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Tourism and Its Discontents in the Global South

JOSEPH CHEER

Tourism has become a massive global business sector. Travelers criss-crossing the globe took a record number of more than 1.4 billion international trips in 2018, spending huge amounts of money and generating \$1.7 trillion in revenue, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). The volume and extent of these global sojourns is unprecedented in human history. International travel, whether for leisure, adventure, education, business, or religious purposes, is now embedded in contemporary lifestyles.

And more people and places have been drawn into the tourism industry than ever before. According to current estimates, over one in ten jobs around the world can be attributed to tourism. The sector accounts for around 7 percent of total international exports and 30 percent of services exports.

Underpinning the growth of international travel are the changing tastes of the globe’s mobile and affluent classes. Many among them have shifted their attention from the acquisition of material goods toward the accumulation of extraordinary life experiences—the kinds of experiences that can only be achieved through travel. Tony Wheeler, the cofounder of travel guidebook publisher Lonely Planet, and arguably the father of today’s globalized tourism, has opined that the more one travels, the more extraordinary the world becomes.

This notion of travel as the antithesis of the everyday routine is now commonplace. And travel has become more widely accessible thanks to an array of factors, including a prolonged period of global economic growth, the proliferation of low-

cost airlines, and the lowering of visa entry requirements. The ubiquity of social media and personal brand building now entices more and more people to pursue and share such experiences.

The implications of booming international travel have become intertwined with pressing global concerns, notably climate change and other environmental issues, such as the exploitation of nature. Tourism also can determine the economic development prospects of destination areas. And there is a growing trend of tourists participating in volunteer projects to do good while traveling.

My particular focus here is on the impact of international tourism on what is usually referred to (at least in scholarly and international development circles) as the global South—those countries and areas that belong to the less developed or developing world. This encompasses the majority of countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, Central Asia, the Pacific Islands, and others in contexts more difficult to define.

The idea of the global South often also includes First Nation Peoples and other indigenous groups in developed countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, whose standards of living are comparable with those in the less developed and developing world. Some indigenous peoples have sought to leverage their cultural and natural inheritances for tourism development, trying to capitalize on the marketability of indigeneity as a draw for global travelers.

Tourism today still mainly involves the global movement of travelers from the developed countries (or the global North) of Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea. They are increasingly joined by the rapidly growing affluent classes of China. Yet most international travel for tourism is still with-

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in the global North: between Europe and North America, or between Asia and both Europe and North America. Although travel from the global North to countries of the global South is also on the rise, it has grown to a lesser extent. But it has provoked a great deal of debate.

The catchphrase “sustainable tourism” has come to stand for the aspiration to develop the industry in a way that respects the needs of hosts as equivalent to those of travelers. The UNWTO designated 2017 as the Year of International Tourism for Sustainable Development. This strain of idealism has long been voiced by promoters of the merits of tourism in the global South. It emerged in the 1960s, when H. David Davis of the World Bank argued that tourism was unparalleled in its ability to generate foreign exchange earnings and stimulate employment and incomes, and was therefore an ideal means of accelerating economic development.

While some contemporary observers are also sanguine about the potential of tourism to deliver substantial benefits for the global South, others like Tricia Barnett, cofounder of the group Equality in Tourism, argue that despite enormous opportunities, the truth is rather depressing: although jobs are indeed created, the payoff is questionable. The main reason, according to Barnett, is that the tourism industry very often is dominated by foreign direct investment, so the economic benefits accrue elsewhere. This presents a dilemma for many countries of the global South—how to ensure that the expansion of tourism does not play out along marginalizing neocolonial lines, leaving local communities worse off.

THE NEW GRAND TOUR?

In Europe, the tourist circuit known as the Grand Tour served as a rite of passage for privileged members of the upper classes from the seventeenth century into the nineteenth century—typically with Italy as the ultimate destination. The Grand Tour might be considered something of a precursor to present-day tourism to the global South. Some idealists still see travel as a path to education and enlightenment, or to developing character and a well-rounded worldview—aims once associated with the Grand Tour.

But for the most part, today’s reality is radically different due to the democratization of global trav-

el. Far more people now have access to travel and the means to undertake their own versions of the Grand Tour. One need only look at the summer playgrounds of the Mediterranean, or the thronged resorts of Southeast Asia, to recognize that for many tourists, any noble intentions have given way to excesses of hedonism and self-indulgence that can make life a nightmare for host communities. Hedonism, of course, was not unknown among travelers in the age of the Grand Tour, but the number of tourists (and hence their impact) was much smaller then.

Contemporary travel to the global South typically takes place against a backdrop of poverty, enduring legacies of conflict and environmental crises, natural resource scarcities, and developmental deficiencies such as a lack of diversified economies. This leads to perhaps the most contentious aspect of global travel: beyond the clash of cultures, disproportionate power relationships are established between relatively moneyed, educated, curious travelers and desperate, poorly educated hosts. While there are obviously exceptions to such generalizations, these power dynamics are all too common in host-guest relations in the developing world.

