Sustainable tourism – myth or reality?

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Synopsis

Tourism is the world’s largest industry, and can have an important multiplier effect within economies, especially those of developing nations. However, with so much international travel dependent on flights, with their heavy use of dwindling supplied of fossil fuel, how sustainable can any destination be?

Tourism should not exceed the carrying capacity of an area; if it does, the very environments and landscapes that attract tourists in the first place may be destroyed.

However, tourism is important for some areas without many income options, and continues to be an important way for countries, especially those in developing regions, to develop economically, and is often a stimulus for infrastructure improvements that benefit the population as a whole.

Case studies presented here show that, with appropriate safeguards and management, it is possible for the environment and local culture to be maintained and supported for the benefit of both visitors and the local community.

With our increasing awareness of the individual’s impact on global systems and destinations, we can more clearly move towards sustainable tourism – but there is still a long way to go.

Key terms

carbon emissions, carrying capacity, cultural values, fragile ecosystems, opportunities for development, pleasure periphery, sustainability, wildlife habitats

Learning objectives

By examining some of the challenges to the natural environment and to traditional cultures posed by tourism, you will have a better understanding of:

• interrelationships between people and the environment
• interconnections between places in different contexts
• links between the environment and political and economic contexts
• questions and issues about people and the environment

Exam Board | Link to specification
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AQA | Unit 3 GEOG3 Contemporary Geographical Issues, Option 5: Development and Globalisation, Development issues within the world, ‘Sustainable tourism, myth or reality’ http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/specifications/a level/AQA-2030-W-SP-14.PDF (see page 12)
Edexcel | Unit 1 Global Challenges, Global networks, http://www.edexcel.com/migrationdocuments/GCE%20New%20GCE/UA035234_GCE_Lin_Geog_Issue_4.pdf (see page 28); Unit 2, Geographical Investigations, 1 Time to rebrand; 2 Rebranding strategies; Unit 4 Geographical Research Option 4: The World of Cultural Diversity, 1 Defining culture and identifying its value; Option 6: Consuming the Rural Landscape – Leisure and Tourism
WJEC | Unit G3 Section A Contemporary Themes and Research in Geography, Theme 1 – Extreme Environments; Theme 2 – Landforms and their Management http://www.wjec.co.uk/uploads/publications/6312.pdf (see pages 28–31)
CCEA | Unit AS 2 Human Geography, Section B, 2(b) Planning issues in rural environments; Unit A2 1: Human Interactions and Global Issues, Section B, 4 Issues in tourism (ii) The Ecotourism Debate. A copy can be downloaded from: http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/qualifications/results.aspx?g=1&t=1&c=R&rs=0&v=0&f=0&q=182&d=d (see pages 15 and 24)
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Introduction

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (WTO), tourism can be defined as: ‘a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment’.

It is the world’s largest industry, contributing 9.1% of global GDP and 8.7% of total employment (2011). Tourism can have an important multiplier effect within economies, especially those of developing nations. There are two popular views of tourism: that it destroys culture and westernises communities in developing countries, or that it provides economic income and opportunities for development.

Figure 1 shows the huge growth in international travellers since the 1950s, which is due to a number of reasons:

- Increasing levels of disposable income (the money that is left over after all basic costs have been met).
- Increasing length of paid holidays.
- Developments in transport, especially air travel.

Today, whether because of increasing wealth, the perceived status it gives them, or due to genuine interest, tourists are now going literally to the ends of the earth for their holidays as the pleasure periphery (escape locations which are away from the mainland or usual tourist areas) expands. Popular long-haul destinations for European or American visitors now include Antarctica, Patagonia, China and New Zealand. However, with so much international travel dependent on flights with their heavy use of dwindling supplies of fossil fuel, how sustainable can any destination be?

