, and vice versa. Keep in mind that your new friend may have to continue living with the impact of your relationship after you have gone.

KEY WORDS

DISCREPANCY: an illogical or surprising lack of compatibility or similarity between two or more facts.
ECOTOURISM: responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.
MANATEE: sea cow of tropical Atlantic coasts and estuaries, with a rounded tail flipper.
SUSTAINABLE: the ability to keep something going healthily over time or continuously.
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

1. What do you think are some problems with tourism?

**Stella (16):** Tourism can overflow countries with other cultures and over time tourists may westernise the popular countries they go to. Tourism could be dangerous for the tourist, because of violence and war in third world countries.

2. What are some good things about tourism?

**Stella:** It's good for the economy, and it might show the locals other cultures, and help them to learn new things. For the tourist, it's the same, it shows them other cultures which they can learn from. It's also a good life experience for the tourist.

3. What are some ways people can be “good” tourists?

**Stella:** Take only photos, leave only footprints!

**Katie (16):** I believe that by simply choosing our country as a destination to holiday in people from different cultures are helping New Zealand’s feeling of multi-culturalism to grow. It is when we are faced with such diverse ethnic backgrounds that we become more accepting and well-rounded people.

1. What do New Zealanders gain from tourism?

**Katie:** It's through tourism that people from other nations get a picture of what New Zealand is really like, which is then how we are perceived around the globe. New Zealand’s tourism industry is thriving, especially due to the current movie making success here, so this is then putting out a positive image for New Zealand, and all its people.

2. What do you think are some problems associated with tourism in Aotearoa New Zealand?

**Katie:** I think the main problem is that we aren’t equipped with a specific tourist style with everything set out and easily accessed from a tourist’s point of view, i.e. coaches to and from specific tourist destinations and brochures telling them exactly where to go. However, we don’t actually have enough tourists to feasibly do this so are stuck with the old ‘do it yourself’ method.

“There is a lot of good that can come from travel. Leaving your day to day life for another country, culture, language, way of doing things... can provide an awareness of the world that can’t be gained any other way. Through travel, people can gain experiential knowledge of worlds different to their own. It is often the understanding that this kind of knowledge can only be attained by stepping over international borders that leads people all over the world to pick up a backpack and head out into the wide blue yonder.

You’d think that backpackers would have a much less negative impact on people and places than hordes of tourists on a group tour, but think again. Backpackers who go wandering off into remote areas looking for an ‘authentic’ experience can sometimes do more damage than good.

At Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve in China, solo backpackers are tolerated – but only just. This is because solo travellers often try to bend the regulations put in place by the reserve administration in order to wrangle ‘authentic’ experiences out of reluctant local people. As a result, the way they seek to have their authentic experiences are often unsustainable, inauthentic, and disrespectful.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Check out page 8 for some suggestions of Positive Actions you can take when travelling.
Taking a closer look

As the social and environmental impact of tourism becomes more apparent, **ecotourism** is the tourism industry's fastest growing subsector, with an estimated world-wide annual growth of 10-15%. Ecotourism can be an excellent tool for sustainable development.

However, as the idea of ecotourism becomes more appealing to tourists, some organisations whack 'eco' on the front of 'tourism' without embracing ecotourism’s ethical and environmental basis.

**Eco-Tourism …**

One of Fiji’s most successful ecotourism businesses, Bouma National Heritage Park is run by the indigenous people of Taveuni in partnership with the Fijian government, with NZAID and New Zealand’s Tourism Resource Consultants’ assistance. The Park has strong local community support and environmental protection elements.

Fiji Visitors Bureau marketing director Jo Tuamoto said the success of Bouma Park was an inspiration. "It proves that it is possible to earn a sustainable income by preserving the natural environment and local culture," Tuamoto said.

**or Eco-Terrorism?**

However, other projects are not always so successful. In their search for untouched places, some ventures catering to adventurous travellers open destinations off the beaten track, speeding up the pace of social and environmental change in host communities. The creation of tourism sites can lead to local people ending their traditional use of land and natural resources. Furthermore, development through tourism can undermine the autonomy of local people by increasing their dependence on outside forces, and eroding their potential for self-reliance.

For example, in 2002, in the Moulvibaza district of Bangladesh more than 1,000 families of the Khasi and Garoare indigenous groups faced eviction from their ancestral lands for the development of a 610 hectare eco-park. "We have been living here for hundreds of years . . . we will not leave this forest," said a Khasi headman, Anil Yang Yung, "We cannot survive if we are evicted from the forest."

The term ‘ecotourism’ was coined in 1983 by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain, one of Mexico’s top architects, Director-General of the International Consultancy on Ecotourism, and special advisor to the World Conservation Union.

**KEY WORDS**

**ECOTOURISM:** Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.

Sources: www.guardian.co.uk/GWeekly/Story/0,3939,740155,00.html, Tourism Resource Consultants New Zealand.
Taking action

What can I do?

→ Promote responsible tourism. Start up a group to lobby a government or organisation that is involved in irresponsible tourism. Let them know there’s a better way of doing things.

→ Make a visual comparison chart showing the discrepancies between tourism brochures and the reality of life for many local people in popular tourist destinations. Display your chart somewhere it will be seen by lots of people - like on a school noticeboard or on your classroom wall.

Websites

www.ethicaltraveler.com is a grass-roots alliance uniting everyone who loves to travel, and sees travel as a positive force in the world. Ethical Traveler believes that we have the ability to join our voices, and to use our economic power to strengthen human rights and protect the environment. 

Tourism Concern works with communities to reduce social and environmental problems connected to tourism and with the out-going tourism industry in the UK to find ways of improving tourism so that local benefits are increased.

Oxo Tower Tourism Concern provides information about a photographic exhibition called “Behind the Smile: The Tsunami of Tourism”. Images of local people juxtaposed with luxury tourist resorts.

www.planeta.com has everything you could possibly want to know about ecotourism. Includes a comprehensive bibliography.

www.responsibletravel.com/copy/values campaigns for change in tourism. Includes information on campaigns against tourist trade in endangered species, and child sex tourism.

www.untamedpath.com provides information about ecotourism and related issues.

KEY WORDS

LOBBY: a group of people engaged in trying to influence legislators or other public officials in favour of a specific cause.