1   Introduction – 'All At Sea!'

In this chapter, I will endeavour to outline the context for the rest of the book, setting the scene for what is to come.

The relationship between tourism and the sea

For centuries now, the sea has been at the very heart of tourism. For hundreds of millions of people worldwide, going on vacation still means going to the coast, particularly for their annual summer break. This magnetic pull of the sea motivates millions of people every week, from Stockholm to Sydney, New York to New Delhi, to head to their favourite beaches and seaside resorts. The lure of the sea makes them willing to put up with the hassles of modern airline travel and being stuck for hours in huge traffic jams so they can spend a few days each year by the ocean.

What they do when they arrive at the coast, however, varies dramatically from tourist to tourist. For some they are content just to drink in the views, take photos and sit in their car viewing the sea through their windscreens. For others it means lying on the beach soaking up the sun, people-watching or playing ball games. Some tourists come to enjoy the man-made attractions that develop wherever tourists make their annual seasonal migration to the ocean. This can mean everything from casinos to theme parks, gift shops to theatres. In these cases, the sea is simply a backdrop to the vacation, with little real interaction with it on the part of the visitor.

But, of course most visitors to the seaside will, at some point, at least dip their toe in the water and most will go further and swim in it. Depending on where they are, they will bask in the sensual pleasure of being in lovely warm clear water or they will grit their teeth as the cold water grips them like a vice and console themselves with the idea that swimming is good for them! Tourist engagement with the sea itself can range from a quick 'paddle' from the shore to a 'wild swim' for many kilometres beyond the sheltered inshore waters.

For an increasing number of tourists, though, the sea is a playground and being in it or on it may well be the main purpose of their vacation. We have seen, in recent years, large increases in the popularity of a range of marine-based activities, from surfing to paddle-boarding, windsurfing to jet-skiing, scuba diving to sea kayaking, sea angling to sailing.

In a world where an increasing number of tourists are urban dwellers who live away from the sea, there is another attraction of visiting the coast, which is the opportunity to enjoy fresh seafood. For many tourists being able to eat fish straight from the sea provides an element of authenticity for their trip

In recent years we have also seen a massive increase in marine wildlife tourism, mirroring what we saw earlier on land with the growth of safari tourism and wildlife experiences. For many coastal destinations, lists of their main selling points now usually include the opportunity to see whales, dolphins, stingrays or whatever happens to live in or migrate through, 'their' piece of ocean.

It is clear from this brief outline of how tourism relies on the sea as a resource, that it is the interests of both tourists and the tourism industry that the marine environment is in good health. This has been widely recognised by tourism interests which have supported initiatives such as the 'Blue Flag Beach' scheme within Europe which sets standards for the quality of bathing water. However, most industry lobbying and public policy in relation to tourism and marine environments has focused upon safeguarding the quality of beaches and inshore waters so they can be exploited by both the tourism industry and tourists.

In contrast there has been much less interest paid to the possible impacts of tourism on the well-being of oceans. It has always been assumed that there are no such impacts and that the oceans are resilient enough to deal with any impacts that may occur. However, in recent years, both of these assumptions have begun to be questioned and shown to be false.

As we will see in detail in a later chapter, the massive global growth of cruise tourism has been shown to have a negative environmental impact, which now can be seen across the planet. At the same time, the media has highlighted the damage which divers have done to some of the most iconic coral reefs in the world.

Furthermore, there has been growing public awareness around the issue of declining fish stocks, and the consumption of fish by tourists on vacation has served to exacerbate this problem. At the same time the desire of tourists for fish dishes when they vacation by the sea often leads to some destinations, where fish stocks are limited already, importing fish from considerable distances with the resulting carbon emissions.

However, concern over the state of our oceans has become much broader in focus than just tourism, not least due to television programmes such as the 'Blue Planet' series by David Attenborough that has been shown all over the world.