

COMMENTARY

Misguided policy initiatives in small-island destinations: why do up-market tourism policies fail?

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Abstract

Following the rhetoric of sustainability, many destinations have adopted policies aimed at attracting high spending visitors while limiting the further growth of mass package tourism. Drawing mainly from the experiences of small-island destinations, we question whether these policies are either environmentally or economically justifiable. Up-market tourists are few in number, prefer varied destinations and require luxury accommodations and facilities that are environmentally taxing and often foreign owned. Mass tourism, while certainly no panacea, has the advantages of larger markets, higher rates of repeat visitation, lower per capita rates of energy and natural resource use, and is often relatively spatially confined. Additionally, given the downturn in all travel following the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks, destinations are likely to welcome any paying guest.

Keywords: island tourism, up-market tourism, mass tourism, sustainable tourism

Introduction

Policymakers have become increasingly alarmed about the effects of mass tourism on the economic, environmental and sociocultural fabrics of receiving areas, including small islands (Wilkinson 1989; Conlin and Baum

1995; Bosselman, *et al.* 1999; Pigram 2001). Spurred on by the rhetoric on sustainable strategies for tourism growth, international tourism organizations, governmental agencies and private businesses have called for the development of 'softer,' high quality-orientated tourism types such as ecotourism, adventure tourism, and special interest tourism, which are considered 'alternative' to traditional, high-impact mass travel (Hall and Lew 1998; WTO 2002a).

Reflecting the growing emphasis on alternative tourism, the UNESCO Commission on Sustainable Development (1996) cautioned that small-island developing states and regions, where tourism is commonly regarded as the sole option for development, must avoid over-reliance on mass tourism. Instead, the Commission recommended limiting the further growth of mass tourism while promoting facilities to entice up-market visitors. According to its advocates, up-market tourism allows a win-win scenario to be created for the destination since the negative environmental impacts associated with mass tourism are lessened without reduced economic benefits (CTO 2000; Godfrey 1996).

The argument for up-market tourism has its merits. Nevertheless, it is our contention that the advocates of this form of tourism development overlook various drawbacks. The most serious problem associated with 'up-market' tourism development is that it fails to offer a realistic opportunity for approaching balanced development in destinations since it reflects a continued preoccupation with economic objectives, often paying only lip-service to environmental and societal concerns.

In this commentary we expose certain myths associated with up-market tourism strategies, aiming to demonstrate why it is an unrealistic long-term option for sustainable tourism development. We base our argument on evidence drawn primarily from Mediterranean and Caribbean island destinations, which have adopted up-market tourism initiatives.

The case for up-market tourism

There exists a substantial volume of literature on the economic importance of tourism for coastal and island environments (Bryden 1973; Wilkinson 1989). We are also aware of the unwelcome environmental and sociocultural impacts that usually accompany the sector's benefits (Ioannides *et al.* 2001). Examples exist of destinations, such as some Mediterranean and Caribbean islands, where unplanned and uncontrolled coastal tourism has caused problems like widespread destruction of fauna and flora, the pollution of fresh water supplies, and the loss of cultural and historical resources (Pigram 2001; Selwyn 2001). The poor reputation arising from these impacts has been blamed for the declining competitiveness of such islands, a situation that has worsened with the emergence of environmentally pristine destinations in the Indian and Pacific oceans that have become

increasingly accessible in terms of time and cost to leading tourism markets (Buhalis and Diamantis 2001).

Faced with the threat of declining competitiveness many island destinations throughout the world have heeded the advice of international bodies such as the World Tourism Organization and the United Nations, which call for diversifying existing tourism products and creating quality facilities and attractions targeting up-scale travellers (UNESCO 1996; WTO 2002a). Most notably, since the 1980s the Balearics have implemented a series of measures aimed at restructuring the islands, especially Mallorca, from run-down, cheap mass tourist destinations into quality-based resorts. Among the programmes adopted were those aimed at limiting the further increase of tourist accommodation capacity and enhancing quality requirements for such facilities. Moreover, legislation has been adopted protecting 40 percent of the islands' area from development pressures (Bardolet 2001).

The Republic of Cyprus has also sought to diversify its product that has been and continues to be heavily dependent on mass seaside tourism. Plans call for new tourism forms such as agrotourism in the island's interior, the creation of golf courses and establishment of luxury resorts, while concurrently discouraging the construction of cheaper forms of holiday accommodation (Godfrey 1996). A recently adopted strategic plan cites the overall goal of replacing the maximization of arrivals with income maximization, and proposes a number of targets, including 'the increase of per capita tourist expenditure, improvement of seasonality, increase of the length of stay, [and] increase of repeated tourism' (CTO 2000: 2).

