

## Overtourism

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journal or publication title	Journal of Tourism Studies
volume	18
page range	137-145
year	2019-03
URL	<a href="http://id.nii.ac.jp/1060/00010527/">http://id.nii.ac.jp/1060/00010527/</a>



# Overtourism

Caroline BERTORELLI

## *Abstract*

Many countries promote tourism as a means of economic gain and growth. The tourism industry has been successful to such an extent that some areas are now experiencing overtourism. This article overviews what overtourism is, the causes, the impacts, initiatives to address and remedy the impacts, and what is happening in Japan.

## *Keywords*

overtourism, overcrowding, tourism management, cultural heritage, sustainable tourism

## *Introduction*

It is no wonder that tourism has been a focus of economic growth by many countries. It has been and still is one of the fastest growing industries, and contributes significantly to gross domestic product (GDP). According to the latest figures published by the Organisation of Economic and Co-operation Development (OECD, 2018), in 2016, average GDP for OECD countries was 4.2% in 2016 (up from 3.9% in 2015), providing 6.9% employment and contributing 21.7% of service exports. In terms of the world economy, travel and tourism contributed 10.2% to GDP and 9.6% of total employment in 2016 (WTTC, 2018). The money generated is used not only for developing the tourism industry infrastructure further but also protecting the environment. Moreover, tourism provides leisure activities that people enjoy, making them happy too.

One of the downsides of the success of the tourism boom is that now too many people are travelling, putting tremendous strain on the resources and communities of popular attractions and regions, not to mention the environment. This article overviews the emergence of the phenomena of overtourism, the causes, the impacts, initiatives to address and remedy the impacts, and what is happening in Japan.

## *What is overtourism?*

Overtourism, a term coined in 2012, is where there are too many visitors going to a specific tourist destination, creating a situation in which tourism becomes unsustainable: accommodation for local

people becomes outpriced, roads become overcrowded, and environments including flora and fauna can become damaged by the sheer numbers of visitors (Dickenson, 2018). Goodwin (2017) extends the definition to include the situation in which hosts or local residents feel that the number of visitors is impacting their quality of their lives to an unacceptable level to such an extent they may rebel.

While the term “overtourism” is relatively new, the notion of overcrowding at tourism destinations is not. Concerns were first raised by researchers in the 1960’s (Koens, Postma, & Papp, 2018), followed by attempts to address the concept of overtourism and its impacts on destinations in the 1970’s and 1980’s (for example: Pizam, 1978; Butler, 1980). A number of publications on the topic appeared in the 1990’s, for example, Boissevain (1996) studying destinations in Europe such as Amsterdam and Malta, Fyall and Garrod (1998) investigating the impact on heritage sites, and Bosselman, Peterson, and McCarthy (1999) exploring both positive and negative aspects of tourism together with coping strategies through a number of case studies globally including North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania.

So while tourism in general is good—good for the economy in terms of bringing money into a region, good for local communities in terms of providing business opportunities and employment, and good for the tourists by providing leisure opportunities—overtourism casts a dark shadow on the future of the tourism industry in terms of sustainability.

### ***What are the causes of overtourism?***

The materialization of overtourism in any one area or region is complex and multifactorial, encompassing a combination of the growth of the industry, transformation of tourist behaviour, changes in access, and the development of new attractions (Goodwin, 2017). These include the following factors: the falling cost of travel such as low-cost carriers; the larger scale of transport such as the thousands-of-passenger-capacity cruise liners; the emergence of more affordable accommodation such as Airbnb; the abundance of free sites such as photo opportunities by buildings or other attractions of historical or cultural beauty or significance; and marketing (Goodwin, 2017). Social media, including travel websites such as TripAdvisor, has also contributed to increased tourism promoted by provision of easier access to travel information and cheaper accommodation (Farhad, 2018).

### ***What are the impacts of overtourism?***

Five impacts of overtourism were identified by McKinsey and WTTC (McKinsey & Co. & WTTC, 2018): alienated local residents; degraded tourist experience; overloaded infrastructure; damage to nature; threats to culture and heritage. Some of the issues are explored below with examples.

Local communities may feel disregarded and disrespected by the overcrowding and rowdy behaviour

of tourists. For example, the widely-reported drunken and disorderly behaviour of British tourists on Greek and Spanish islands, not only causing noise disturbance but also trashing the environment (Goodwin, 2017). Residents in Barcelona are finding rents beyond their reach owing to the demand by tourism, while residents in Hawaii complain the state caters more for tourists than for them even though they are the tax payers (McKinsey & Co. & WTTC, 2018).

