

VISIONS OF TOURISM: FROM MODERNIZATION TO SUSTAINABILITY

*By Amanda Stronza
and Carter Hunt*

We live in an era where the heavy-weights of the tourism industry tout sustainability. Even Hilton, a name practically synonymous with mass tourism, promises to “lead the industry with products and programs” that not only “deliver great guest experiences,” but also “protect the world we live in.” Holland America Cruises publishes an annual “sustainability report,” which includes not only the number of passengers abroad and nautical miles traveled, but also the total tons of carbon emitted. In the airline industry, Costa Rica’s regional airline NatureAir is the world’s first carbon neutral airline, automatically including the cost of carbon off-sets into the fares of its regional flights. At the international level, Virgin America now offers passengers the opportunity to swipe their credit cards through their seat-back “Red” entertainment consoles and purchase carbon off-sets while in flight.

These trends signify growing public concern about the environment and sustainability and an interest in making the private market work for an array of public goods—vibrant economies, thriving communities, and healthy ecosystems. Some have called this a “triple bottom line” (Buckley 2003). Tourism in some form is now marketed to potential visitors to destinations all over the world, from remote indigenous communities to gateway cities outside of United States national parks, as a way to contribute to the achievement of these goals. Yet not long ago, however, the tourism industry showed little regard for its social or environmental impacts (de Kadt 1979), and non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, devoted little attention to the power of tourism either to protect or destroy natural areas and local communities (Smith 1977).

Our objective here is to highlight how ideas about tourism, that is, what it can achieve and how it is marketed, reflect changing paradigms of development over the last half century. We will discuss two main paradigms, modernization and sustainable development, and how they have both shaped tourism policies and been exemplified and almost piloted by tourism projects all over the world. Whereas pollution, inflation, environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and other problems attributable to tourism used to be borne by communities and environments of the local destination, they are now increasingly being assumed by the industry itself. The externalities, as economists would say, are increasingly being internalized by tour operators and agencies. This shift is reflected in the new array of tourism products and niches, which include ecotourism, agritourism, ethnotourism, sustainable tourism, and others.

Evolving Visions of Tourism

With the “discovery” of the developed world, an event often traced to Truman’s 1949 inaugural speech, the post WWII era has seen tourism implemented primarily as a tool for modernizing traditional or underdeveloped societies as they march toward a First World ideal of high mass-consumerism (Mowforth and Munt 2008). In the 1970s, at the height of this modernization era in international development, large-scale tourism was heralded enthusiastically and often uncritically as a veritable “passport to development” (de Kadt 1979). During these years, the economic concept of “comparative advantage” resulted in entire island nations and other middle-latitude coastal areas advertising themselves as pristine paradises. With promises of plenty of sun, sand, sea (and sex), they opened their doors to foreign and multilateral tourism investors and lured them with

generous tax breaks, fee exemptions, and devalued local currencies (Mowforth and Munt 2008).

Times eventually changed, however, and so did the paradigm for development. In the late 1980s, international development began to adopt a rhetoric that was less top-down, more democratized, and newly holistic in its integrated concerns for people and nature. This approach was reflected in the 1987 Brundtland Report from the World Commission on Environment and Development which called for development actors to place social and environmental concerns on equal footing with economics, thereby ushering in the era of “sustainable development” (Brundtland 1987). As the centralization of governments began to diminish, NGOs assumed new and important roles as architects and stewards of development. Strategies became community centered and aimed at improving people’s welfare while also protecting the environment (Brandon and Wells 1992). Sustainability now challenged growth as the ultimate goal of development, and tourism began to be viewed as a “green passport.” Development specialists and conservationists began to perceive and promote sustainable tourism and ecotourism as potentially beneficial to communities and ecosystems (Brandon and Wells 1992). As in the prior years of modernization, tourism in the era of sustainable development was painted with rosy colors, although the palette had expanded. Tourism had become not only a formula for “growing the economy,” but also an incentive for conservation, a strategy for empowering disenfranchised peoples, a platform for reversing colonial legacies of social and environmental injustice, and an opportunity to build cross-cultural understanding and new appreciation for nature (Stronza 2001).

