

TOURISM: THE FUTURE WE WANT?

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Introduction: Our Crisis of Conscience

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development - also known as Río+20 - has crystallized the priority issues needing our care. Neither the concept of sustainability, incubated and endorsed in Río, twenty years ago, nor this year's recycled idea of a 'green economy', has safe consensus. On March 30, 2012 the U.N. High Commissioner on Human Rights issued a plea for integrity within the process.

The summit evokes a degree of awe, but also comes at a time of fatigue in global crisis management. We must be mindful that this does not suppress our judgment. The once-a-decade summit is meant to harness the wisdom of past dialogues on environmental stewardship - in particular, how to resolve or mitigate the core questions of social justice (for example, poverty, equity and human rights). This being the third summit, there is some presumption that the visions offered are well distilled. Tourism, singled out as a 'green economy', must be okay.

Tourism: Tangled Truths

Who could object to eager tourists with pockets full of cash? That is a question that sums up the summit of 2012. A seemingly harmless question, but potentially lethal to fragile places and vulnerable peoples worldwide which are regarded as exotic attractions or resources for industry growth. Still, it is imbedded in Río+20 action plans as if consenting is a given.

This casual assumption that tourism belongs in our crisis-response toolbox is unfortunately in the Rio outcome document. We are expected to endorse an industry whose infrastructure and practices are among the primary causes of global warming, environmental degradation and culture loss globally. Let us not be so quick to minimize the issues.

The two paragraphs on tourism in the Río+20 outcome document, *The Future We Want*, should be a red flag to us all. Titled 'Sustainable Tourism', this section emphasizes tourism as a pathway for meeting and balancing multilateral sustainable development goals, as if the industry was already vetted and pre-approved - and exemplary in its evolution. The text highlights several tourism potentials (alleged benefits, far from corroborated as an industry norm at the grassroots level), suggesting an aggregate of success stories worldwide. It implies not only that

tourism will be allowed to grow unabatedly, but also that tourism investments should be fast-tracked. Global standards are sidestepped, as if tourism impacts on the biosphere are benign.

Within the 200 words on tourism, a major macro-economic policy issue with many troubling dimensions (notably, lax provisions for cultural rights) and unresolved risks (foremost, climate change) is packaged as a solution. This text stands out as the most dangerously abbreviated proclamation on tourism to hit the policy tarmac in a decade. If we endorse its glib assertions, we will turn this economy of vast scale into negligence of truly international proportions.

Headlining tourism as a ‘sustainable’ sector reflects poorly on the ‘green economy’ concept under debate in Río. Most tourism is a pronounced form of consumerism, even in its greenest attire. The tourism sector has long been chastised for misleading ‘green’ marketing, insincere ‘green’ gestures, and shallow ‘green’ reporting - as well as unsubstantiated claims of meaningful local engagement.

Let us examine some of the reasons why tourism merits more diligence, in Río and beyond.

Rethinking Acceptable Trade-offs

Tourism is both a complex social force and a multi-faceted industry, characterized by contradictions. On the surface it offers a convincing ‘consumer pay’ model for conservation and poverty alleviation, through ecotourism and other variations billed as ‘responsible’, ‘conscious’ or ‘ethical’. But internationally the tourism industry’s operations and growth destabilize climate, with unfathomable future costs and implications. Meanwhile, its profit margins (even most ‘fair trade’ scenarios) often rely on poverty; its business practices (including most ‘alternative’ models) have normalized human rights violations; its mere presence (often mirroring underlying racism or other systemic discrimination) may trigger culture loss.

This is the global context of tourism. It is hard to reconcile this bundle of serious impacts - and other known tourism by-products in popular hubs and destinations (such as child exploitation, food inflation, water shortages, groundwater pollution, ecosystem degradation, sacred sites desecration) - with a UN policy now generously endorsing tourism. Although some photogenic partnerships balancing tourism business with other community-level needs, interests and rights do exist, these tend to be very localized and carry their own inherent inconsistencies (for instance, reliance on air travel which is a primary source of greenhouse gases). The net impacts of tourism implore “Caution!”.

Revisiting Tourism’s ‘Green’ Image

On ecological grounds alone, claims about ‘sustainable’ tourism warrant scrutiny.