Not only are the lives of local communities degraded by overtourism, but also those of the tourists themselves. Like residents, tourists may also find themselves suffering from overcrowding by having to wait in queues for hours to see attractions, all of which may lead to dissatisfaction and ultimately tourist withdrawal (McKinsey & Co. & WTTC, 2018).

Overloaded infrastructure in terms of transportation, supply of utilities such as water, and waste management affects both tourists and residents, stretching limited resources. For example, power failures and water supply shortages in the Philippines, and the sewage system in parts of India (McKinsey & Co. & WTTC, 2018). While these have already been in existence for local residents and communities, the problems are compounded and intensified by the additional burden of increasing tourist numbers to those areas. Any breakdown in such infrastructure could have serious implications for tourism.

Damage to the natural environment is greater the greater the number of people visiting a specific location. Such damage can include physical damage to flora and fauna, endangered species in particular, putting ecosystems at risk, as well as erosion of land and pollution of air (McKinsey & Co. & WTTC, 2018). Such destruction may deprive regions from the ability to sequester the funds—mainly attracted through tourism—needed to sustain the natural cultural and historical heritage.

Locations registered as World Heritage Sites (WHS) under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) may risk losing such status, which ironically was established for protection of sites of universal cultural significance and inevitable tourism promotion. One example is Montenegro's Kotor, a region of outstanding historical, natural and cultural significance, which may lose its WHS status as a result of construction of hotels and resorts that are destroying the landscape (Vasovic, 2017). Cambodia's Angkor Wat, Peru's Machu Picchu, and the Great Wall of China are also at risk (McKinsey & Co. & WTTC, 2018). It would be a great loss to humanity if such treasures were to become inaccessible or disappear entirely.

Impacts from overtourism exist, no question. The question is how should they be dealt with. One solution is to measure, categorize, and monitor the impacts (McKinsey & Co. & WTTC, 2018). By collecting, collating, and analysing impacts into metrics, such measurements that can be identified, monitored, and acted upon. Those at high risk from overcrowding can then be prioritized for drawing up and implementing countermeasures to limit or reduce the adverse effects or influences, which leads us to

the next section.

### ***What could or should be done about overtourism?***

Responsible tourism is considered to be the key to creating a sustainable tourism industry, involving cooperation between the local communities, tourism businesses, and the tourists (Goodwin, 2017; McKinsey & Co. & WTTC, 2018). Many stakeholders have already recognized the seriousness of the issue and have undertaken action. UNESCO set out a policy for sustainable development in 2015 (UNESCO WHC, 2015) and designated 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (UNESCO, 2018). Additionally, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNTWO, 2018) recently published a report providing strategies and measures with emphasis on shared responsibility among the various stakeholders.

Skift, a travel media organisation (Scheivachman, 2017) published a 5-point framework to address overtourism that includes: (1) limiting transport options, for example, restricting access by cruise ships and low-cost carriers; (2) increasing prices and focusing on the luxury-end of tourism, which has been successful in Iceland; (3) improving marketing and education to inform tourist about the need for environmental protection; (4) developing collaboration among stakeholder such as tourism bodies and businesses so they work together to solve the problem; and (5) protecting overcrowded areas to protect and sustain local communities that support tourism.

The report by McKinsey & Co. and WTTC (2018) also proposes implementing price controls and additionally restricting access to not only locations but activities, too. Further proposals include regulation of accommodation, especially short-term accommodation such as AirBnB, and not only spreading tourists to other areas but also spreading tourists in terms of time at particular sites to even out numbers and reduce overcrowding at popular times.

One concern is that those creating tourism policies may indeed lack knowledge or appreciation for the tourism industry itself with potential repercussions (Joppe, 2018). Venice, for example, rebelling against the intrusion and nuisance of daily tourist numbers exceeding the resident population of 55,000 (Peltier, 2018), has introduced strict measures including various bans and fines (Ellwood, 2018). For example, cruise ships over 60,000 tons cannot sail the Giudecca canal. Fines are now issued for trivial behaviour such as sitting in unauthorized locations, sketching in a street without a permit, and even possessing a bicycle. The economic consequences of these initiatives are already being felt with some hotels seeing drops in revenue of almost 10%.

From a management perspective, collecting data regularly, implementing long-term plans that are

monitored and reviewed, and involving public and commercial organizations together with local communities would also ensure the creation of solutions to meet the needs of all stakeholders (Goodwin, 2017; McKinsey & Co. & WTTC, 2018). The McKinsey report further comments that whatever measures are implemented, each destination should determine the best solution for its own circumstances as overcrowding varies according from place to place (McKinsey & Co. & WTTC, 2018). Koens, Postma, and Papp (2018) also recommend government or government-led initiatives over local initiatives, as these are more likely to have more stable long-term effects.

