

Tourism at the tipping point: Governance for future generations

by Alison M. Johnston

Revisiting the precautionary approach

The 1992 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) provides a framework to discuss what is sustainable, or safe, for future generations. While its concepts and legal baselines apply to our global economy, implementation of core principles is uneven across economic realms. The tourism industry is featured in CBD implementation plans, prompting some observers to ask how such a privileged role is justified.

Governments implementing the CBD have been counselled to endorse tourism growth. Across the UN, tourism is essentially managed as a programme. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) coordinates a growth strategy, collaborating with the CBD Secretariat and other UN agencies in the promotion of new markets. Its “master plan” directs mass tourism not only to established hubs but also to remote protected areas, World

Heritage Sites, and cultural landscapes – often places where Indigenous Peoples’ rights should inform governance.¹ The effect is to institutionalize tourism as a pre-approved enterprise, despite its deep and sprawling footprint.

Amid this, many civil society groups warn that continued growth of tourism carries an unacceptable magnitude of harm.² The gist of their message is that industry profit formulas and practices sanction human rights violations, shunting industry costs (including costly ‘benefits’) onto vulnerable populations – ultimately, across generations.³

Present policymaking on tourism requires a historical context. Initial CBD deliberations on tourism embodied the precautionary approach, a central principle of the Convention. In 1997 the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), CBD Secretariat, and Global Environment Facility agreed on a baseline. The Berlin Declaration on Sustainable

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Tourism stated: “Tourism should be restricted, and where necessary prevented, in ecologically and culturally sensitive areas.” While this caveat was envisioned at the ecosystem level, it now has relevance on a vastly different scale due to several environmental emergencies converging globally.⁴ One billion people travelling worldwide, in a \$7.6 trillion global industry, has become a governance dilemma.

The biosphere crisis challenges us to ask basic questions about tourism. Is tourism adaptive or maladaptive? Will it safeguard or endanger future generations? Fundamentally, does tourism enhance the human rights of children, who are disproportionately affected by widespread biodiversity loss, climate change and other related ecological damage?

Examining some structural pillars of tourism may help us to wade beyond entrenched ideology – which positions tourism as a ‘green’ economy – to see the actual spectrum of impacts for both vulnerable populations and humanity as a whole.

Aviation: A threat to biological diversity

In 1998-99 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the UN Commission on Sustainable Development challenged the policy positioning tourism as a form of sustainable use. They forged spaces for affected peoples to share their own experiences in relation to the tourism industry: too often, exploitation, oppression, and displacement. This community-based research was considered radical by UNWTO, since it questioned growth strategies. The paradigm of economic growth has defined the UN discourse on tourism, especially as UNWTO evolved into a UN agency in 2002.

The CBD process on tourism took on a marketing orientation, creating products such as guidelines to foster industry expansion. These voluntary measures have not improved industry practices and consumer behaviour.

Rather, e-commerce multiplies tourism traffic through deep discounts; airlines offer crowd-funding to woo young customers; Facebook and Twitter deliver travelogues in “real time”, unleashing viral tourism. Credit card companies still offer “travel rewards” for consumerism. Such phenomena have yet to be reconciled with the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, particularly Target 4, on sustainable production and consumption.

Tourism harbours many of the “silent disasters” identified at the first World Humanitarian Summit in 2016⁵ – such as accumulating air pollution, marine litter, water contamination, and soil toxicity – all asphyxiating ecosystems and compromising public health. However, CBD tourism policy is governed by tourism profits: its contribution to economic growth, measured in gross domestic product (GDP). Underlying causes of industry harm thus remain unchecked. Neither the initial User’s Manual (2007) or updated Application Manual (2015) for the CBD Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Development promotes a remedy for harmful mass tourism, or even industry degrowth.

Evaluating aviation is a way to gain perspective on this impasse in tourism governance. Amid a faltering global economy, airlines entered a “golden time” thanks to lower fuel prices.⁶ The aviation sector alone had net profits of \$39.4 billion in 2016.⁷ While many airlines posted a decline mid-year due to terrorism and other factors, there now is a “bullish” 20-year forecast for global aviation.⁸ A doubling of passenger traffic is anticipated by 2035.⁹ Airbus predicts the global fleet of planes will double from 19,500 to 40,000 in this period. Boeing now has a 100-year strategy for growth. Global sales of new aircraft are estimated to be \$5.9 trillion by 2035.¹⁰

Taking a precautionary approach, how should we interpret this data? Airports are considered a “safe and attractive” investment,¹¹ especially among pension funds and other institutional investors. Established “megahub” airports

process more than 50 million passengers annually. This provides a business rationale for expansion. Vancouver International Airport (Canada) has developed a 2037 Master Plan expected to generate a million more passengers annually. La Guardia Airport (USA), planning for 2020-2050, is undergoing a \$4 billion makeover. Heathrow Airport (UK) just had a \$22 billion expansion approved. Yet aviation ranks as a top emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs), ahead of Canada.¹² It produces over 2% of global GHGs, most at high altitudes, which multiplies the impact. Still, as aircraft manufacturer Embraer (Brazil) has expressed, from an economic perspective, “There’s no crisis in the commercial aviation industry.”¹³

Although the International Civil Aviation Organization’s (ICAO) Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme (CORSIA) promises to freeze emissions from international flights at 2020 levels, this outcome seems unlikely. The International Council on Clean Transportation warns that its “cap-and-trade” framework is grossly insufficient.¹⁴ Industry itself admits that “airlines have limited ability to reduce fuel use”.¹⁵ Meanwhile, innovations for fuel efficiency offer 20% improvement at best; biofuels for jets remain “a pipe dream” since none are produced at scale.¹⁶ Overall, the architecture and math of CORSIA do suggest a crisis. Only 65 countries are signed on and domestic aviation emissions continue to climb as countries chase GDP growth. Most revealingly, Indigenous Peoples globally report harm from both biofuels and offset projects.

