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## What is Tourism?

### By the end of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- Identify and analyse the force field of tourism knowledge.
- Understand the development of myths about tourism and assess their validity.
- Identify the components of tourism.
- Distinguish between and critique heuristic and technical definitions of tourism.
- Explain the multidisciplinary nature of tourism.
- Demonstrate why pleasure tourism is an extreme form of leisure by explaining its evolutionary roots.

### Introduction

Tourism is not absolute. That is what makes it such an exciting field of study on the one hand, and such an exasperating phenomenon to study on the other hand. Life is much easier when things are framed in black-and-white terms: good versus bad; healthy versus unhealthy; left versus right; right versus wrong. Increasingly, as well, people like to have the world presented to them in a simplistic manner where they are faced with apparently easy choices. Life would be easy, if only the world was simple. Yet, in reality the world is a rich tapestry of colours. What on the surface appears to be a simple yes/no choice, in reality becomes a very complex situation when one scratches below the surface.

Tourism is no different. We can all come up with absolute examples of what is and what is not tourism and who is and who is not a tourist. Visitors from China who spend five days on a package tour sightseeing and shopping in London are clearly tourists. Their activities and their resultant expenditure are also clearly tourism related. By contrast, if someone goes shopping for groceries in his or her home community, the person is clearly not a tourist. Other absolute categories such as, business travellers, people visiting friends and relatives, special interest tourists, can also be defined. But after that, what constitutes tourism enters a grey area. What if you have a second home and spend every weekend there? Are you a tourist? What if you are studying abroad for 11 months? Are you a tourist? What if you have family living someplace where you grew up and you visit them regularly? Are you a tourist? The answer depends on how tourism and the tourist are defined.

By the same token, identifying all businesses that represent the tourism sector and the people who work in this sector is challenging (Leiper, 1999). People talk about theme parks as being tourist attractions. Yet, a large portion of their visitors are local residents. Most so-called tourist retail shops, restaurants and even travel providers also rely heavily on local traffic to keep them viable. Even the hotel sector is reliant to a certain extent on the local market for functions, weddings, meetings, special events, food and beverage, and even accommodation.

Who works in the tourism industry? Again, we talk about tourism employees, but as Leiper (1999) mentions there is a huge grey area. You could probably say that hotel, airline, travel agent, theme park and tour operations staff work in the tourism industry, although certainly not all of their income comes from tourists. But, what about immigration officers, doctors, accountants, lawyers, insurance agents, the police and many others? Most people would not think they are part of the tourism sector, but they will deal with tourists directly on a daily basis or serve the tourism industry indirectly on a regular basis.

The same level of imprecision applies to the study of tourism concepts and theories. They are often presented as absolutes. But, as Smith et al. (2013) document in the previous chapter, the term 'theory' has been used very loosely. Even the word 'tourism' means quite different things depending on the disciplinary perspective. This chapter will examine some of the inherent complexities in tourism and explain the resulting difficulties that have arisen through the academic inquiry of this activity. Appreciating the complexity will also help appreciate how and why tourism scholarship has evolved the way it has.

## Tourism as a complex topic of enquiry

Our understanding of tourism, and the resulting theories, principles, concepts and models developed to explain and/or explore this phenomenon are a reflection of this complexity. How can we understand tourism as an absolute entity when we cannot even agree on whether it is a discipline, a field of study or a post disciplinary subject of enquiry (Coles, Hall and Duval, 2006; Hall et al., 2014; Tribe, 1997) or if it is even an industry (Lew, 2012)? Tribe's paper on the 'Truth about Tourism' is an invaluable starting point, for he asks (2006:360):

Is it possible to tell the truth about tourism? Surely an elaborate and expensive knowledge production system (universities, research departments, journals, conferences) exists just for that purpose. But could it be that the thousands of research articles that have been published have failed to uncover the truth?

Tourism has been the subject of academic inquiry for well over 70 years. A huge body of literature has developed over that time. More than 3,000 universities worldwide teach tourism and more than 400 academic journals publish refereed, scholarly research on this topic. The best guess is that somewhere in the neighbourhood of 3,000 academic papers are published each year and that the volume of published material is doubling every five years (McKercher and Tung, 2015). Many things promoted as being core truths about tourism are accepted as fact, even though the basic premises behind them either have no sound evidence or have been disproven repeatedly (McKercher and Prideaux, 2014). But, they are still being repeated.

Also, in spite of the 70 years of research, some key issues in tourism remain understudied, or have been examined at a superficial level. What do we really know about destination choice, market segmentation, life cycles? How much good work has been conducted on gender and tourism? Why is so little work being conducted on drive tourism when it is the most common form of tourism? Indeed, one of the ironies is that early researchers working in an information void, often produced the most insightful research. Today, when we have access to more data than ever before, more sophisticated research instruments and the much larger research community, much of the research being produced is not very exciting. It seems that numbers and adherence to certain statistical techniques get in the way of good ideas.

Tribe (2006) illustrates the root cause and the resultant challenge for tourism for he talks about how the force field of tourism provides a lens that distorts reality. The following section summarises his work. The treatise he argues is informative, for he states no research is value- or bias- free. Instead, he sees a gap between the fact of tourism and the phenomena of the collective 'truth' or knowledge held