

# Only governments can stem the tide of tourism sweeping the globe

Tourism, like all globalised trends, can be a force for good, but can also wreak immense localised damage



The Rialto bridge in Venice, a city with more than 20 million visitors a year. Photograph: Stefano Mazzola/Awakening/Getty Images

In Barcelona this summer, I was shown a protest sign written in English that said:

*"Why call it tourism season if we can't kill them?"*

Anger over **unhampered tourism is getting ugly**, even in Barcelona, where the mayor, Ada Colau, is one of the few politicians **dedicated to reining in the industry**. Residents told me they have had it with skyrocketing rents, thousands of tourists from cruise ships swamping the city's historic centre and partygoers keeping families up into the night. And they are increasingly sceptical about the economic benefits for the average citizen.

Every time I find myself smirking at another photograph of drunken tourists crowding a gracious town square, I think of Venice. The annual tourist traffic of more than 20 million visitors to **La Serenissima** has impoverished, rather than enriched, most Venetians. They have been pushed out, the population cut in half to fewer than 60,000 people. The survivors continue to protest and vote against giant cruise ships and mindless tourism. But the powers that be have done little. Even the United Nations has warned that the genius of Venice, its culture, art and way of life are **being drowned by tourism**.

The anger isn't limited to Europe. In Cambodia, **citizens were evicted** from their fishing villages so that foreign-built resorts could rise on the pristine beaches. With record crowds and mounds of litter, the once romantic *Ipanema beach* in Rio de Janeiro now features drunk tourists **infuriating the locals**. Cities across North America, from New Orleans to Vancouver, have issued regulations on **Airbnb rentals** after citizen complaints that their neighbourhoods were being overwhelmed by unruly tourists and rising rents.

It is no longer possible to dismiss criticism of exploding tourism as elite snobbery, of high-end cultural tourism versus T-shirt-clad visitors squeezed on a tour bus. Or a question of who has the right to travel and who doesn't.

The dimensions of the industry have grown so vast so quickly that it has become a serious issue of globalisation, as pertinent to the communities at risk as shuttered factories have been to the American and British rust belts.

Few industries were better positioned to take advantage of the 21st century than tourism. Open borders for the first time in modern history, leaps in technology from aeroplanes to the internet and the rise of the global middle class (think China) meant travel moved from a pastime to an economic

engine. In less than two decades, travel doubled from 536m trips abroad in 1995 to 1bn in 2012. When the Cold War closed off much of the world to tourism, that figure was only 25m.

Travel and tourism has become a behemoth, capable of doing great good and great damage. It is an \$8tn industry. It is the largest employer on Earth: **one in 11 people works in tourism and travel**.

The appeal of travel is a given. Leisure, excitement, education, adventure. Nothing seems to put a damper on travel. Not the 2008 **great recession**. Not terrorism, including attacks on **tourist resorts**. Not even war. Tourists still show up in Afghanistan and North Korea. A **tourist was released last week** after six years held hostage in Mali by al-Qaida.



The Thai government has banned tourists from Koh Tachai island. Photograph: Alamy

Travel is already **up 6% this year**, according to the UN's *World Tourism Organisation*, with a 10% increase in the Middle East, the centre of the world's most deadly conflicts, and up 6% in Europe, despite a string of terrorist attacks, particularly in France and England.

This boom has translated into crowds of tourists in every corner of the globe and, in a new rite of summer, stories of tourists behaving badly. Hong Kong protests against loud, impolite tourists urinating in the street sound a lot like the complaints I heard in Thailand about Chinese tourists desecrating Buddhist temples. An internet search of "*tourists behaving badly*" can keep you entertained for hours.

Many of us hear these stories and congratulate ourselves for being thoughtful travellers. We avoid the nasty crowds. We seek the out-of-the-way destinations where we enjoy the best in local food and culture. Some plant trees to offset their carbon footprints. But this problem can't be remedied by good consumer behaviour. Appealing to the industry to refrain from packing their planes and adding new cruise destinations isn't going to work either.

Only governments can handle runaway tourism. Few major industries fall so squarely into their hands – local, regional and national. Governments decide who is eligible for visas: how many cruise ships, airlines and trains can bring in visitors, how many hotels receive building permits, how many beaches are open to development, how many museums and concert halls are open, even how many farmers receive subsidies to raise food for the restaurants and cafes that tourists frequent.

After years spent tracking the explosion of tourism, I came to the obvious conclusion that without serious and difficult government co-ordination, mayhem can follow. The current biggest disrupters are short-term rental companies, such as *Airbnb*, and cruise ships.

Most governments still measure tourism success simply by the number of visitors. The more, the better. For the moment, officials have been reluctant to regulate tourism to the benefit, first of all, of their own citizens. Instead, tourism is seen as an easy moneymaker and a short cut to economic development. The exceptions are standouts. France, **Bhutan, Costa Rica** and Canada are among the few countries with governments willing to co-ordinate policies of sustainable tourism and they haven't suffered: they are among the most popular destinations in the world.

Promoting tourism by the numbers works both ways. The Chinese were only allowed to travel abroad 20 years ago, after generations of forced isolation. The travel bug hit big. Now the Chinese as a nationality are ranked as the greatest number of travellers in the world and the biggest spenders. President Xi Jinping negotiates favours with other countries in return for more tourist visas for his people.

There is hope. Tourists and governments accept that too much tourism can have a deadly effect on the environment and nature. "Eco-tourism" has been popular for years, whether practised in good faith or not. Slowly, governments are adapting, sometimes in the extreme. Last year, Thailand **banned all tourists from Koh Tachai** as the only way to save that exquisite island.

Cities and societies can be just as vulnerable to runaway tourism as ocean beaches and forest habitats and governments need to do the hard work of taming tourism for them as well.

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