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The Consumption of Marine Resources by Tourists

Most of this book to up to now has focused upon tourists and tourism harming our oceans by putting undesirable things into the sea, whether that be plastics, fuel spilled from boats or even nasty chemicals from sunscreen lotions. However, in this chapter we will focus on the harm which tourists and the tourism industry do when they remove things from the sea and the ocean fringe. We will see that the consumption of marine resources by tourists and the tourism industry is adding to the problems faced by our oceans. I recognise that most of the damage being done to the marine environment from the consumption of resources in the sea and under the seabed is not due to tourism. The majority of it is due to over-fishing to meet the everyday needs and desires of the populations of towns and cities, and the exploitation of natural resources including, oil, natural gas and minerals.

However, tourist consumption contributes to the problems faced by the oceans and most of this consumption is for pleasure rather than necessity. Furthermore, most of the consumption of marine resources by tourists occurs in specific locations and this concentrates its impact on particular areas of the marine environment, around coastal destinations.

A typology of tourist consumption of marine resources

A simple attempt to identify the various ways in which tourists and tourism consume marine resources is presented in Figure 7.1. This is followed by a closer look at each point from that figure.

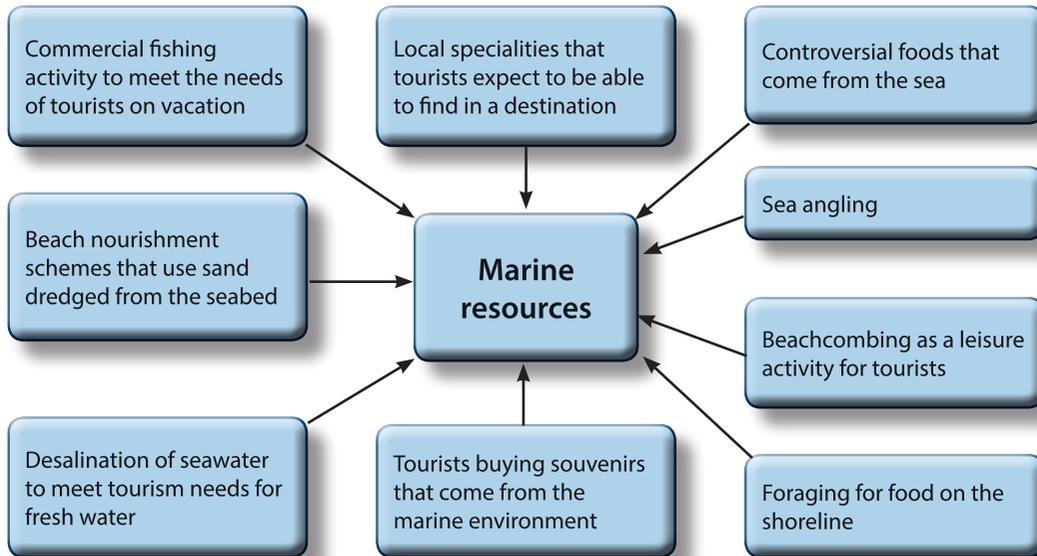


Figure 7.1: A simple typology of the ways in which tourists and tourism consume marine resources

■ Commercial fishing to meet the needs of tourists on vacation

In many coastal destinations, tourists expect to have fish on the menu in local restaurants and their hotels, or be able to buy locally sourced fish and seafood to cook in their self-catering accommodation. This can put great pressure on the local fishing industry to meet this demand, which is highly seasonal. However, these seasons may not coincide with the times of the year which are most productive from the point of view of commercial fishermen. Furthermore, many coastal tourist destinations are found in areas where over-fishing has depleted fish stocks so that the amount of fish available is declining year on year. This is certainly the situation around the Mediterranean Sea, which every summer probably attracts more tourists than any other area of sea in the world.

A 2017 report from the Union for the Mediterranean painted a clear picture of the challenges faced in relation to fish stocks. The report noted that 80% of Mediterranean fish species were being fished at or above their levels of sustainability. This was in addition to a European Commission report, also from 2017, that suggested that 93% of Mediterranean fish species were being over-fished. At the same time the report noted that international tourism alone in the region had grown from 58 million visits in 1970 to more than 350 million in 2016. It also noted that just five countries around the Mediterranean accounted for 80% of these tourists, suggesting that there is further scope for growth, particularly in the countries that fringe the southern half of the Mediterranean Sea. (Union for the Mediterranean, 2017).

Some tourists are attracted to Mediterranean destinations because of the health benefits of the so-called 'Mediterranean diet'. This diet, by promoting the eating of fish rather than red meat, may, inadvertently, be further contributing to the problem of over-fishing in the Mediterranean. This problem of overfishing, partly linked to tourist demand, is not confined to the Mediterranean region. It can also be observed in the islands of the Indian Ocean, the coastal zones in south-east Asia, and parts of Central America.

Much of the commercial fishing that takes place in the world is undertaken by some form of trawling which is indiscriminate in its impacts on the marine environment. As well as catching the fish being targeted, it can damage seabed habitats and catch and kill endangered species, something known as 'by-catches'. This may include species such as dolphins and sea turtles that are vital elements in marine ecosystems, but also key attractions for tourists in coastal destinations.

The pressure from tourist demand as well as the depletion of fish stocks can lead to three outcomes that can be a threat to the environment.

First, fishermen may be tempted to break the rules on quotas and minimum sizes of fish that can be caught, because of the pressures on them to earn a living. This can result in a reduction in future fish populations.

Second, fish and seafood may be imported, sometimes from considerable distances, if there is insufficient fish available in local waters. It may also reflect the desire of hotels and restaurants to offer exotic species not found locally or provide fish that guests are familiar with from home. Thus, the restaurant customer in London may be eating tuna steaks that have come from the Indian Ocean, while the hotel guest in Sri Lanka is eating smoked wild salmon from Alaska. Such meals have a significant carbon footprint and do little to improve the sustainability of global fisheries.

Third, destinations can be tempted to move into fish-farming when natural stocks become depleted. While the potential benefits of fish-farming seem clear when faced with depleted natural stocks, it brings its own problems, which have been well documented. These include the introduction and transmission of diseases to the marine environment, deterioration in water quality, water eutrophication and habitat modification. And they may not solve the problem of supply in tourist destinations as many tourists are likely to reject farmed fish, preferring something fresh and local.

Yet again, though, we have to note that demand in tourist destinations is not the main cause of global over-fishing although, again, we need to recognise that tourist consumption of seafood is for the pleasure of consumption rather than being everyday sustenance for people with few alternative sources of protein.

Ironically, in some places, such as Taiwan, commercial fishermen are diversifying into tourism to help mitigate the effects of declining fish stocks. (Chen, 2010)