Today the indicators of tourism’s success as a mode of development include



Local “Polers” Take Tourists for Rides in Traditional Wooden Canoes Called Mokoros in the Okavango Delta, Botswana

a variety of positive social and environmental changes. Now we measure tourism’s impact by how it helps protect biodiversity, by the number of species newly valued and protected, by the number of hectares placed in reserve, or by the greater environmental threats averted (Buckley 2011). On the microeconomic scale, the variety and volume of economic benefits generated for local communities are now forefront. Social and cultural measures of success have changed as well. “Sustainable” tourism now requires, ideally, providing local hosts the opportunity to manage or own their own enterprises, monitoring for themselves the impacts of tourism on their homes and communities, and becoming empowered politically, culturally, psychologically, and socially (Scheyvens 1999). The expectations and demands on tourism in the age of sustainable development have increased dramatically.

Changing Roles for Stakeholders

As the goals and standards for tourism have shifted, many stakeholders throughout the industry have also taken on new possibilities and roles. Local communities in tourism host countries are partnering with tour companies and NGOs as they learn how to channel outside attention on their lands, traditions, lifestyles,

and socioeconomic situation in hopes of achieving positive change (Stronza and Gordillo 2008). Tour operators are seeking new partners in communities and among NGOs as they try to make sense of and capitalize on a newly green market. Even some regional and national governments have adopted a discourse of using tourism to help protect biodiversity and alleviate poverty. And tourists are hiking, gliding, and paddling through new terrains, learning to gaze more respectfully, to listen more closely, to ask where their money really goes, and, perhaps, to even change their worldview. In the midst of the repositioning, NGOs are playing especially pivotal roles. Key contributions of NGOs so far have included serving as mediators among stakeholders collaborating in new partnerships, lobbying for policies favorable to sustainability, and helping raise public awareness about social and environmental responsibility in tourism. Project-oriented NGOs are also contributing by way of example and are implementing pilot initiatives that demonstrate linkages between conservation, community development, and sustainable tourism. For example, in the late 1990s, Conservation International (CI) offered support and training to villagers in the community of San Jose de Uchupiamonas to help establish the Chalalan Ecolodge

in Madidi, Bolivia. With five years of financial support from the InterAmerican Development Bank, CI’s collaboration with local leaders made Chalalan one of the first fully autonomous and community-owned ecolodges in Latin America. Perhaps one of the most important roles for NGOs has been to help communities and grassroots organizations in tourism destinations gain greater control over tourism and manage impacts according to their own concerns and needs. Finally, NGOs are often well-suited to conduct research on the impacts of tourism and help establish plans for future management and monitoring.

Tour operators and other industry representatives have also taken steps to promote sustainability. Many are striving to craft cohesive messages about what responsible tourism is, with the consensus lying in the idea that tourism should, at least, do no harm to local communities and environments. Regional tourism associations can play an especially critical role in educating tourists and helping shift the status quo for tourism practices throughout whole regions. They are especially good at establishing place-specific guidelines that conform to local political, economic, and cultural concerns. In contrast, many large NGOs (e.g., Rainforest Alliance and the United Nations Foundation) offer a global perspective across regions, cultural traditions, and ecosystems, emphasizing broad and long-term development ideals for tourism, including the promotion of biodiversity conservation and indigenous rights.

Emerging Guidelines in Tourism

Guidelines are divided broadly into two categories: those aimed at tour operators, and those aimed at tourists. Standards for tour operators include ensuring that local communities receive direct economic benefits (e.g., preference in employment and purchasing of local goods and services), establishing a process for transferring knowledge and know-how to local leaders, maintaining trust and transparency with local hosts, educating and raising cultural and environmental awareness among guests, and

seeking proactively to protect natural resources, especially those of subsistence importance to local communities.

While open to critique, the efforts of large hotel and other industry operators to include corporate social responsibility into their mission statements reflect an increasing awareness of the ethical aspects of travel and tourism. Efforts to develop strict sustainable tourism criteria are beginning to bear some fruit, as in Costa Rica's Certificate for Sustainable Tourism program. Work is currently underway to create an international accreditation body for "certifying the certifiers" through the Tourism Sustainability Council, co-initiated by the United Nations Foundation, United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations World Tourism Organization, and Rainforest Alliance.

For tourists, guidelines include reading about local places and environments before traveling, spending money locally, asking how profits are connected to communities and conservation, and remembering to behave, truly, as a guest. Some rules are broad and include the basic "take no pictures"; others are culturally specific and recommend "removing shoes when visiting temples." Some guidelines, such as those embraced by The International Centre for Responsible Tourism, approach the philosophical: "cultivate a habit of listening and observing, rather than merely hearing and seeing" (O'Grady 1980). Beyond doing no harm, two overarching themes emerge: (1) respecting culture, which at the very least entails asking questions about local traditions and paying attention; and, (2) being an active and conscientious visitor, which might also entail asking how tourist dollars are channeled to conservation and community needs, if at all.

