

‘Deviant Leisure’: The Consumption of Tourist Experiences and Harm

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Evolving consumer desires, globalised connectivity, financial capabilities, technological advances and expansion of the accessibility and availability of low(er) cost air travel have all contributed to the growth and diversification of tourism and travel opportunities. The ‘deviant leisure’ perspective invites criminologists to consider the ‘potential for harm that lies beneath the surface of even the most embedded and culturally accepted forms of leisure’ (Smith and Raymen, 2016:2). Given that tourism forms one of the largest and fastest growing sectors of the global consumer economy, with its expansion and diversification making it a ‘major social, cultural and economic phenomenon’ (Wearing et al., 2010:1), the deviant leisure perspective offers a useful framework for examining the relationship between leisure and harm whilst recognising ‘adherence to the cultural values inscribed by consumer capitalism’ (Smith and Raymen, 2016:1).

Despite retaining a huge portion of the market, highly commodified ‘package holidays’ characteristic of ‘mass tourism’ have been positioned as inauthentic tourist experiences and socially irresponsible due to concerns about sustainability: environmentally, socially and culturally (Mowforth and Munt, 2016). Forms of ‘new’, or ‘alternative’, tourism have seen huge growths as part of the shift from mass tourism to more (supposedly) individualised travel. Advocates of alternative tourism claim a more authentic, more responsible mode of tourism where tourists [or travellers] can “get off the beaten track” and there have been huge growths in ecotourism, volunteer and adventure tourism markets as a reflection of this. Given that tourism is said to form the ‘most viable and sustainable economic development’ for developing countries (WTO, 2017) alternative tourism must be acknowledged for its positive economic impact. At the same time, recognising the inherent inequalities

of global divisions and biases of global North or Western perspectives is a must (see Carrington et al., 2016).

Volunteer tourism – the ‘poster child for alternative tourism’ (Lyons and Wearing, 2008:6) - has gained increasing popularity in recent years with a huge industry supporting and providing opportunities for people to ‘give something back’ in their leisure time. Volunteer tourism is now recognised as one of the fastest growing tourist markets worldwide offering a whole range of experiences, destinations and activities (Sin et al., 2015). ‘Charity challenges’ further reflect another way people are encouraged to use their leisure time productively. Recent years have witnessed a growth in the promotion and visibility of charity fundraising through adventures and expeditions. Generally organised by a third party – sometimes on behalf of a charity themselves – these ‘challenges’ often adopt forms of adventure tourism (see Taylor et al., 2013) with participants collecting sponsorship for taking part. The proliferation of global charity challenge opportunities has partly been associated with the rise of celebrities taking part in such events. In 2009, we saw a group of celebrities climb Mount Kilimanjaro for the televised Comic Relief and in the week following responsibletravel.com reported a 1,225% increase in interest in their Kilimanjaro package tour (Douglas, 2009). These events now market themselves as a way for ‘ordinary people’ to experience the ‘extraordinary’ – a preserve which was once limited to the wealthy, or extreme adventure enthusiast (Barrell, 2012).

However, even charity based tourism – ostensibly socially conscious, responsible and also ‘real’ in terms of its cultural and social experience - has clear potential for harm. Its ideological rejection of commodified consumption (as with most forms of alternative tourism) is also problematic. For example there has been a growing concern recently related to the harmful (and criminal) nature of ‘orphanage tourism’: where tourists are either taken to visit orphanages to donate goods or money, or increasingly, spending a period of time volunteering.

[in the] worst cases, children are exploited through forced labour, enforced begging, human trafficking or sex tourism. In other cases, exploitation occurs by way of forced interaction with volunteers, loss of rights to privacy and increased risk of physical and sexual abuse (Cheer et al., 2017)

In addition to the potential for criminal exploitation and harm of children (see Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015; Punaks & Feit, 2014), volunteer tourism is potentially harmful in many ways. These might include: 'a neglect of locals' desires, caused by lack of involvement; a hindering of work progress and the completion of unsatisfactory work, caused by volunteers' lack of skills; a decrease in employment opportunities and a promotion of dependency, caused by the presence of volunteer labour; a reinforcement of conceptualisations of the "other" and rationalisations of poverty, caused by the intercultural experience; and an instigation of cultural changes, caused by the demonstration effect and the actions of short term missionaries' (Guttentag, 2009:537).