Malta's policies relating to tourism are virtually a carbon copy of the ones in Cyprus and other islands. They emphasize providing attractions and facilities for affluent visitors, including a luxury yacht marina and new golf course and the promotion of rural and cultural tourism. Planning permission for tourism accommodations is granted only for luxury hotels. Reflecting a compliance with this policy, by 1999 there were already 10 five-star hotels throughout Malta (Ioannides and Holcomb 2001).

The list of island destinations that have adopted programmes to improve the quality of their tourism product in the name of sustainability is lengthy. Nevertheless, there is a need to view these steps, particularly the seemingly ubiquitous pursuit of high-spending tourists, cautiously. We now focus on some of the problems associated with upscale tourism, questioning its worth as a means of achieving balanced development in touristic environments.

Problems associated with up-market tourism: a case of misplaced priorities?

Although attempts to promote diversification of a destination's tourism product are laudable, proposed actions for encouraging up-market tourism must be questioned, particularly as efforts to curb mass tourism often

appear far from sincere. In mature island destinations the oversupply of cheap accommodation in coastal areas means the pursuit of mass tourists cannot realistically be checked in the near future, since this would lead to a dramatic decline of occupancy rates. Such a decline would cause financial ruin for the numerous entrepreneurs depending on this product type (UNEP 1996). Hoteliers in Cyprus have lobbied hard and successfully overturned a proposed ban on charter flights fearing this would ruin them. Ironically, at a time when the Cypriot government espouses the need for quality tourism, this situation has led to an explosion in the numbers of low-spending mass tourists, spearheaded by major tour operators who have the upper hand in negotiating prices with local hoteliers (Sharpley 2001).

Even if we acknowledge the reality, at least for the short term, of pursuing mass tourists to fill existing accommodation it is hard to comprehend why many island destinations maintain strategies to *increase* arrivals rather than setting, as Bermuda has done, an optimum ceiling on the number of tourists and bed spaces (Bosselman, *et al.* 1999). For instance, despite its commitment to upscale tourism, Cyprus still wants the number of tourist arrivals to increase to at least 3.5 million by 2010 (CTO 2000). Although such a policy reflects a significant slowdown in the average annual growth rate, the targeted number of tourists (a significant increase in absolute terms) raises concern in a destination where there is already strong evidence that the physical and social carrying capacities have been exceeded (Sharpley 2001).

The obvious contradiction of desiring quality tourism products to attract upscale tourists while also increasing the numbers of mass tourists reflects a case of policymakers wanting to have their cake and eat it too. This situation demonstrates the continued predominance of economic concerns over issues relating to the natural environment and social equity, a fact that acts as a stumbling block in the pursuit of balanced development (Ioannides 2001).

When considering upscale tourism initiatives a host of additional problems must be accounted for. These relate to the types of projects viewed as necessary to attract up-market visitors and their impacts, and to the characteristics of the up-market tourists themselves.

Up-market travellers are assumed to require luxury accommodations (Ioannides and Holcomb 2001). This is a key reason behind the emphasis that has often been placed on constructing superior-grade hotels and integrated resorts. It is also true that on islands like Cyprus and Mallorca such tourist facilities are regularly well planned and carefully landscaped, and efforts made to limit negative problems arising from the disposal of solid waste and sewage. It is also not unusual (indeed in some countries it is required) for a luxury resort to have its own waste management facility to minimize the risk of pollution, although it has to be taken into consideration that numerous negative externalities can arise from such upscale facilities (Domroes 2001).

Evidence suggests that per capita water and energy demands of tourists in up-market luxury facilities exceed those of mass tourists, domestic visitors and local residents (Lawson 1995). Widespread air conditioning, heated swimming pools, luxurious spas and frequent linen changes characterize up-market accommodations. The construction of golf courses in semi-arid environments to diversify their tourism product appears particularly flawed, especially when water shortages necessitate the construction of energy-intensive desalination plants (Ioannides 2001). Note that the average golf course requires 2.3 million cubic meters of water daily (Mastny 2000). Although up-market hotels are likelier to adopt energy conservation strategies than their lower grade counterparts, the benefits of automated light and air-conditioning shut-off systems appear negligible in places like Malta, which have to import vast quantities of oil for their energy needs and rarely harness alternative sources of power (e.g. wind or solar energy).

As a rule, up-scale hotels are owned and managed by foreign companies and rely heavily on imports of items not usually manufactured locally, such as expensive furniture, computer systems and telecommunications equipment, and luxury foods and drinks to cater to the demands of their visitors. A reliance on imported goods can lead to heavy economic leakages and stunt local entrepreneurial activity and, in the long run, has a negative effect on the destination's economic sustainability (Ioannides and Holcomb 2001).