Sustainable tourism

Elements that go to make up a sustainable holiday destination are summarised in Figure 2. There are many locations that are trying to move towards achieving this. For a destination to be sustainable, the local community must be fully involved and the local economy needs to benefit. Infrastructure should be in keeping with the local styles and, if possible, scale. Tourism should not exceed the carrying capacity of an area as if it does, then the very environments and landscapes that attract tourists in the first place would be destroyed.

Nature or wildlife tourism is sometimes viewed as part of sustainable tourism. It focuses on enjoying and respecting wildlife. Eco-tourism is similar but includes elements of education of the traveller. However, just using such a term does not necessarily mean that the holiday is sustainable.

Case Study 1: Everest base camp, Nepal

In 1953, the summit of Everest in Nepal was reached for the first time. Today, more than 4,000 climbers have reached the peak and the base camp is viewed as a possible destination by large numbers of people. In 2010, there were over 32,000 visitors to the Everest region, with many trekking up as far as the base camp to get a clear view of the mountain. There are limited facilities along the route to the camp, and until recently tourists had to use the side of the path as a toilet, leaving behind toilet tissue. Eventually the route became known as ‘The Tissue Trail’. In order to heat water and cook for trekkers, many trees were cut for fuel, resulting in reduced fuelwood for local communities and the destabilisation of slopes. With the creation of a National Park in 1996, the problem of deforestation has decreased due to protection, but it is still a problem outside its boundaries. However, tourist revenues are important for an area without many income options, and the government of Nepal ensures that all tourists pay a tax to enter the Everest region and has used this income to develop freestanding toilet facilities along the route. The increased incomes for the Sherpa families have led to a higher take-up of education and the ability to access a better diet, as foods can be bought in from the lower valleys. The Sherpas are involved in decisions about tourist access and the spending of revenue within their villages. Overall, they have managed to hold on to their cultural values and benefit from tourism. The negative impacts have been recognised and are being addressed.
Rural destinations play a major role within tourism as they provide the landscapes and access to wildlife that many tourists want for at least part of their holiday. The tourists are ‘consumers’ of the rural landscape resource but it must be maintained and replenished if the process is to be sustainable. There should beenough tourism income to provide the means by which this can occur and so minimise the negative impacts on a tourism destination.

**Case Study 2: the Hideaway Resort, Fiji**

In Fiji, the Hideaway Resort is located on a coconut plantation within a fragile environment of tropical rainforests and fronted by the world’s second longest coral reef. The adjacent village owns the land upon which the hotel accommodation is built, as well as the reef. The villagers’ main occupations are farming and fishing, but fish stocks had reduced drastically, partially due to using dynamite and poisons to kill the reef fish, thereby destroying much of the reef’s viability. The hotel owners have cooperated with the village from the beginning of the resort development. Initially the villagers helped in the construction of the bures (traditional high-roofed wood and straw Fijian cottages) and then, after training, working in the hotel itself as waiters, receptionists, cooks etc. Although the overall manager is Australian, Fijians are now part of the management team. The hotel has regular meetings with the village chief to discuss any issues.

The accommodation in traditional-style bures means that air conditioning units are rarely used, as the high-roofed cottages are designed to encourage a cooling flow of air through the building via open shutters. The food in the restaurant is mainly locally sourced, as is the evening entertainment, which includes the local choir and dancers. There are links with the local village of Tagage and visitors can opt to meet the chief and elders and participate in a welcoming kava ceremony, where a local beverage is drunk from a communal bowl (Figure 3A). The hotel offers jobs to villagers and also scholarships for a number of students to access further education. Local artists and craftspeople are encouraged to work and display within the hotel’s grounds. In this way, local traditions are maintained alongside improved opportunities for income.

With help from the hotel and its visitors, the reef fronting the resort is now a Locally Managed Marine Area (LMMA) and the part immediately fronting the resort is ‘tabu’: it cannot be fished. Visitors are allowed to snorkel over it at high tide, but not to touch it. In conjunction with this, visitors are able to sponsor a coral head in the coral farm, which is located on a damaged part of the reef. The coral is superglued onto the reef as...
part of the reef’s regeneration. Within 18 months of the reef being made ‘tabu’, the catches for local fishermen had increased by 50%, as fish could safely breed on the reef and then disperse into the surrounding waters.