### ***What is happening in Japan about overtourism?***

In Japan, tourism is overseen by the Japan Tourism Agency, set up under the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism in October 2008 with the specific mission of promoting inbound as well as outbound tourism, and revitalizing regional areas and tourism-related industries (MLIT, 2018b). This followed the enactment in 2007 of the “Tourism Nation Promotion Basic Law.” The driving force for this initiative was to secure sufficient resources to support the growing elderly population and national debt. Specific targets for number of international visitors were set into three phases of 15 million by 2013, 20 million by 2016, and 25 million by 2019, with a target of 30 million in the future. Tourism promotion has been so successful that targets have been smashed and new targets set. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO, 2018), the target of 30 million visitors was already almost reached in 2017 (actual number, 28,690,900). New targets include 40 million visitors by 2020, the year that Tokyo hosts the Olympic Games, and 60 million by 2030 (Kyodo News, 2018, October 15).

The reasons given for such rapid growth in foreign tourist numbers in Japan has been attributed to visa relaxation, increase in range and accessibility of duty-free products and rebates, and a concerted effort to provide more multilingual support for visitors (MLIT, 2018a). Is this trend, however, sustainable? In the last few years, there has been a wave of news reports suggesting that the growing numbers of tourists is causing inconvenience and strain on local residents, local communities, and tourism workers.

The Japanese media has coined its own term for such effects of overtourism: “*kankō kōgai*,” tourism pollution (Kyodo News, 2018, May 5). The following are some examples from news reports: Local residents in Kyoto cannot comfortably use their cars or public transport to go about their daily business such as getting to and from work (Kyodo News, 2018, May 09). Tourists vandalized Toji Shrine in Nara with an oily substance (Kyodo News, 2015, April 9). A monk sued a World Heritage site temple in Wakayama prefecture for overwork owing to the increase in number of guests (Kyodo News, 2018, May 17). There are also complaints about tourists making noise, disposing of trash improperly at lodgings, and trespassing onto areas of natural beauty (Kyodo News, 2018, October 15).

The Japanese government is now conducting a survey on overtourism in municipalities with popular tourist attractions in an effort to understand this issue more closely, and ultimately implement policies to address the issues raised (Kyodo News, 2018, October 15). This is a step in the right direction. In 2015, Japan was ranked 16<sup>th</sup> in terms of number of international visitors (24.04 million), trailing France (84.45 million), USA (77.51 million), and Spain (68.22 million), being the top three in that order (MLIT, 2018a). Perhaps studying the situation and initiatives of such countries would also provide useful insights and potential initiatives to foster a sustainable tourism industry.

### ***Discussion and Conclusion***

The tourism industry's success has filled government coffers, provided jobs, and given pleasure to millions of travellers worldwide. As tourism continues to expand, the lives and livelihoods of local communities once delighted by the influx of tourists and money, are starting to feel overwhelmed, overburdened, and encroached upon. Tourists are overcrowding popular areas, overloading traffic and transport, overlooking or being ignorant of local practices and customs, and in some cases causing deliberate physical damage to important cultural assets.

It is ironic that the very organisations established to protect world heritage, such as WHC and UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage convention, in doing so have attracted so much interest as to lead to its destruction. As such, tourism promotion, while drawing profits in the short-term, may cause self-destruction from overtourism in the long-term. Central and local governments need to take urgent action in cooperation with local communities to protect and sustain tourism if the industry is to survive.

Taleb Rifai, secretary-general of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) cautions against the serious repercussions of deterring tourists in response to overtourism (Rifai, 2017). Takao Ikado, an expert on tourism, concurs that a situation of overtourism and its associated problems may be inherently better than the situation of "no tourism" at all (Kyodo News, 2018, May 5). This may seem scaremongering, but the general consensus is that once damage has been done, the effects may be long-lasting, but prevention is far better than the necessity of a cure of uncertain outcome.

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to-overtourism/

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## [要約]

多くの国々は、経済的利益と成長の手段として観光を推進してきました。観光産業は、いくつかの分野が今では過疎主義を経験している程度に成功している。この記事では、オーバートゥーリズムが何であるか、その原因、その影響に対処するための取り組み、そして日本で起こっていることについて概説します。

## [キーワード]

オーバートゥーリズム、過密、観光管理、文化遺産、持続可能な観光