

RESPONSIBLE HOLIDAYMAKING**The paradox of sustainable tourism.**

A tourist flying economy class from Britain to Kenya and back generates around a tonne of carbon emissions, according to the International Civil Aviation Organisation. No matter how many times he reuses his towels or sits on a composting toilet when he is there, he could never hope to offset the burning of all that jet fuel. Does that mean the very notion of « sustainable tourism » is an oxymoron?

The phrase has three possible meanings. The first is ecological. Given the contribution that transport, especially by air, makes to global warming, on this definition it is almost guaranteed to fall short. The only truly sustainable holiday would be camping in the back garden eating berries, says Harald Zeiss of the institute for Sustainable Tourism at Her: University in Germany. The second is social. Ideally, when cultures meet and gain in mutual understanding the long-term benefits will be intangible, but real. The final one is economic. Tourists who step off the beaten track have a chance to help lift the poor out of poverty and encourage them to preserve their environments for financial gain. The question is how much weight to give to each.

According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), a UN agency, 11 billion international trips were made in 2014, a 4.4% increase on the year before. As popular destinations become overcrowded, more people seek places that remain comparatively unspoilt. But pristine wildernesses don't stay pristine for long once they are on the holiday trail. The paradox of sustainable tourism is that it can be « both a destroyer of nature and an agent for its conservation », notes Andrew Holden of Bedfordshire University in Britain.

Keeping resorts small, and perhaps even temporary, can help resolve that paradox in favor of conservation. Those on larger-scale eco-tourism packages may be doing good in other ways. Concentrating large numbers of visitors in a single location increases their local impact—which can be for the better. If a resort buys local food, says Mr Zeiss, or invests in renewable-energy generation that can be used by those who live nearby, then the surrounding area can receive a boost.

But hotels must seek ways to mitigate their negative effects. Though signs suggesting that guests can help « save the planet » by re-using their towels overstate the case, water-guzzling is one of the biggest evils of mass tourism. An analysis by Thomas Cook, a large holiday firm, suggests that on average each tourist around the world accounts for around 350 litres of water per day by showering, using the swimming-pool and the like which rises to 6,000 litres when indirect use such as food production is added.

But often it is the guests themselves who kick against energy-saving initiatives. To stop patrons leaving lights and air-conditioning on when they are out, many hotels have keycards that control the electrics in rooms. Yet some report that guests override the system by inserting a business card into the control slot before heading out.

Overall the benefits of sustainable tourism outweigh the harms, some think. Mr Zeiss argues that the most unnecessary flights are taken not by tourists but by business folk who fly abroad for a toe—touch meeting that could easily have been replaced by a video-call, and then fly home the same day.

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