For many tourists, travel to the global South is doubtless driven by a genuine fascination with its people and places, or what might be called a desire to explore the world of the exotic “Other,” as the literary scholar Edward Said put it in his influential 1978 book *Orientalism*. The eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s concept of the “noble savage,” the antithesis of modern man, reflects an early version of this same desire to experience the life of the Other as an escape from one’s own familiar and mundane existence.

Today, companies capitalize on such yearnings by marketing opportunities to “live like a local.” They offer supposedly authentic experiences that are eminently suited to self-congratulatory social media posts. Celebrations of Hawaii’s “Aloha spirit” are emblematic of the banality of many such touristic encounters: the salutation, meant in island culture to convey love, friendship, and care, is extended to tourists, yet its commercialization in staged luaus and hula dances belies those warm intentions and renders host-guest exchanges as superficial transactions.

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“Making a difference” through travel has become another rallying cry for many tourists of a progressive and humanitarian outlook who are intent on leaving a positive mark on the global South. Volunteer tourism—“voluntourism”—is characteristic of this trend. Both skilled and unskilled travelers sign up to work alongside government personnel and civil society groups on development projects in areas such as education, public health, economic development and infrastructure, and emergency aid delivery. While some voluntourism efforts may be productive, they have also drawn criticism as convenient ways to pad a resume, or to indulge the so-called white savior impulse, rather than vindicating an ideal of tourism as a mutually beneficial exchange.

A broader movement for “responsible tourism,” which brings together academics, industry organizations, and advocacy groups, promotes the mantra, “Take nothing but photographs and leave nothing but footprints,” while warning against inappropriate, inconsiderate, and exploitative behavior by travelers to less developed and developing countries. Yet the mere presence of tourists, no matter how careful or well-intentioned they may be, can have profoundly disturbing and damaging impacts. In her short 2011 documentary film about tourism in remote Ethiopia, *Framing the Other*, for example, Ilja Kok depicts how competition among villagers for the new resource can intensify into conflict.

Another revealing documentary, Denis O'Rourke's 1988 *Cannibal Tours*, is about European tourists in Papua New Guinea's Sepik River region. It examines the problematic nature of host-guest encounters in which travelers are embraced for their wealth, while local people are fetishized for their supposedly primitive and otherworldly personas. The tourists seek to extract exoticism from the Other, while the hosts work to gain maximum economic advantage.

In the 1980 book *Pacific Tourism: As Islanders See It*, edited by Freda Rajotte and Ron Crocombe, which was one of the first scholarly attempts to elicit host communities' perspectives, local residents complained that they received only crumbs from the tourist trade. The late anthropologist Malcolm Crick similarly lamented that the overwhelming effect of tourism in the global South has been to reinforce the subservience and precarious state of host communities, deepening the marginalization wrought by the historical legacies of colonization. These adverse impacts are intensified by

both the dominance of outside influence in global travel supply chains and the cronyism and poor governance prevalent in developing countries.

COUNTING THE COSTS

The question of whether tourism's impact on destination communities in the global South is mostly beneficial or largely damaging is difficult to answer unequivocally, due to the complex interplay of factors and a lack of fine-grained data gathered over a long period. Analyses of the impacts of tourism tend to be couched in economic terms, such as total international visits and expenditures, foreign direct investment, jobs created, and overall contribution to gross domestic product at the national level. Tourism's potential for alleviating poverty has long been promoted as its most positive benefit; but although there are some examples of this panning out, they are fairly rare.

Jeremy Smith, a leading voice for sustainable tourism, argues that one reason for these disappointing results is that “acting more sustainably is framed as an external cost,” rather than as an essential undertaking. It is unlikely that most tourists will pay more or behave differently to ensure that their holidays in the global South have more beneficial effects for local communities. Smith also notes that although tourism's potential benefits for host communities are often touted, international travel is driven by unsustainable consumption of fossil fuels. Flights from Europe to Africa or from North America to Latin America generate large quantities of carbon emissions in an age of accelerating climate change. Tourism and climate change researchers James Higham and Susanne Becken argue that the most environmentally sound action that people can take is to travel less, though they concede that persuading enough people to change their behavior so dramatically would be a formidable task.

Countries in the global South are the most vulnerable to climate change and other environmental disruptions, given their greater reliance on natural resources and exposure to natural disasters. Small-island developing countries are a case in point, as seen in the inundation from sea-level rise afflicting the Pacific island states of Kiribati and Tuvalu and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events in the Caribbean. In these contexts, where natural capital is crucial to local livelihoods and food sources, any degradation is bound to have profound impacts on inhabitants' well-being.