Because of their size, luxury resorts and facilities may require far more land than their lower-grade counterparts. Mastny (2002) indicates that each year 5,000 hectares – an area equivalent to half of Paris – is cleared for golf courses worldwide. This means such luxury facilities are often situated outside existing settlements and frequently conspicuously sited in or near sites of outstanding natural beauty, which may be ecologically sensitive. The five-star Anassa Hotel in Cyprus was controversially built in a rural area just outside the proposed Akamas National Park. Ironically, this spatial isolation means the costs of providing infrastructure to such facilities can be excessive, often falling upon local communities as opposed to the developers. Moreover, their remoteness means such resorts are not easily accessible by transit or alternative forms of transportation such as bikeways, depending, instead, on private automobiles.

The aforementioned facts reflect a widespread problem in numerous island destinations, namely that of inconsistent government policies as well as weak enforcement of regulations (Sharpley 2001). We often see a destination where the tourism plan advocates sustainability while the land-use plan includes policies encouraging sprawl. In Cyprus, while it is true that the development of lower-grade hotels has been curbed in response to new tourism policies, coastal and rural development has proceeded unabated resulting mostly from the construction of private second homes and apartment complexes. Such developments are not controlled by tourism strategies and clearly have not steered the island towards a balanced development form.

Many other myths and problems are also associated with up-market tourism. Its advocates contend that individual travelers are likelier to be repeat tourists than mass tourists (Godfrey 1996), but evidence suggests this is untrue. In fact, up-market travellers are probably culture vultures constantly searching for new destinations to add to their list of 'been there done that' and unlikely to return to the same destination every year (Timothy and Olsen 2001). By contrast, psychocentric mass tourists who travel less frequently than their wealthier counterparts are lured by the familiarity of a destination, as has been noted on Rhodes (Selanniemi 2001). Marketing to repeat visitors is more economical than continually trying to attract new consumers.

It should be noted that 'alternative' tourists are not necessarily high-spending nor environmentally sensitive. Visitors to cultural and heritage attractions may seek more 'authentic' domestic accommodations and local food rather than luxury hotels and restaurants. Expensive expeditions to such destinations as the Galapagos Islands or Antarctica can generate large revenues for travel companies but are environmentally damaging. Eco- and adventure tourists may sully pristine places while a few more bodies on an already crowded beach make little incremental difference.

In final analysis, the up-scale market that destinations seek to lure is very limited; there are simply not enough wealthy tourists to benefit every destination worldwide. To make matters worse, most island destinations lack the rich cultural attractions and diversity that can be found in cosmopolitan areas such as global cities and, therefore, face an uphill battle in their efforts to lure sophisticated and high-spending travellers. At the end of the day, it is the islands' natural resources (i.e. beaches and sunshine) that attract most travellers in their bid to escape the drudgery of their everyday lives; this situation will continue well into the future and, thus, it is important for policymakers in these regions to ensure that the mass tourist product is developed more sustainably (Bardolet 2001).

Final thoughts

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US, the tourist industry, which had already been particularly hard hit by the economic recession, suffered a worldwide turndown. In the US the Air Transport Association estimated a \$US24 billion loss between June 2001 and June 2002 and Congress rushed a \$US5 billion grant and \$US10 billion in loan guarantees to bail out US airlines (Verhovek and Kaufman 2001). Airline passenger numbers, especially for business travel, declined sharply and have yet to recover. Many jobs in hotels, restaurants and other tourist services were lost in US cities.

While many destinations are adversely affected by the reduction in tourist numbers, those served primarily by air travel, such as islands, are particularly hard hit as travellers choose closer destinations accessible by

road. Examples of islands experiencing downturns in tourist numbers after 9/11 include Cuba (with a -26.3% 'growth' rate in November, 2001), Jamaica (-20.0% for September), and Cyprus (-19.5% for December) (WTO 2002b). St Maarten's hotel sector reported declining occupancy rates prior to 9/11, but a task force later that month predicted that tourist revenue losses would exceed \$US30 million by the end of 2001 (Sint Maarten Hospitality and Trade Association 2001). Significantly, it appears that upscale resorts on these islands have been particularly badly hit. The luxury golf resort of Casa de Campo in the Dominican Republic had to cut its winter rates by 30% while the upscale Varadero resort in Cuba suffered a 40% decrease in occupancy compared with a nationwide 20% decrease in the winter season (Frank 2002). Others resorts simply closed down, including the Harbour Village Resort in Bonaire (Caribbean Newsletter 2001). By contrast, luxurious spa resorts in North America experienced dramatically increased visitation with travellers requesting itineraries that do not involve flying (Canadian Tourism Commission 2001). Affluent tourists, including business conventioners, are not only travelling less but selecting 'safer' familiar destinations rather than those perceived as 'exotic' but potentially more hazardous (WTO 2002b).