Since the way forward involves pathways ensuring that tourism “positively contributes to biodiversity”,¹⁷ we must confront the industry’s reliance on aviation. Policy prioritizing the aerospace industry’s “ecosystem of partners and stakeholders”¹⁸ – or, a “healthy ecosystem” of manufacturing and airports¹⁹ – puts actual ecosystems in grave danger. Climate change flowing from air travel, and from carbon-heavy tourism at destinations,

disrupts ecosystem functions. Biodiversity loss is amplified and poverty potentially deepened. This devastating cycle endangers the well-being of both local peoples and humanity, shrinking children’s capabilities.

As deliberations on tourism continue under the CBD, moral courage and decisiveness is needed to rectify policy structures normalizing harm. Governments must evaluate the development pattern of tourism, consistent with the precautionary approach reaffirmed in the Cancun Declaration.²⁰

The petroleum factor: An emerging peoples’ story

Although case studies exist of individual tourism projects promoting biodiversity conservation, these merit scrutiny from a structural standpoint. Most rely on tourists flying in from remote continents. Most entail local infrastructure and local activities that are carbon-intensive once on-site. Thus, meaningful cost-benefit analysis involves multiple dimensions.

In evaluating potential benefits of tourism, we must consider the aggregate impacts for all affected. The petroleum for both aviation and destination tourism worldwide is sourced from places where local communities may face complex decisions about their livelihoods. Across the globe, from Ecuador to Nigeria, many peoples find themselves enmeshed in the petroleum industry, finding employment on drilling rigs or pipelines or servicing the transient workers. Often, it is colonial poverty that triggers the decision to engage in this economy in lieu of or alongside customary practices.

As aggressive tourism growth accelerates in Asia,²¹ considerable pressure is being put upon Indigenous Peoples in Canada to accept new oil and gas infrastructure crossing their territories for export.²² Huge conglomerates such as PetroChina, Petronas (Malaysia), Pacific Oil and Gas Ltd. (Singapore), Korea

Gas Corporation, Mitsubishi (Japan), Grupo Salinas (Mexico) and Royal Dutch Shell PLC have fronted proposals for drilling or fracking facilities, pipelines, processing plants, and deep-sea export terminals. Some peoples have welcomed the overtures from petroleum companies and others have vowed to block proposed developments.²³ Divides and friction have grown between and within affected Indigenous communities, because of the magnitude of both opportunity and cost. Many communities derive or hope to generate income from benefit-sharing agreements; most have members, hereditary leaders, or youth invoking customary law to reject involvement, on behalf of future generations.

The most controversial project is the recently approved Trans Mountain Pipeline. This project signals Canada's intent to "approve, promote and subsidize fossil fuel projects", including dirty oil sands expansion.²⁴ It involves twinning an existing pipeline to triple its capacity to carry oil from Alberta to British Columbia, and export 895,000 barrels a day to Asia. The pipeline was approved over objections from the resident Tsleil-Waututh People, as well as numerous allies such as the Union of BC Indian Chiefs. This infringement of rights and neglect of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was justified on the basis of "national interest" – meaning GDP. Canada's oil industry and aviation sector promise sizzling economic growth.

Alongside this oil controversy are mega-projects for the export of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Asia, also advancing amid an investment climate of protests and lawsuits. Research commissioned by Indigenous Peoples who are opposed to these LNG projects cites concerns about water quality, fish habitat, and marine mammal health. Independent research cautions that the petro-infrastructure fragments wilderness zones, reducing habitat and putting imperilled species at risk.²⁵ Meanwhile, Amnesty International reports adverse impacts of such projects on Indigenous women, who often are knowledge keepers

integral to protecting future generations.

This supra-structure of finance and investment which keeps airplanes on the move globally and fuels destination tourism also reliant on heavy carbon use, is a critical policy issue. While governments perceive tourism as "an important driver of sustainable economic growth",²⁶ integrating all biodiversity considerations actually suggests the opposite – especially if qualitative data is assessed across the life-cycle of industry and among vulnerable populations. Once aggregate impacts of the industry are synthesized, it is hard to sustain a belief in 'sustainable' tourism at the scale envisioned by UNWTO. There is no rational or moral basis for tourism growth.

Within the CBD process on tourism, it is time to re-orientate policy structures, which are on the verge of normalizing distress across generations. Tourism is deeply implicated in many competing crises and meta-failures of our global economy. Addressing its cross-sectoral impacts will bring insights on safety for transformative change economy-wide.

Conclusion

Tourism is characterized by development patterns that are entirely at odds with the CBD premise of sustainable use of biodiversity. Even so, industrial-scale tourism is promoted for implementation, as if its environmental impacts are minimal in comparison with other industries.

Evaluating the tourism industry's reliance on fossil fuels shows its magnitude of costs for future generations. Climate change accelerates the loss of biodiversity and associated breakdown of ecological systems, deepening the biosphere crisis.

Researchers evaluating broad impacts of the tourism industry warn that "we have a duty to act for our children and their children".²⁷ Stalling on "immediate, widespread action"

risks disastrous consequences for humanity.²⁸ It puts future generations in a constant state of triage.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies called for an equity approach at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016. It is time that we bring children into the fore of this equity equation, as the embodiment of future generations.

The CBD must be interpreted in keeping with the full framework of law informing its implementation, particularly the human rights of children. Otherwise, risky structural elements of tourism affecting future generations will be overlooked in policy development.

UNWTO policy of growing the tourism industry and its central aviation sector is reckless and must be corrected, with the CBD regime guiding the discussion.

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Notes

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