More often than not, where international tourists go and how they spend their money is deter-

mined by a profit-driven industry that is little concerned with the well-being and security of local residents. Community-based tourism—travel that bypasses the global tour operators and strives to connect directly with local producers—is a niche experience at best, and often an expensive one.

For countries in the global South, the main allure of tourism involves economic imperatives—jobs, foreign exchange earnings, foreign investment. But their efforts to seize such opportunities and build more diversified economies are often hindered by multiple bottlenecks, including government incapacity, the dominance of foreign capital, political instability, and weak resilience to natural disasters. Many local people have menial, low-skilled jobs and limited formal education, whereas tourism enterprises may require highly trained staff.

The reliance on foreign direct investment is a further constraint on the positive economic effects of tourism, since profits are usually repatriated abroad or otherwise prevented from being put to use locally. Limited ability to satisfy the needs of visitors with locally sourced products often results in “leakages” of tourist spending.

The social impact of tourism in the global South is felt mostly at the local level. Expansion of the tourism sector can lead to displacement of local people, as desirable real estate—coastal or arable land—is snapped up by government insiders and private interests for resort and infrastructure development. Inflationary effects also force surrounding communities to retreat to more peripheral locales. For indigenous peoples, alienation from their traditional land disrupts customary ways of life and livelihoods—and puts them at a disadvantage in the competition for scarce resources such as water.

These disruptions fragment communities and undermine their overall resilience to change. Some commentators also point to “demonstration effects”—the phenomenon of locals, especially youth, mirroring the behavior of tourists. This can be particularly problematic in places where the culture is deeply conservative and religious.

Analyses of the cultural impact of tourism raise questions about authenticity, commodification, and diminishing integrity. Authenticity, or the extent to which a culture retains its integrity in touristic contexts, is widely presumed to attract

foreign visitors. Some therefore argue that tourism can play a role in ensuring that local culture is valued and even strengthened. But tourism often leads to garish displays of culture—crass, Disneyfied versions of the authentic. Critics say that such commodification is harmful to local communities whose cultural identity is debased and trivialized in order to entertain tourists.

EARNING THE RIGHT TO TRAVEL

The success of efforts to secure better and more consistent outcomes for destination communities in the global South will depend on instilling a more ethical approach and a greater awareness of social justice concerns in the consumption of travel experiences, as tourism scholar Tazim Jamal suggests. What good will the industry do if it marginalizes communities that are already disadvantaged, or undermines the social, cultural, and environmental inheritances that bind them together and enable them to respond to change?

The tourism industry and governments must recognize and protect the interests of these communities, and tourists themselves need to exercise more responsibility.

The international development scholar Regina Scheyvens has found that evidence that tourism contributes directly to poverty alleviation is fairly sparse. Such findings challenge the claims of governments, development agencies, and industry representatives that more tourism will deliver many benefits to host communities. But others, like Jeremy Smith, argue that properly designed regulations can ensure that societies benefit and that tourism is indeed sustainable.

My own research into links between modern slavery and tourism in the global South suggests that the problem is far more severe than it has been thought to be. Growing interest in orphanage visits has resulted in children, most of whom are not actually orphans, being housed like animals in a zoo to attract tourists. And human traffickers commonly provide cheap labor for construction sites or to serve as housekeepers and cooks at resorts.

The desire for extraordinary travel experiences seems to be frequently accompanied by a naive or willful ignorance of the reality that other people may be exploited in the process. What, then, of the so-called right to travel, which the World Tourism Organization says should be “equally open to all

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the world's inhabitants"? Surely this right must be matched by efforts to stop tourism from morphing into a disruptive and damaging force, particularly for the most vulnerable. But the question of who should be responsible for such measures is difficult to adjudicate.

Although the situations where tourism has proved capable of delivering mutually beneficial outcomes for hosts and guests are rare, the question of whether tourism can be a boon for communities in the global South remains open. For tourism to deliver the promised benefits, a lot has to go right. Rather than ad hoc, demand-driven, and politically motivated rationales, tourism requires effective, accountable planning and governance. Local communities must have a say in how their collective inheritances are mobilized for tourism; they should not be excluded from criti-

cal decision-making, particularly in development planning processes.

The time has come to reconceptualize tourism. Rather than assuming that host communities must serve the industry, expectations should be adjusted so that tourism genuinely aligns with those communities' own priorities. But tourism, like any other industry, makes the pursuit of profit its top priority. How can this be reconciled with the interests of countries in the global South that desperately need sustainable development? And what if the pursuit of development through tourism is more harmful than beneficial for some countries? Despite all of the shiny airports and glitzy resorts proliferating in the global South, and the many government pronouncements that the tourism industry will deliver untold riches to needy communities, the jury is still out. ■