

Chapter 3

An introduction to tourism impacts

Learning objectives

At the end of this chapter you should:

- have a basic understanding of the various impacts of tourism;
- be aware of a number of influences on tourism impacts;
- be aware of why tourism has the particular impacts that it has;
- be aware that tourism impacts can be considered as positive or negative;
- be aware of a range of perspectives on tourism impacts.

Introduction

Tourism takes place in the environment, which is made up of both human and natural features. The human environment comprises economic, social and cultural factors and processes. The natural environment is made up of plants and animals in their habitat. It is possible to make a distinction between the human environment and the natural environment and this is particularly useful when discussing the impacts of tourism. However, it is important to note that, in a real setting, the human environment and the natural environment are interwoven and human activity is both affected by and has effects on the natural environment.

Tourism, as a significant form of human activity, can have major impacts. These impacts are very visible in the destination region, where tourists interact with the local environment, economy, culture and society. Hence, it is conventional to consider the impacts of tourism under the headings of socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts. This convention is followed in the three chapters that follow this introduction to tourism impacts. In the real world, tourism issues are generally multi-faceted, often having a combination of economic, social and environmental dimensions. Therefore when considering each of the types of impact in turn, it should be remembered that the impacts are multi-faceted, often problematic and not as easily compartmentalized as is often portrayed. In other words, tourism impacts cannot easily be categorized as solely social, environmental or economic, but tend to have several interrelated dimensions. It should also be noted that much tourism planning and management is in relation to tourism impacts in destinations and resorts.

Key perspectives

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 judgement of the observer of the impacts. This can be illustrated through the use of the following example. In this case, only economic impacts are considered and the example relates to the building of a hotel in an area with currently little tourism activity. It is possible for one observer to express a view that the building of the hotel will create more jobs, both in the building and running of the hotel and the observer would consider this to be a positive impact. Conversely,

another observer may claim although jobs will be created, they will only be part-time, semi-skilled, poorly paid and lacking a career structure, as well as taking people away from traditional forms of employment. This observer would view the building of the hotel as having a negative impact on the local economy.

Another example, in this case relating to environmental effects, may help with an understanding of the importance of attitudes and value positions in relating to tourism impacts. One observer may suggest that the creation of a footpath through a national park to cater for tourists can be viewed as a way of routing tourists and therefore limiting damage – a positive impact. Another observer may claim that this footpath routing will promote an increase in tourist numbers and hence the likelihood of more damage to the environment – a negative impact. Therefore, any discussion of tourism impacts needs to consider the value positions of observers and commentators and should be set within considerations of the wider context of tourism.

However, it is conventional for researchers and policy makers to note a number of both positive and negative effects of tourism. Positive economic benefits usually include contributions to the local economy and job creation. Positive social impacts of tourism can include the revival of traditional art or handicraft activity as a result of tourist demand. Positive environmental effects of tourism may include revenue generated from visits to sites of natural attraction being used to restore and maintain the attraction, as well as enhanced interest from visitors in the importance of the natural environment and therefore a greater willingness to support measures to protect the environment.

Negative economic effects of tourism may include increases in the price of land, house and even food prices in tourist destinations, which become particularly evident during the tourist season. Negative environmental consequences include pollution from vehicles, litter dropped by visitors, disturbance to habitats and damage to landscape features. Negative socio-cultural impacts may include the loss of cultural identity, particularly when tourists are from the developed world and the hosts are located in a developing country. This may be part of what is usually referred to as the demonstration effect. This occurs when inhabitants of a developing country imitate the activities of the visitors, who are from developed countries. This may start off as what may be considered relatively innocuous behavior, such as the desire to wear brand name jeans and consume branded fast food and drink, but can take the form of far more undesirable activities such as drug taking and prostitution.

Much research work on tourism impacts in the period since the late 1970s has tended to suggest that negative impacts outweigh positive impacts (Jafari, 1990; Wall, 1997). However, large numbers of residents of destination areas have continued to want tourists to come and often want them very much (Wall, 1997). Jobs, higher incomes, increases in tax revenues and better opportunities for children are frequently stated reasons for wanting more tourists (Wall, 1997). Residents may be prepared to put up with some negative impacts in return for what they regard as desirable positive impacts. This introduces the concept of trade-offs, which are often involved in relation to tourism impacts.