In the Hideaway Resort, the environment and local culture are being maintained and supported for the benefit of both the hotel and the village. 95% of the staff are Fijian, and their culture is respected and embedded in the hotel’s activities. The villagers have sustainable livelihoods as a consequence of their involvement in tourism, and the village is retaining its young people because of the training and employment opportunities available.

At the Hideaway, care is taken to have minimal impact on the natural environment. In fact, tourism has improved the state of the coral reef. In doing this, fishing has improved for the locals. New income streams from jobs at the hotel, plus donations from visitors, mean that the village has a secure electricity supply and a modern school building. Visitors have the opportunity to get to know about local life and culture. As a holiday location, it fulfils many of the elements of a sustainable destination.

**Figure 3** [A] Welcoming kava ceremony served by village elders, to greet interested visitors and maintain their ceremonies. [B] The village choir within the grounds, making their way to sing for visitors. Using and supporting local culture. [C] The traditional bures set within the original coconut plantation and with gardens planted with a wide range of South Pacific plants. Local wildlife is supported including a large colony of fruit bats.

Source: Sally Garrington

**Case Study 3: the Chencha-Dorze Project, Ethiopia**

Tourism can be developed more sustainably and support poor communities via umbrella organisations such as the UNWTO. Under their auspices, they run the ST-EP projects (Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty). These projects are pro-poor and are focused on how the local community can benefit economically from sustainable tourism, leading to development and benefits for participating communities.

An example of a ST-EP project is the Chencha-Dorze Tourism and Handicrafts Project in Ethiopia. It is located in the mountainous south of the country where tourism is growing. Previously, handicrafts had been sold along the side of the road but quality was variable and had limited appeal for tourists. The project co-ordinators worked with local people to help improve the craft skills of those wishing to sell textiles and also helped set up bulk buying contracts of the materials required which reduced costs considerably for the community. Coupled with this was the training of local guides so that tourists could be shown around the unique Dorze villages. Links were also created between local food suppliers and hotels. The result has been that incomes have risen and more tourist monies have remained within the community. The local people have a greater sense of pride and ownership of their landscapes and associated culture. Tourists visiting the region have a more authentic experience of what the local culture is like and at the same time are helping it survive.
Case Study 4: wildlife tourism and the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador

Wildlife tourism is an increasingly popular form of tourism as more people wish to interact with the natural environment. Wildlife tourism aims to create a positive experience for the tourist whilst at the same time ensuring that the resource base upon which that experience is based is not degraded. Unfortunately, many of the most popular wildlife experiences are located within fragile ecosystems which are particularly vulnerable to human disturbance, such as coral reefs and tropical rainforests. Wildlife tourism encompasses the extreme of trophy hunting (as with lion hunting on private game reserves in South Africa), as well as the general enjoyment of natural habitats and watching wildlife. However, even the latter can result in the disturbance and disruption of breeding patterns of species if not carefully managed. Figure 4 outlines some of the impacts of tourism on wildlife habitats.

On the Galapagos Islands the increasing levels of tourism had meant that the Islands were in danger of losing their UNESCO World Heritage Biosphere Reserve status. Uncontrolled visitor numbers and access to the breeding grounds of a range of species were impacting on reproduction rates. There were continuing problems with land being used for building tourist facilities, and dealing with the wastes produced by visitors. However, by 2009 a five-zone management strategy was in place, with tour operators and visitors paying higher fees to access the wildlife sites, thus providing income to help protect the unique biodiversity of the islands. The five zones range from ‘Primitive Scientific’, used for research only, to ‘Intensive Use’ where up to 90 people a day, in groups of 20, can visit with an official guide. The Ecuadorean government continues to work with UNESCO to ensure the long-term future of this unique destination.

