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An Introduction to Tourism Impacts

Introduction

Tourism, as a significant form of human activity, can have major effects on people and places, and these effects are commonly referred to as tourism impacts. Tourism always takes place in a context, which we usually refer to, in a broad sense, as the environment. This environmental context is made up of both human and natural features. The human environment comprises economic, social and cultural factors and processes. The natural environment is a combination of inorganic components such as rocks and water, and inorganic processes such as the erosion of rocks, and with organic elements, which comprise plants and animals and organic processes such as those within an ecosystem.

The human and natural environments

When discussing impacts of tourism, it is possible to make a distinction between the human environment and the natural environment and this is the convention followed by most writers on tourism impacts. However, it is important to note that, in a real setting, the human and the natural environment are not separate, but interlinked, and human activity is both affected by and has effects on the natural environment.

Most writers and researchers consider the impacts of tourism under the following headings: socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts. This convention is followed in the chapters that follow, but it should be remembered that in a real world context, tourism impacts are generally multi-faceted, often having a combination of economic, social and environmental dimensions, although tourism researchers, and others such as planners and politicians may concentrate on one type of impact and largely ignore the others. Nevertheless, when considering each type of impact, it should be noted that the impacts are multi-dimensional, not as easily compartmentalized as is often portrayed and frequently problematic. Hence, tourism impacts cannot easily be categorized as solely social, environmental or economic, but tend to have several interrelated dimensions.

Although it is conventional to subdivide tourism impacts under those three headings, it is also normally the case that the discussion follows a pattern in which the economic impacts are considered before the others. In this text, we divert from the norm, and the environmental impacts are discussed first. The rationale for this in summary is as follows:

- The environment is a key resource for tourism
- The environment is to a large extent the geographical context for much tourism
- The environment is a combination of both natural and human aspects
- There is a great range of environmental attractions that encourage tourism
- Environmental impacts of tourism are often easy to discern as their visual nature is very evident. These impacts are dynamic and change continually.
- As environmental impacts are frequently visual in nature they can significantly influence the image of a destination
- The environmental impacts of tourism can be either positive or negative
- Not only does tourism have an effect on the environment, but the environment can have effects on tourism.
- The environment is being affected by human activity (including climate change which is discussed Chapter 11) and this has effects on tourism.

The environment can be regarded as a key geographical resource for tourism. It is also the case that the variation in geographical factors, particularly spatial factors, are very obvious in relation to the environment. The environment is conventionally subdivided under both human and non-human components, which is either a natural or, as is more likely, a semi-natural environment. Environmental effects of tourism are also very apparent in terms of their visual nature, such as the existence of hotels, theme parks or marinas. Tourism can have significant negative impacts on the environment in terms of, for example, pollution, crowding and congestion, but can also give positive effects through, for example, raising awareness of the need to conserve threatened landscapes or species, as well as helping to raise money from visitors to support conservation measures.

Tourism impacts can be recorded in a number of locations. This can be in relation to tourists leaving an area of generation, usually the tourists' home locations, and moving towards, before arriving at, an area of attraction. Hence, impacts can be considered in relation to an area of origin, and the transport route and transport type used by tourists. However, tourism impacts tend to be most obvious in specific locations where tourists congregate, and in particular it is in the destination area that the impacts can often be seen most clearly. It is in the destination that impacts are particularly obvious, because it is here that tourists interact with the local environment and the local economy, as well as the local culture and society. Nevertheless, it is frequently the impacts on the environment in terms of the creation of hotels, and a related tourism infrastructure that is an immediate indication of the significance of tourism in a particular area, location or, as it is commonly referred to, the tourism destination.

Impact as change

Many texts book on tourism have sections on tourism impacts. In these texts usually the approach is an initial division under different headings as indicated above, and this is then often followed by a concern with specific impacts. However, the discussion so far has assumed, through the use of the term *impact*, that tourism has some form of effect on society, the environment or the economy. But the term *impact* has been viewed as problematic by some researchers (see Hall and Page, 2014, for more discussion on this). However, as Hall and Page (2014) indicate, the term *impact* really is a short-hand way of indicating that there has been a *change* in something over time as a result of tourism visitation. In fact, it would probably be better to use a term such as 'tourism-related change' than *impact* (Hall and Lew, 2009).

There is another problem with the term *impact* – it implies a *one-way* process. This one-way process can be summarized as 'A has an effect on B', or using a specific example 'tourism has an effect on the environment'. The problem of using the term *impact* in this way is that it may hide the fact that 'B also has an effect on A' or referring again to the example 'the environment has an effect on tourism'. Hence, using the term *impact* may imply solely a one way process – a form of cause and effect in which only 'A has an effect on B'. In reality, it is very likely that 'A and B' have effects on each other – so it is a *two-way* process. In the real world, it is in fact even more likely that, not only do 'A and B' have effects on each other, but are found within a wider context in which there are other factors that affect both 'A and B'. Additionally, 'A and B' are very likely to have effects on certain aspects of this wider context.

The discussion in the previous paragraph indicates that the term *impact* is really a short-hand way of indicating tourism-related change (Hall and Lew 2009). Hence, the term *impact* is strictly speaking limited and not completely accurate, but it is the word that is in common use, so as Hall and Page argue (2014:140) 'we are stuck with it!' This book also follows the convention of using the term *tourism impact* when discussing what can be considered to be tourism related change.

Positive and negative impacts

The impacts of tourism can be positive or beneficial, but also negative or detrimental. Whether impacts are perceived as positive or negative depends on the value position and judgment of the observer. This can be illustrated through the use of the following example, which is concerned with environmental effects, and is used here to help with an understanding of the importance of attitudes and value positions in relating to tourism impacts. One observer may suggest that creating a new footpath through a national park can be viewed as a way of routing tourists and therefore limiting damage to the wider area of the national park. This would be considered by the observer as a positive impact. Another observer may claim that this new footpath will lead to an increase in tourist numbers and therefore