

The Impact of Tourism on the Marine Environment



John Swarbrooke





Part of the Responsible Tourism Series

Edited by Harold Goodwin, Director of Responsible Tourism,
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Plymouth.

Sustainability is a necessity, climate change, biodiversity loss, the loss of cultural heritage and local economic development are challenges for the tourism sector. Too often sustainability is used as 'greenwashing'. Responsible Tourism requires transparency in reporting and respect for local people and their cultural and natural heritage. We need to leave more than footprints, to fund conservation and to compensate local communities for the opportunity cost of maintaining their heritage for our enjoyment. Too often tourism has just used destinations and this needs to be reversed. Responsible Tourism is about using tourism to make better places to live in and better places to visit, in that order.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated in the first instance to our son, John Michael Richard Swarbrooke, for it will be his and later generations which will pay the price if we do not tackle climate change and global warming.

It is also dedicated to my wife, Susan Horner, for her constant support and to my parents, John Wilfred Samuel Swarbrooke and Maureen June Bate, without whose sacrifices I would have never have been able to write books and teach students, which have been two of the greatest privileges and pleasures in my life.

Acknowledgements

I think that I first need to acknowledge that my decision to write this book was largely influenced by where I live. It is a small village in Cornwall, in the UK, on the wild Atlantic coast, by a small road which each year carries hundreds of thousands of tourists between various visitor attractions and beaches. From my window I see pleasure craft, fishing boats, and freighters going up and down the coast and the occasional cruise ship. And from the nearby cliff tops, at different times of the year, I can spot seals, dolphins, basking sharks and even whales, along with thousands of seabirds, both permanent residents and migrants. Nearby beaches are packed over the summer months with surfers, sunbathers, and sea anglers, too many of whom leave rubbish behind on the beach, and the receding tide sweeps this into the sea and thus into the marine ecosystem and the food chain. Six kilometres above my head are the contrails of jet airliners that are contributing to global warming, which in turn is affecting the water temperature of the ocean that I look at from my window. Given all these things, writing a book such as this one seemed an obvious thing to do!

A further influence on my decision has been my experience of working at the University of Plymouth, which is a centre of excellence, with a global reputation, in the fields of oceanography, marine science, environmental science and marine biology. Colleagues at the university have played a leading role in bringing the scandal of plastic pollution in the oceans to the attention of the world. My discussions with these colleagues helped stimulate me to write this book, as they acknowledged that they knew of no text that looked at the impact of tourism on the marine environment from the point of view of the oceans, rather than tourism!

I certainly owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Harold Goodwin and Professor Michael Hall, two giants in the world of tourism academia, for their contributions to the book. Although both are very busy, they readily and generously agreed to my request for short essays so that mine was not the only voice coming from the pages of the book. Both have written about subjects which are close to their hearts.

While I did make grateful use of academic journal papers and texts when writing this book, I would like to acknowledge the debt I owe to the many online sources I used to gather the latest information. These websites belonged to governments, the United Nations and the European Commission, university research centres, professional bodies, tourism organisations, individual researchers and non-governmental organisations and activist groups. In a subject area where things are happening every day and change is constant, these sources are vital resources because with books and refereed academic papers having such long gestation periods, they are overtaken by subsequent events. Indeed, I sadly have

to acknowledge that in the few months between the completion of this manuscript and the publication of the book, some of the content will already seem out-of-date.

Finally, I would like to thank Tim Goodfellow and Sally North of Goodfellow Publishers, for being so supportive and encouraging, something that is rare in the academic publishing world today. The idea for this book was born during a conversation with Tim Goodfellow over lunch in Taunton and his enthusiasm for the subject spurred me on, for which I am very grateful.

Preface

I have written this book for the simple reason that I believe such a book needs to be written and that it needs to be written now.

This view has been strengthened during the period spent writing this book, a six-month period in which Greta Thunberg has been stirring consciousness around the world and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has issued its report on the impact of climate change on our oceans.

We have long neglected the well-being of our oceans, but have now become painfully aware of their fragility, not least due to the media with television documentaries such as the recent 'Blue Planet II' series, presented by Sir David Attenborough and seen by audiences in many countries.

As we, hopefully, begin to recognise the need for radical action to save the planet and safeguard the interests of those yet to be born, we are beginning to understand that the marine environment will play a major role in that struggle. If we can save our oceans, we may yet be able to save the planet as a whole.

Many of the challenges facing our marine environment have little or nothing directly to do with tourism, so why write a book specifically about the impact of tourism on our oceans?

The answer is a simple one in principle. Tourism adds another layer of challenges for our marine environment, and the rapid growth of marine tourism worldwide means that these challenges have grown dramatically in recent years. The pace of change has exceeded our ability to manage marine tourism.

Oceans are complex places in which to manage tourism. While no one owns the oceans themselves, the right to exploit them is a complex issue vested, usually, in national governments, and is often highly contested.

Unlike on land, there is no destination marketing organisation to promote tourism in the oceans but, nevertheless, they are at the heart of tourism and the tourist experience, whether it be a beach vacation or a cruise on the high seas.

With the exception of communities that live along their fringes, they have no resident communities to protect them or influence political decision-making. They are used in many different ways by humans, ways which often conflict with each other. Furthermore, we have little understanding yet of the carrying capacity of different marine environments in relation to tourism. Likewise, we do not really, as yet, have any idea of what the fashionable concept, sustainability, means in the context of the marine environment.

Of course, we also need to recognise that the only true residents of the oceans, the wildlife, have no vote, so just have to passively accept whatever tourism throws at them!

