

Eco-holidays – The sustainable tourism paradox

Notions of sustainable tourism need to think hard about what the term often means in practice, write Joseph Wilde and Bart Slob

There are few among us who would not enjoy getting away for a relaxing vacation on a sunny beach far from the daily routine.

The dream is even more attractive if we feel that our holiday can help contribute to sustainable development in the local community at our tourism destination.

Indeed, tourism is being touted as a way to help lift developing countries and regions with few other possibilities for economic development out of poverty. But can we really be sure that our vacation expenditures are contributing to the sustainable development of local communities?

Research into the tourism industry conducted by the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (Somo) reveals that the notion of sustainable tourism embodies a paradox.

Tourism, if undertaken in a responsible way, contributes to the economic development of local communities. However, the means of transportation required to get tourists to those communities and destinations is inherently unsustainable.

These two facets of tourism are contradictory yet inseparable, and the ethically-minded traveller needs to be aware that tourism is not a sustainable development panacea.

A complex picture

Somo's research on tourism has used, as a case study, Porto de Galinhas, a small village in north-eastern Brazil, to analyse sustainability issues in the tourism industry and map the value chain of tourism to Brazil.

Porto de Galinhas, which is in many ways representative of tourism communities around the world, has experienced a boom in tourism over the past five years, and many local entrepreneurs and workers acknowledge that tourism is key to the development of the region.

However, the community is struggling to ensure the sustainability of the industry, both in terms of retaining as much value as possible in the region and doing so without compromising the local environment and culture.

One reason that tourism can have such a positive effect on local economic development is the complexity of the tourism value chain and the linkages with a large number of economic sectors.

Tourism encompasses not just accommodation, transport and excursions, but also bars and restaurants, handicrafts, entertainment, food production, waste disposal, and the infrastructure (energy, water, roads) and construction that supports these sectors.

However, despite the integration of tourism and tourism-related activities, the value-adding effects of tourism are often lost for local economies because of "leakages".

Leakages occur when tourists' expenditure is either sent out of the country (for example, when payment goes to a foreign hotel company) or never reaches the country in the first place (for example, much of the expense of a holiday will typically be taken up by travel agent commissions, the cost foreign airline tickets or tour operator profits).

Some experts estimate that 60% to 90% of a typical total holiday price "leaks" out of the destination country and thus does not contribute to local economic development.

Buy local

To reduce leakages and contribute to local economic development, tour operators should offer (and tourists should opt for) small-scale, locally-owned hotels and services rather than large multinational chains.

This may be nothing new for responsible tourists, but Somo's research in Porto de Galinhas confirms that such hotels generally source their own goods and services locally, effectively linking in to local economic development, while luxury hotels tend to source their goods and services from farther away, leaking profits out of the region.

Similarly, luxury tourism activities, such as scuba diving, require trained personnel and equipment to be imported while more modest activities, such as simple tours, make use of local resources.

It is clear that responsible, context-conscious tourism contributes to the economic development of local communities and should be encouraged. However, encouraging more tourists to travel to destinations such as Porto de Galinhas implies an increase in greenhouse gas-emitting air travel, which has a negative ecological effect.

Per passenger mile travelled, carbon dioxide emissions of aircraft are five times higher than those of cars and 20 times higher than trains. A single round-trip flight from Amsterdam to Rio de Janeiro generates more than four tonnes of greenhouse gasses as well as other pollutants.

The pollution paradox

Herein lies the paradox of sustainable tourism: in order to visit and contribute to the economic development of local communities at tourism destinations in developing countries, tourists must use a means of travel that is unsustainable. Until and unless advances in technology allow tourists to travel without polluting, visits to far-away places simply cannot be sustainable.

This is not to say that people should stop travelling and exploring the world in a responsible way, but we should not fool ourselves into believing that long-haul tourism is sustainable just because it can contribute to local economies.

When the environmental costs of travel are included, other industries may in fact be better placed to contribute to sustainable economic development in poor countries than tourism. Three cheers for the one who discovers the non-polluting plane, because it is a long bike ride to Brazil.

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