Japan, which has fostered international travel, as a solution to trade imbalances, has been a reliable source of affluent tourists but the Japanese are increasingly selecting closer destinations in Southeast Asia. In 2001 Japanese outbound tourism decreased by 4-6%, most of the loss being post 9/11 (WTO 2002b). This is particularly affecting destinations such as Hawaii where the reduction in visitors is costing about \$US4 million a day. In the wake of 9/11 there was a 447% increase over the previous September in monthly unemployment claims from those working in tourism-related industry in Hawaii (APAICS 2002). Additionally, the cruise industry has seen many cancellations and conspicuous consumption of luxury vacations is less fashionable (MacDonald 2001). Until these trends reverse, tourist destinations are likely to welcome any visitors, even budget travellers. The downturn in tourism resulting in higher vacancy rates is financially more burdensome for luxury accommodations with high capital investment and fixed running costs than for more modest establishments that may close periodically or partially.

As a final note, we suggest that this is an appropriate juncture to re-evaluate up-market tourism policies as the sole solution to achieving sustainable development. It is far more important for destinations to adopt a planning/policy framework that treats tourism not in isolation but as an integral component of the entire development process. We also urge that diversification of local economies away from heavy dependence on tourism should be considered more seriously. Creating alternative employment opportunities for local people in other services and industries is likely to be politically and socially more attractive than increasing the 'status' gap between hosts and guests, a concomitant of up-scale tourism.

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Biographical notes

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Briavel Holcomb's interest in tourism was stimulated from a round-the-world voyage with the University of Pittsburgh's Semester at Sea program in 1990, while her focus on islands grew from a Fulbright in Malta in 1995–6. She has taught urban affairs at Rutgers for thirty years and her current research and teaching is on social implications of the Internet. (Bloustein

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Résumé: Commentaire: décisions malencontreuses pour le tourisme dans les petites îles: pourquoi ne réussit-on pas à y attirer les touristes les plus riches

Suivant la rhétorique de la durabilité, de nombreuses destinations ont décidé d'attirer des visiteurs qui dépensent beaucoup tout en limitant la croissance du tourisme de masse. En nous basant sur l'expérience de quelques petites îles, nous nous demandons si on peut justifier ces décisions du point de vue de l'économie ou de l'environnement. Les touristes de la haute sont peu nombreux, ils préfèrent varier leurs itinéraires et ils exigent des logements de luxe et des services qui dégradent l'environnement et qui appartiennent souvent à des compagnies étrangères. Le tourisme de masse n'est certes pas le remède idéal mais il a l'avantage d'amener un grand nombre de touristes qui reviennent et qui utilisent moins d'énergie et de ressources par personne. Il occupe souvent un espace restreint. Qui plus est, vue la réduction du nombre de voyageurs à la suite des attentats terroristes du onze septembre 2001, les destinations accueilleront sans doute quiconque veut bien payer.

Mots-clés: tourisme insulaire, tourisme pour les riches, tourisme de masse, tourisme durable

Zusammenfassung: Kommentar: Fehlgeleitete Strategien kleiner Inseldestinationen: Warum versagen Strategien eines hochwertigen Tourismus?

Gemäß der Rhetorik der Nachhaltigkeit haben viele Destinationen Strategien zum anlocken eines hochwertigen Tourismus entwickelt und zugleich Begrenzungen im weiteren Wachstum des Massenpauschaltourismus eingeführt. Hauptsächlich auf der Grundlage von Erfahrungen mit kleinen Inseldestinationen stellen die Autoren diese Strategien als entweder ökologisch oder ökonomisch nicht gerechtfertigt in Frage. Hochwertige Touristen sind nur eine kleine Gruppe, welche unterschiedlichste Destinationen bevorzugen, wo jedoch stets Luxusunterkünfte und Einrichtungen angeboten werden müssen, die oftmals umweltbelastend und in ausländischem Besitz sind. Der Massentourismus, sicherlich kein Allheilmittel, hat demgegenüber jedoch die Vorteile der größeren Märkte, der höheren Rate der Besuchswiederholer, geringeren Prokopfverbrauchs der Natur- und Energieressourcen und ist zudem oft auf verhältnismäßig enge Räume begrenzt. Überdies dürften die Reisedestinationen nach dem Rückgang des Reisens im Gefolge der Terroranschläge vom 11. September 2001 ohnehin jede Art von zahlenden Besuchern willkommen heißen.

Stichwörter: Inseltourismus, hochwertiger Tourismus, Massentourismus, nachhaltiger Tourismus