Whilst charity challenges may be argued to create and sustain employment opportunities – with the need for porter services, accommodation and other amenities the nature of this industry especially when taking place in developing nations – must raise questions regarding worker exploitation and child labour. Luggage needs to be carried – often by people – significant distances in challenging environments between overnight stops and start and finish points. Although in some areas pressure has forced companies to sign up to ethical codes, questions remain about the kinds of working conditions porters are enduring:

Frostbite, altitude sickness and even death can be the cost for the porters carrying trekkers' equipment in the Himalayas, on the Inca Trail in Peru and at Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. Lack of shelter, inadequate food and clothing, and minimal pay are commonly faced problems. (Tourism Concern, 2017)

The rise in alternative tourism has seen an increasing focus on sustainability as part of its supposed response to the problems of mass tourism. Yet, what sustainability actually is or means in practice, remains hotly contested (Mowforth & Munt, 2016). Many tour operators will devote a (usually small) portion of their profit to local environmental initiatives, and there is usually a fee for entering national parks aimed partly to contribute to the costs of environmental damage. However, Goodwin (2015:42) reflects that 'entrance fees to national parks generally do not cover the costs of managing and restoring habitat trampled by visitors, let alone contribute to the maintenance of national wildlife estate in general'. Growth of tourism also results

in – often unregulated – buildings and other human settlement developments. Further impact will be felt on natural resources well beyond simple problems of littering, whether it is water supply, building materials or human excrement. Although much has been made of the potential for volunteer tourism and harm to humans, there is also evidence that suggests it might be equally as problematic for wildlife and conservation efforts. Opportunities to volunteer with wild and exotic animals are common and heavily marketed and generally open to all – providing you can afford it - with these opportunities being presented as a better alternative to harmful tourist activities such as elephant riding, tiger selfies and the like. A move towards recognising 'ethical' wildlife volunteering projects indicates that there are problems with the authenticity, practices and intentions of some of these kinds of projects. Examples of fake animal sanctuaries and organisations which appear to place profit firmly before conservation regularly crop up. The nature of a profit driven market implies that supply needs to keep up with demand.

The growth in alternative tourism is characteristic of contemporary consumer capitalism where 'the new world is driven forward by the injunction to enjoy proliferating experiences' (Hall, 2012:146). The insatiable desire of new and rewarding experiences is something which is heavily marketed and promoted to people on a daily basis. At the same time consumers – of products and experiences – are challenged to be more socially responsible in their choices. Whether this be through buying fair trade products or engaging in more sustainable and environmentally friendly travel – we are encouraged to enjoy ourselves in an ethically conscious and socially responsible way (see Brisman & South, 2014; Fletcher, 2014; Sin, 2010). This is not only to benefit others, but also to benefit ourselves. This message is heavily pushed onto people from a young age, volunteering abroad for example is suggested to young people who want to improve their chances of getting into university, or getting a job. Indeed, much of the information around charity emphasises how through helping others, it will improve your C.V. and enrich your own life - putting you ahead of others. In addition, the positive ethos of raising money for charity, or helping a good cause adds to the experience. Not only can one enjoy a new culture, location and experience, but one can also feel good about what they have achieved. Not only do charity tourists feel like they are doing something about

the world's problems, but within a hyper competitive individualised consumer society, they are seen to be doing something about them.

It is important to recognise that significant amounts of non-charity based tourism also happens in the same areas – whether described as nature, eco, adventure or otherwise. Existing critiques of alternative tourism more generally highlight these kinds of issues (see Mowbray & Munt, 2016) – however charity based tourism further compounds these issues. It arguably makes the appeal and desirability for these kinds of experiences much more relevant to a broader segment of consumers. Further, the broad range of social and environmental harms which are associated with charity based tourism (and of course other forms of tourism) must be considered in recognition of their overwhelming exacerbation of social inequalities and impact on the economically disadvantaged (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Pemberton, 2016; White, 2013; Yar, 2012).

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