In 2002 the UN International Year of Ecotourism took place, amid much international protest. Several advocacy groups tracking industry trends urged the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to stop promoting ‘eco’ tourism. They warned that too many community-based evaluations of tourism contradict the glossy promotional reports from governments, conservation organizations and industry-linked think tanks. Their message to UNEP was to operationalize the precautionary principle of the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD).

Many studies echo this message. In March 2004, *New Scientist* journal examined commercial

wildlife viewing, publicizing the stress and lingering trauma to animals - evident in altered migration routes, disrupted feeding patterns and reduced fertility. Afterward, The International Ecotourism Society (USA) admitted: “These findings undermine the premise that ecotourism is an ecologically sustainable activity.” Despite such revelations, UNEP and the CBD Secretariat still promote tourism as a preferred means of financing biodiversity conservation.

We must distinguish between very small-scale and isolated ‘success stories’ - such as volunteer programs offered to paying travellers by the Cheetah Conservation Fund (Namibia) or Orangutan Foundation International (Borneo) to finance endangered species interventions, involving and supported by local peoples - and the widespread systemic failures represented by bulging Galapagos nature tours, over-subscribed Everest treks and Maasai Mara safari traffic jams. Worldwide, industrial ‘eco’ tourism is far off course and often without moral compass.

The clearest baseline for tourism remains the *Berlin Declaration on Sustainable Tourism* (1997), signed by UNEP, the CBD Secretariat and Global Environment Facility as well as several countries. This declaration states: “Tourism should be restricted, and where necessary prevented, in ecologically and culturally sensitive areas.”

The Río+20 outcome document, *The Future We Want*, should reinforce this standard for the tourism sector and support its implementation. The thrust should be specific safeguards for biological and cultural diversity, not vague permissiveness for industry.

Threats to Cultural Sustainability

The question of how suitable tourism is as a ‘green’ economy is best understood in relation to Indigenous Peoples. Globally, most ecosystems targeted for ‘eco’ tourism in its various forms and reincarnations are not simply wilderness, national parks or new frontiers, but longstanding cultural landscapes which are the ancestral lands of Indigenous Peoples.

This close correlation between cultural diversity and biological diversity is well documented and a core premise of the CBD. Since the Earth Summit in 1992, governments have meticulously mapped the location of world resources. Compilations produced by World Wildlife Fund International and Terralingua (www.terralingua.org) show that approximately 90% of ‘what’s left’ globally lies in Indigenous territories. Consequently, Indigenous Peoples are under pressure to either make way for industry, relinquish traditional livelihoods for generic jobs, or participate firsthand in commercializing lands kept intact as spiritual trusts over millennia.

Among Indigenous Peoples, tourism is not necessarily compatible with customary systems for conservation, or with cultural revitalization. It may stimulate community economic development and reinvigorate customary livelihoods over the short-term, by creating markets for culturally grounded services, products, exhibits and cross-cultural education. However, it frequently leads to or deepens economic dependency and cultural assimilation - because most funding agreements, business relationships and management frameworks are negotiated or imposed under the duress of colonial poverty. The outcomes can be devastating to culture: including the erosion of language, customary practices and cultural knowledge systems central to inter-generational governance (and part of the indivisible heritage of Indigenous Peoples).

Internationally, there are some models of tourism based on Indigenous Peoples’ right to self-determination. Wildland Adventures (USA) stands out for the integrity of its partnership with

the Maasai people in Kenya, fostering respectful inter-cultural visits. Maiwa (Canada) has developed cultural tours in collaboration with tribal peoples across India, showcasing their textile expertise and opening new markets for retail sales. That said, the Cofán people (Ecuador) remain both the glowing success story and cautionary tale. After crafting their own home-grown tourism economy that could co-exist with and support Cofán culture, they lost this financial pillar of government practically overnight due to economic globalization: namely, changing political directives and economic policies afar.

Countering the few success stories, there are countless examples of business interests and conservation groups commandeering markets for ‘eco’ tourism and cultural tourism from the resident Indigenous People(s), with help from discriminatory regulatory systems, as well as from discriminatory industry and governance structures. Indigenous Peoples often find themselves:

- treated as either an accessory to tourism or the featured product of pseudo ‘cultural’ tourism (bringing ‘value-added’ profits for industry but serious psychological impacts and institutionalized poverty locally)
- relocated forcibly from ‘parks’, excluded from meaningful roles in ‘protected areas’ management, targeted for biopiracy, and/or deprived of access to the lands and resources necessary for cultural health and for existing as a people
- unable to continue practices integral to their culture and society (especially in relation to customary law) when sacred sites are annexed as star attractions.