Figure 4 Some of the impacts of tourism on wildlife habitats

Case Study 5: whale watching, Kaikoura, New Zealand

Kaikoura, on New Zealand’s South Island, is known as the whale-watching capital of the world. Formerly an area of whale hunting, it is now the sustainable resource base for whale-watching, a business that is owned and run by indigenous Maoris – the whale being an important part of their culture. In Kaikoura the local culture is highlighted and respected by locals and visitors alike. The marine ecosystem is used sustainably as whale hunting is now illegal. Sperm whales dive off the coast here, where there is a deep marine trench where they can easily find their main food: squid. Most of the accommodation is in small hostels and hotels and there are few negative impacts on the environment. However, as seeing at least one sperm whale is part of the expected tourist experience, the company uses a helicopter to help spot where the whales are diving, so that the boats can be guided to suitable areas. Although this does not impact on the immediate environment, it could be argued that it is not sustainable in terms of its fossil fuel use and carbon emissions, when added to that used by the high-powered boats. There is a tension between the required visitor experience and the resource base.
So, how sustainable?

The problem with the concept of sustainable international tourism is that however sustainable the destination, there is the serious challenge of sustainably accessing the location in the first place. International flights produce more carbon dioxide than almost any other form of transport, and there is the added concern about damage from emissions in the upper atmosphere. For a journey of 200 km, a plane emits 34.3 kg of carbon dioxide per person; the journey by train produces 10.7 kg, and by coach 6 kg. So, accessing nearer locations would be more sustainable. However, once at a rural holiday destination, even if within the UK, it is likely that a car will be needed to access sites and shopping. With heavy traffic in holiday locations, it is difficult to use a car’s engine efficiently. So, the most sustainable holiday might be accessing a city by train and then using public transport for sightseeing.

How can we assess our impacts and make an informed choice about our holiday destinations? The Worldwide Fund for Nature has calculated that if all the productive sea and land areas are divided by the world population, it results in each of us having two global hectares. Ecological footprints are an aggregate measurement of the impact of our consumptions and wastes on the biosphere and are given in global hectares. As well as considering our impact within a holiday destination, we have to take into account how we accessed it, and with international flights forming up to 90% of the carbon emissions of a holiday, it often exceeds our global hectare allowance for the year.

If we are to travel sustainably, what are the options? Carbon offsetting is one solution, where we pay to cover the cost of absorbing the extra carbon dioxide we emit by travelling abroad. Often this is used to plant more trees to act as a carbon sink. We can just travel more locally and not use air transport, thus reducing our carbon emissions. We can go overland and use trains and coaches; ferries take us over water. If flying, go for longer, to offset the impact of the flights accessing your destination. A city break of five days to New York is less sustainable than three weeks in the USA.

The tourism industry continues to be an important way for countries, especially those in developing regions, to develop economically, and is often a stimulus for infrastructure improvements that benefit the population as a whole. When carefully managed, the industry can help protect fragile environments and support and validate vulnerable cultures. With our increasing awareness of the individual’s impact on global systems and destinations, we can more clearly move towards sustainable tourism – but there is still a long way to go.

Mark Ellingham, who founded the Rough Guide travel books, states: ‘Incorporating sustainability into the travel business is in the interest of everyone ... by preserving the environments and cultures that we all want to continue to enjoy’

Useful Websites


World Tourism Organisation. http://www2.unwto.org/


Focus questions

1. Referring to Figure 2 and using examples of destinations you have studied, assess to what extent they can be considered sustainable.

2. Examine the challenges to local communities which occur as a result of the tourism industry.

3. Tourism can never be truly sustainable. Discuss

Checkpoint

While you’re reading, consider the following questions:

Why is tourism important, as a global industry?

What are the elements that go to make up sustainable tourism?

Evaluate the capacity of tourism to:

(a) harm a country

(b) help develop a country

With examples, state what some of the impacts on wildlife habitats are of tourism.

Suggest ways of making tourism more sustainable.