Internalization of Tourism's Externalities

So far, we've briefly described the transition from a modernization to a sustainability model of development and how this change has been reflected in tourism. Much of the story we've told is positive, perhaps because it is



A Canopy Tower Offers a Bird's Eye View of the Rainforest in the Community-Based Ecotourism Lodge, Posada Amazonas, in Tambopata, Peru

just that: a story or a kind of rhetorical device used to market tourism and in the process support business as usual. Even in this era of sustainability, local communities still receive little benefit from the tourism industry and still pay much of the environmental and social costs (Hunt and Stronza 2011). In some sense, the transition from modernization to sustainability merely represents the absorption by the tourism industry of the previously externalized costs of development. In the modernization era, tourism was a means of generating foreign exchange and integrating national economies with the world market or indigenous communities with nation states (Mowforth and Munt 2008). Social and environmental costs were largely external to these calculations, as well as to measures of tourism's success or failure.

This continued into the 1970s, which not coincidentally is when a number of anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists turned their lenses upon tourism (de Kadt 1979; MacCannell 1976, Smith 1977). Their research began to shed light upon the "acute" costs of tourism-related development

for local peoples and environments. As social and ecological awareness heightened, policy makers by the 1980s were forced to address the many problems of the modernization approach. The shift in thinking culminated in the aforementioned Brundtland Report of 1987 and its mandate for *sustainable* development, a major effort to internalize the environmental and social outcomes of development, and to move to alternative forms of supposedly more sustainable tourism (Smith and Eadington 1992). Ecotourism in particular became the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry and appeared to hold some promise to reduce the acute, local impacts of tourism (Stronza 2001).

Yet we also need to consider the generalized, or dispersed, costs of tourism development. As we look beyond impacts on local communities and their surrounding environments, we must also consider the effects of tourism from the moment tourists leave their place of origin, through their visit in their chosen destination, and again once they return home. Researchers have documented the dispersed environmental impact of air travel on the global atmospheric

commons, thus revealing travel and tourism's substantial contribution to global climate change (Buckley 2011). Thus, while ecotourism may be effective in reducing the acute costs of tourism in local destinations, when included into calculations of overall environmental impact, the externalized and dispersed costs of travel including flight emissions make the distinctions between ecotourism and mass tourism negligible on a larger, global scale.

Conclusion

Regrettably, tourism is also implicated in other prominent global environmental concerns including sea level rise, arctic ice melts, desertification, coral bleaching, waste production, and water overconsumption. Whether tourism's impacts have been accounted for or remain externalized, whether they are locally acute or globally dispersed, local populations still bear the brunt of these impacts. In order to move tourism studies and "development" toward more effective and just paradigms, currently externalized costs must be internalized; tourism's acute and dispersed impacts, not just on the natural environment but also on markets, politics, cultures, and societies, must be factored in.

For most people, tourism is an escape, a reward, a chance to indulge. Among scholars, tourism can be the ideal subject of study. In this paper, we have tried to summarize two overarching ideals about development as they have filtered into in tourism policy and discourse over the past half-century. As our ideals continue to evolve, we look forward to further inquiry and discussion of the ways in which tourism both reflects and enacts our hopes for the global economy, the future of indigenous peoples, the sustainability of our lifestyles, and our collective relationship with the natural world.

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- Amanda Stronza** (*astronza@tamu.edu*) is an environmental anthropologist and Associate Professor in Recreation, Park, and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University. She studies sustainable development and biodiversity conservation with a focus on the ways in which local actors perceive, experience, resist, or engage in conservation-as-development programs, like ecotourism. Her field experience is primarily in the Amazon regions of Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia. She is currently a Visiting Professor at the Okavango Research Institute, in Botswana, and beginning new research on the social and economic impacts of trophy hunting vs. photographic safaris.
- Carter Hunt** (*cahunt@stanford.edu*) is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University. He holds a PhD in Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences from Texas A&M University and will join the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management at Penn State University in January 2013. His primary interests are innovative mechanisms for biodiversity conservation and rural community development in Latin America, with a focus on ecotourism. ■
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