As has been previously stated, it is often easy to see impacts in a uni-dimensional manner, when in reality they should be viewed within a wider context of not just tourism factors but also wider societal considerations. As Wall (1997, p. 2) stated:

The situation is extremely complex ... but impacts are often desired, are extremely difficult to assess, may require the acceptance of trade-offs and in a policy context, may involve the development of strategies to mitigate undesirable impacts.

Tourism impacts are likely to change over time as a destination area develops (Butler, 1980). According to Wall (1997), key factors contributing to the nature of the impacts are the type of tourism activities engaged in, the characteristics of the host community in the destination region and the nature of the interaction between the visitors and residents. Davison (1996) suggested a range of similar influences and also included the importance of time and location in relation to tourism impacts.

In stressing the importance of the 'where' and the 'when', Davison (1996) claimed these influences set tourism's impacts apart from those of other industrial sectors. In relation to tourism being concentrated in space, Davison indicated that tourism production and consumption, unlike many other industrial activities, take place in the same location. This means that the tourist consumes the product in the tourist destination. Therefore tourism impacts are largely spatially concentrated in the tourism destination.

In relation to tourism impacts being concentrated in time, Davison (1996) suggested that it is the seasonal nature of much tourism activity that makes time important. The seasonality of tourism is largely due to two major factors: climate and holiday periods (Burton, 1992; Davison, 1996). Climate is a significant factor

in which it controls important resources for tourism, such as hours of sunshine or amount of snow cover occurring at particular times of the year. Tourists' ability to visit a destination at a particular time of the year, for example, during school holidays, tends also to make it a seasonal activity.

In Australia and New Zealand, for example, the seasonality of tourism is closely related to climate. The summer period coincides with the traditional break at Christmas. In New Zealand, until relatively recently, the majority of businesses were closed during the last few days of December until late January. Although, changing social circumstances mean that more people now work over the Christmas and New Year break, as well as in January, the period from late December until late January is still the main school holiday time. In France it has been traditionally the case that many businesses are closed throughout the whole of August which is both part of summer and the period when many French people take their annual holiday.

Some of the tourism's impacts also occur beyond the destination. For example, transport from the tourist's home to the destination – the transit zone as shown in Leiper's tourism system (Figure 1.4) has an effect on the transit zone. Also, a package tour purchased in the tourist's home region is likely to benefit the travel and tour operator based there, rather than one in the destination.

Tourism also has an impact on tourists themselves. These effects may be noted in their behavior in destinations. The impacts may also become apparent when the tourist has returned from a visit. For example, the tourists' experiences may affect their decision on a future visit to the destination. In this case, some of the experiences gained would be in the actual destination, although the reflection on that experience and its effects on future tourism choices could take place elsewhere.

Major factors influencing tourism impacts have been synthesized and summarized below. These factors are based at least in part on the work of Davison (1996) and Wall (1997) and are set out in the form of questions, with some comment following the questions as examples or to provide explanation.

Major influences on tourism impacts

- Where is tourism taking place? (e.g. A rural/urban location, a coastal/inland location, a developed/developing country?)
- What is the scale of tourism? (e.g. How many tourists are involved?)

- Who are the tourists? (e.g. What is their origin? Are they domestic or international visitors? Are they from a developed or developing country?)
- In what type of activities do tourists engage? (e.g. Are these passive/active? Are these consumptive of resources? Is there a high/low level of interaction with the host population?)
- What infrastructure exists for tourism? (e.g. Roads? Sewage system? Electricity supply?)
- For how long has tourism been established? (see particularly Butler's (1980) theory of the destination life cycle)
- When is the tourist season? (Time of year? Importance of rainy/dry seasons?)

McKercher (1993) argued that although the impacts of tourism are well documented, little research has been conducted into why impacts appear to be inevitable. He claimed that there is a number of what he referred to as structural realities – he used the term ‘fundamental truths’ – which explain why the various effects, particularly adverse effects of tourism, are felt, regardless of the type of tourism activity. McKercher's ‘fundamental truths’ can be considered as major influences on tourism impacts and hence are presented in the case study below (with comments added under the headings McKercher employed) and there are a number of questions about these in the student activities that follow on from the case study.

Case Study: Some fundamental truths about tourism

- (1) *Tourism consumes resources and creates waste:* Tourism is essentially a resource-based industry. These resources are natural, man-made or cultural resources. Tourism is a voracious consumer of resources. The resources are typically part of the public domain (e.g. woodlands, coasts, mountain regions), and hence tourism can be very invasive. Tourism is an industrial activity that creates waste with sewage, rubbish and car exhaust common by-products.
- (2) *Tourism has the ability to over-consume resources:* The natural, man-made and cultural resources that tourism relies upon are liable to be over-consumed. If

threshold limits have been reached, adverse effects over large areas can occur. This can be in relation to the natural, man-made or cultural resources.

