

Conference report: 'Loving them to death?' RTD14

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The theme of the 14th International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations was 'Loving them to Death', a reference to the impact of overtourism on protected areas, both terrestrial and marine. The location of the conference, Plymouth in the south west of the UK, was apposite given its coastal location as well as bordering Dartmoor National Park. The popularity of the UK's southwest as a holiday destination has led itself to growing concerns surrounding the impact of overtourism, at least in parts of the region.

The event was characterised by keynote presentations, shorter case studies, and, crucially, time for discussion and the development of new partnerships. The conference saw a mix of both academics and practitioners take part. This practitioner-focus was deliberate in that the desire was evident to bring about more responsible forms of tourism, to make a difference 'on the ground' and as such the inclusion of industry and representatives of the third sector was indispensable. Thus, alongside academics, delegates attended from heritage and wildlife associations, visitor attractions, destination management organisations and national parks.

This is not to suggest that the event was devoid of academic content. The majority of keynote speakers were academics (Profs. Richard Butler, University of Strathclyde, Michael Hall, University of Canterbury, NZ, Harold Goodwin, Manchester Metropolitan University and Iain Stewart (MBE), University of Plymouth) who offered their views on developments in the area of overtourism and in particular its environmental impacts. These presentations were designed to stimulate discussion and certainly what became clear is that finding solutions and even identifying causes and allocation of responsibility is a complex affair.

Some of the themes that arose that demonstrate the contentious, complex and yet criticality of the issue to biodiversity in protected areas in particular included:

- The need for both short-term and long-term thinking. Short term solutions may be offered that, if extended indefinitely however, will cause more harm than good.
- Most people involved in managing tourism do not understand the issue of biodiversity (what it means, how it is measured, what implications are if it declines). At the same time, people with a background in environmental/biological sciences do not understand visitor behaviour.
- Should we establish 'sacrifice areas' to protect other areas or should we try to disperse tourists to create less of an impact in a particular location?
- Some so-called 'green' approaches are no more than window-dressing and 'green growth' is viewed sceptically (efficiency gains in resource use pale into insignificance against growth figures of domestic and international tourism).
- Tourism can have a positive impact on biodiversity (e.g. from an economic standpoint adding value to it/destinations that are visited because of their natural resources/capital). Although

even here it was recognised that what may be perceived by the tourist as natural may be anything but (e.g. farmed landscapes that display very limited levels of biodiversity).

- With regard to environmental impacts, tourism is largely, despite the previous point, seen as resulting in negative impacts, which can be distinguished based on geographical proximity to where the tourist activity is happening (e.g. immediate impacts to the destination) and longer term and more widespread impacts globally if we think of climate change).
- It should not be forgotten that Impacts on biodiversity also arise through the (over)use by locals and agriculture. The debate surrounding the protection of biodiversity needs to extend to recreational use of protected areas, undertaken by locals and visitors.
- Need to distinguish between overtourism in rural and urban areas, each displaying their own characteristics
- Frustration that seemingly so little progress has been made (many of the debates echo those heard 30-40 years ago). Time is increasingly of the essence however.

Given the location of the conference there were numerous examples of initiatives taking place in the UK, including from Justin Francis, Managing Director of Responsible Travel. Justin, who has been working with policymakers in the UK to improve regulations concerning protected areas, specifically National Parks, identified the difficulty park managers face in trying to protect a common pool resource but with very limited resources. Hardin's (1968) classic discussion of the Tragedy of the Commons, the difficulty in avoiding the exploitation of common pool resources, is as relevant today as it ever was. Privatisation, as unappealing as it is to many, may be a viable solution, an insight that is unlikely to go down well with the general public or certain parts of the polity. Better regulation and enforcement and well-funded management is also a potential solution. Alternatively, as discussed originally by Ostrom (1990), the question arises as to how communities can create rules to manage resources sustainably? The issue of tourism governance very clearly raises its head here.

A question that resonated with delegates was 'What is the overriding purpose of national parks'? If this question could be answered definitively we might be a step closer to protecting them, but as it stands, many national parks promote goals that are in conflict (to a degree at least, for example, how do you increase access yet at the same time decrease negative impacts?). Furthermore, biodiversity is not mentioned in any of the UK's national parks' goals and protected area managers are last in line when it comes to decision-making. National parks are also underfunded (in the UK). As such, there is little surprise when protected area managers fail in protecting biodiversity.

Potential solutions included:

- Wider application of tourism taxes
- Ensuring developments offer a net gain, not just a maintenance, of biodiversity
- Rewards for enhancing and protecting biodiversity

Case studies were presented from:

- New Zealand (an example of the gradual deterioration of the soundscape of a protected area because of a lack of communication between agencies. The allocation of a common pool resource to one stakeholder group),
- the Scilly Isles (a highly sensitive small island destination with a great deal of biodiversity now looking at the impact of a growth in cruises),
- Northern Ireland's Giants' Causeway (traffic congestion and overcrowding),

- the Brecon Beacons, Wales (development of a visitor management plan that seeks a self-regulatory approach),
- Kents Cavern (reinventing an attraction using an area's natural capital),
- Iceland (dramatic growth of tourism within the context of an advocacy platform),
- Cornwall (developing guidelines for protecting the marine environment and protecting its mining heritage).

The end of the conference saw groups working on two key areas with a view to developing knowledge and research agendas:

- National parks: two key purposes, environmental protection and an area for leisure and recreation whereby the former takes precedent. Public sector plans tend however to focus more on the latter. Trying to move towards improved governance of national parks and a more long-term outlook (10 years rather than 5). Varied recognition of the status of national parks across countries (e.g. in the UK they fall within the remit of a junior minister who may not have a background in his/her brief, whereas in New Zealand a conservation authority is a-political and staffed by experts).
- Understanding how the arts have been able to gain public support and funding to see whether models could be adopted for tourism. It is not just about the art that is created, but the process of its creation. Art can be a means of raising environmental awareness. It has also been used as a means of dealing with conflict (e.g. in Northern Ireland). How can we bring colleagues in the arts and colleagues in tourism together?

References:

- Hardin, G. 1968. The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science*, 162: 1243-1248.
- Ostrom, E. 1990. ***Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action.*** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.