Tourism industry interest in the oceans has tended to be focused almost exclusively on the land that borders them, and really just the beaches at the interface between sea and land. The sea itself beyond the distance from shore the tourist wishes to swim has generally remained unknown to most tourists except to cruise passengers and ferry users and the odd sport angler, perhaps. Where it exists, the sea has been something to be exploited by tourism, a vital asset that has too often been taken for granted.

However, in the past 20 years we have seen a number of trends which have thrust oceans into the forefront of the tourism offer aimed at those who are, perhaps, looking for new experiences and are bored with conventional land-based attractions. Let us now look at just a few of these trends.

First, there has been a huge increase in cruising after decades in which it declined, and commentators predicted its imminent demise. Cruise ships are no longer a means of transport alone, they are now floating all-inclusive resorts, almost destinations in their own right. And cruise ships are getting bigger all the time, but their passengers want to be able to go anywhere, so we see bizarre pictures of huge ships doing ungainly three-point-turns in fjords, or monster vessels towering above the cityscape of Venice. And, while attention has focused on the carbon footprint of airliners in debates over climate change and the environment, it is only recently that attention has begun to be paid to the environmental impacts of cruise ships.

Second, we have seen an explosive growth in marine wildlife-watching fuelled by nature programmes on television. Whales and dolphins are being watched, or perhaps more accurately chased, in pretty well all the world's oceans. Tourists, no longer satisfied with seeing marine life, now want to interact with the creatures by swimming with them.

Third, more and more water-based activities are being developed or invented for the enjoyment of tourists, and some of these activities, such as sailing, ocean kayaking and wild swimming can take participants well beyond inshore waters. Those who follow such sports naturally wish to pursue their interest all over the world and in places as yet undiscovered by other tourists.

Fourth, seafood has become increasingly popular in recent years with tourists thanks to the culinary media and the guide-book writers, travel bloggers and the growing healthy eating media. This has put increased pressure on already threatened stocks.

These four points illustrate quite clearly that trends in the tourism market are becoming increasingly challenging for the well-being of our oceans.

It is worth making the point at this stage that the ocean is under threat from tourism particularly because tourists are mobile and not tied to any location. They

can travel to pretty well any marine environment in the world if they have the money, and more and more do. There are therefore very few places of sanctuary, where the marine environment can exist without interference from tourists.

Yet at the same time the tourism industry has more reason than most industries to protect the oceans because tourists really only want to visit places where the sea is clean and there is a lot of wildlife to see. Unhealthy, unsustainable marine environments can easily destroy local tourism industries.

There are bigger issues to worry about in relation to the relationship between oceans and tourism. With global warming causing increased sea temperatures and rising sea levels we face the real prospect of some well-established coastal tourism destinations simply disappearing over time. Some tasteless and somewhat defeatist tourism promoters are already sometimes selling places like the Maldives with slogans such 'see it before it disappears!'

And we cannot ignore the contribution which tourism itself makes to global warming across the planet, not least through the carbon emissions from air travel.

At the same time, we have many examples of where irresponsible marine tourism can destroy beautiful and irreplaceable places; the impact of diving on many coral reefs around the world demonstrates this very clearly.

This book will endeavour to take a holistic approach to tourism and marine environments exploring a wide range of issues from a range of perspectives.

While it may appear at times that the tone of the book is rather negative about the impacts of tourism on the oceans, I have tried hard to present a balanced overview of the key issues. However, this can be quite difficult. With tourism on land negative environmental impacts can often be set against economic benefits such as jobs or social benefits like services and facilities that exist due to tourism demand but can also be used by local residents. Frankly, it is hard to see how the oceans and their wildlife gain from tourism unless one believes that marine tourism provides a motivation and resources for marine conservation

I am grateful to Professor Michael Hall and Professor Harold Goodwin for sharing their thoughts on issues relating to the impact of tourism on the marine environment, which are of particular interest to them.

What we need is a truly inter-disciplinary approach to this subject but that is beyond my expertise or ability, notwithstanding the attempts which have been made to offer perspectives on the issues from scientists who are not tourism academics. What is actually needed is research by multi-disciplinary teams with tourism academics involved but not dominating.

Although I know relatively little about oceans from a scientific point of view, I do understand one thing and that is that the term 'marine environment' in the title of the book is not really accurate. There are many different and diverse marine

environments and the impacts of tourism will be different for each of them. I hope that the reader will forgive the use of the singular version, which has been used purely for convenience. Of course, the same is true in relation to the use of the term 'impact' in the title when in fact there are a myriad of different impacts

However, we also need to place tourism in a wider context in relation to the impact of human beings on the marine environment. The issue of plastics in the ocean shows this clearly; most are not the result of tourism, but some certainly are and as a discretionary, non-essential activity that could be seen as a luxury, tourism should be able to solve this problem easier than some other economic sectors.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge that what happens in and above our oceans themselves has an impact that extends over the land masses of our planet as well. Most of our weather, wherever we live, is influenced by the oceans, and the majority of the extreme weather events on earth also have their origins in or above the seas of the world.

As with all my books, my main hope is that reading it will stimulate researchers, students and practitioners to want to find out more about the impact of tourism on our oceans and how tourism might contribute positively towards their conservation.

Certainly, I have learned a lot while researching this book and I can honestly say it has been a labour of love.

John Swarbrooke
Cornwall – overlooking the Atlantic Ocean!
January 2020

Postscript to the Preface

In the four months between writing the Preface in January and working on the final proofs of the book in May 2020 the world has been ravaged by the COVID-19 Pandemic. It is clear that this is having a devastating impact on the tourism industry and at the time of writing it is unclear how long the Pandemic will continue and over what period of time its effects will be felt within the tourism industry.

However, it is clearly a major issue facing tourism and the planet so, at the last possible moment, right at the end of the book production process, I have added a Postscript looking at what COVID-19 might mean for tourism and the marine environment.

John Swarbrooke
May 2020