- (3) *Tourism competes with other resource users and needs to do this to survive:* To survive it may be necessary for tourism to gain supremacy over competitors. Tourism and other, non-tourism, but leisure related activities often share the same resources. Hence, two people may be doing precisely the same activity (e.g. mountain biking) with one being classified as a tourist (because they are non-resident) the other (a 'local') as being only involved in recreation. Tourism may also compete with other non-leisure activities such as agriculture and forestry in rural locations.
- (4) *Tourism is private sector dominated:* As much tourism is private sector dominated, the profit motive is the key one. Investment is far more likely in profit centres (e.g. a swimming pool/leisure complex) than a cost centre (a sewage system). Governments have had a key role in promoting and developing tourism, but have been little involved in controlling it. Voluntary compliance of the industry with environmental protection is almost impossible.
- (5) *Tourism is multi-faceted and is therefore almost impossible to control:* Tourism is a very diverse industry including suppliers, producers, government agencies as well as a very large number of consumers. In Australia, for example, there were approximately 45,000 tourism businesses in the early 1990s. The great majority of these were small independently owned family businesses. Unity only comes through trade associations, which are usually voluntary organizations. This makes controlling tourism extremely difficult. It is however the most difficult challenge facing industry and government agencies. In a free market system, a diverse and highly unregulated industry such as tourism will be very difficult to control and to restrict expansion of.
- (6) *Tourists are consumers, not anthropologists:* Most tourists are consumers who want to enjoy tourism experiences. Tourists are pleasure seekers and except for a minority they are not anthropologists. Tourists are trying to escape their everyday life and hence tend to want to over-consume and are generally not interested in modifying their actions in relation to the host community or environment.
- (7) *Tourism is entertainment:* Most tourism products have to be manipulated and packaged to satisfy the needs of tourists to be entertained. This can lead to the commoditization of local cultures and traditional activities. Existing products such as dances, festivals or even religious activities may need to be altered to satisfy the tourist demand. Questions of authenticity are likely to be raised as a result.

- (8) *Unlike other industrial activities, tourism imports the clients rather than exports a product:* Tourism does not export products, but brings clients to consume the product *in situ*. This means tourism cannot exist in isolation from the host community. Tourism consumption usually takes place in concentrated geographical spaces. When planning for tourism, local regional and national governments should be aware of the stresses on the physical and social environment that an influx of visitors causes. Host communities also need to be aware that tourism is likely to cause a wide range of impacts.

Adapted from McKercher (1993).

Summary

This chapter has provided an introduction to the study of tourism impacts. It has indicated that although tourism impacts tend to be multi-faceted, it is conventional to subdivide them under the following headings: economic, socio-cultural and environmental. It is also conventional to present tourism impacts as either positive or negative. This chapter has indicated that such categorization depends upon the value position of the observer. As impacts tend to be multi-faceted, often having a combination of economic, social and environmental dimensions, it may be not that straightforward to classify impacts at one particular tourism destination under the heading of either solely 'positive' or 'negative'. It is quite likely that there is a combination of impacts of tourism in relation to a destination and some of these impacts may be viewed as positive, while others are seen as negative.

The nature of particular tourism impacts is related to a variety of factors, including what type of tourism is under discussion, where it is happening, when it is happening, as well as the infrastructure for tourism. Ideas put forward by McKercher (1993) on the commercial and entertainment aspects of tourism have also been introduced and these have been considered in relation to tourism impacts. This chapter has also suggested that it is important to note that much tourism planning and management occurs in relation to impacts at tourism destinations.

Student activities

- (1) How do McKercher's 'fundamental truths' affect your views on tourism impacts?
- (2) To what extent do you agree with McKercher's 'fundamental truths'?
- (3) What are the major influences on tourism's impacts?
- (4) Consider a tourism activity/business in your local area and the impacts of this activity:
 - Make a list of the impacts under the headings 'positive' and 'negative'.
 - When complete, consider which of the two types of impacts are more important in relation to your example. Note: This does not necessarily correspond to the longer list of the two.
 - Look again at the list and consider your own value position and indicate which of the impacts could be regarded in a different way, from your own assessment by another commentator, and how these impacts could be viewed.
 - How important do you believe the nature of tourist activities are in relation to the impacts of tourism?