Meanwhile, many Indigenous Peoples are on the frontlines of climate change, losing their traditional means of subsistence or becoming climate refugees. Others are being displaced and/or marginalized by the carbon offset schemes and biofuel plantations associated with supposedly ‘sustainable’ tourism.

Tourism dynamics at iconic ‘world heritage’ sites such as Machu Picchu (Peru) and the Angkor temples (Cambodia) illustrate the magnitude of industry problems, plus the extent of inaccurate reporting and social exclusion caused by existing development models.

These trends do not inspire confidence in the loose ‘sustainable’ tourism prescriptions of Río+20. We must ensure that cultural rights, and human rights generally, are central to standard setting for tourism. The free and prior informed consent of involved or affected Indigenous Peoples is a vital pre-requisite for ‘sustainable tourism’.

Foundations for Visionary Policy

It would be an indefensible breach of common sense and science to include tourism as a UN sustainable development goal (SDG).

The tourism industry already has had a long season of mis-using ‘green’ concepts for marketing, to drive and justify harmful patterns of growth. Starting in the 1970s scholars warned of the serious consequences. Now an entire generation of expert dialogue has passed, without adequate regulatory breakthroughs.

The Río+20 debates on tourism give us an opportunity to address serious oversights. According to the Center for Tourism Research & Development in India, most popular ecotourism sites lose

their unique features within fifteen years. Mass tourism associated with cultural ‘world heritage’ centres, meanwhile, generally aggravates grassroots poverty and accelerates culture loss locally (further threatening biodiversity). With biocultural diversity so endangered, we are called to take notice and to put real safeguards in place, without favouritism toward industry.

It is alarming that the very serious bundle of conservation and social justice issues entwined with tourism has been crammed into two short paragraphs at Río+20, lacking balanced analysis and appropriate safeguards. The process must be corrected without delay, by using available tools.

In the way forward from the Río+20 outcome document, *The Future We Want*, basic safeguards with respect to tourism should include:

- Commitment to deep systemic and structural changes in the tourism industry, in accordance with the *Rio Principles* established in 1992
- Balanced analysis, inclusive of inter-generational considerations (e.g. climate change), key cultural rights issues and full ecological accounting
- Baselines meeting or exceeding minimum rights (both individual and collective) summarized in the *UN Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples*
- Strengthened process for standard setting, honouring the complete framework of human rights established in international law
- Interim measures congruent with the precautionary principle, to prevent harm and avoid foreclosing options for future generations
- Criteria, indicators and early warning systems fully operationalizing the precautionary principle, to truly safeguard cultural and biological diversity
- Specific and detailed protections for cultural sustainability, mainstreamed into all decision making
- Clear parameters for sustainable production, sustainable consumption and sustainable use based on the best available wisdom, including voices of youth
- Emphasis on child rights, including the specific cultural rights of Indigenous children, as a window for meeting our inter-generational responsibility
- Strategies for clarifying what constitutes ‘sustainable’ tourism previously recommended to the U.N. by Indigenous Peoples and international non-government organizations (NGOs) through parallel processes
- Active linkages to guidance forthcoming from the U.N. Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Civil Society Reflection Group and The Elders council
- Reporting to the Expert Group of the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and U.N. Independent Expert on Cultural Rights

Above all, there must be commitment to establishing an open, equitable and transparent process within the U.N. to harmonize tourism standards with all applicable international law

Conclusion: Our Call to Discipline

Tourism must be responsibly addressed as a thematic issue of Rio+20. This means avoiding a discussion so constrained that the process itself endangers future generations. We must commit to:

- addressing tourism not as one sector, but as a set of high-impact activities that are highly cross-sectoral and therefore warrant our urgent attention
- learning from case studies that are genuine community-based evaluations, which are guided by both science and sacred knowledge (including customary law)
- ensuring that the dialogue process itself is not negligent or rights infringing
- delivering the deepest expression of cultural rights and inter-generational care

Let us recall the *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity* (1992) of Nobel Laureates and the *U.N. Cry of the Earth Conference* (1993), calling for our uncompromising care. The convergence of science and 'traditional knowledge' is highly significant. We have one decade at most to produce visionary and concrete action balancing our mutual rights and responsibilities - or unbearable costs will accrue to children globally. Negligence is not an option.

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