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Anthropologists Weigh in on the Sustainability of Tourism

Sustainable Tourism

Michael A. Di Giovine

August 14, 2017

With **1 billion annual tourists worldwide (and rising)**, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) declared **2017 the Year of Sustainable Tourism**. But how—and if—tourism can be sustainable, particularly as we strive to conserve cultural and natural heritage from man-made pressures is debatable. In May, the International Committee on Cultural Tourism (ICTC), a sub-committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), requested that I present “the anthropological perspective” on sustainable heritage tourism—no small task considering the multiplicity of perspectives in the **Anthropology of Tourism Interest Group (ATIG)**, and the **ambivalent stance anthropology has traditionally taken toward tourism**. To better understand and convey ATIG members’ own perspectives, I developed a short, open-ended survey. Out of a pool of roughly 450 respondents, nearly 40 provided impassioned and varied responses to share with ICOMOS.

Positive and negative impacts

Respondents characterized tourism’s impact through the double-edged sword of tourism development. Few respondents felt strongly that tourism was either very positive or very negative (3 percent each). Most saw **mixed impacts**, though more (37 percent) leaned toward the negative. They noted that while tourism **might provide economic benefits**, like **increased funds for preservation**, problems arise when tourism becomes a site’s main source of economic activity. Economic management paradigms often privilege profit over protection, and neglect other important factors like environmental conservation and local involvement. (**Early socioeconomic research by UNESCO in the 1970s** already demonstrated the tendency for vertical integration

among outside developers, leaving **promises of local economic benefits unfulfilled**). Some also expressed concern that on-site practitioners often lacked effective management skills.

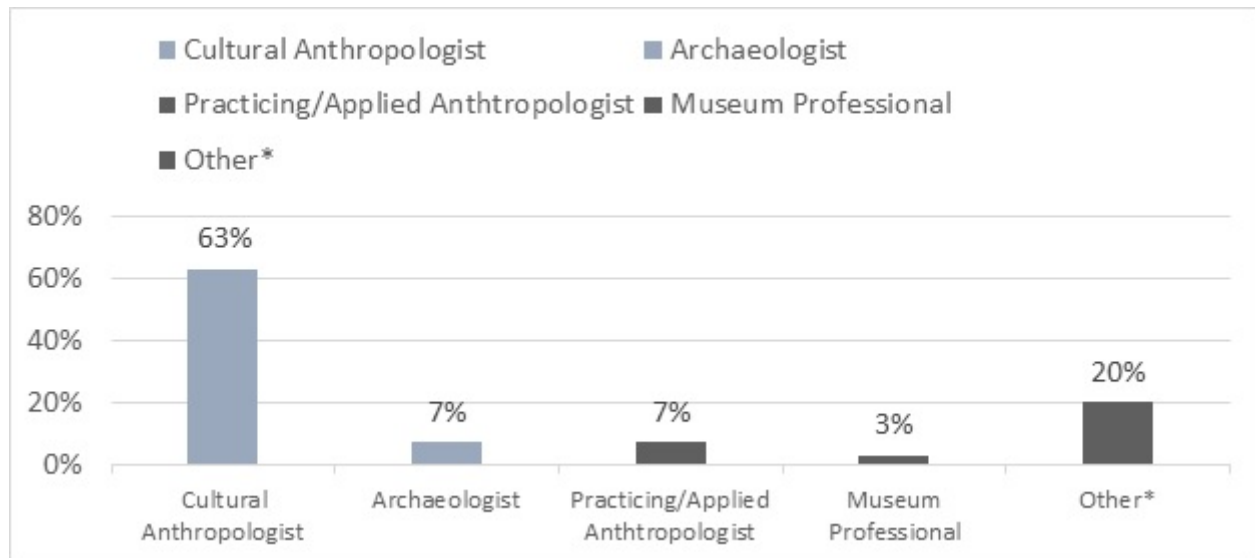


Figure 1: Primary jobs among respondents. Michael A. Di Giovine/ATIG survey 2017

Several respondents recognized tourism's power to raise awareness and **generate the will, expertise, and funding to conserve endangered culturally valued sites**: *"Tourism interest brings with it the impetus for states to invest in heritage management."* Yet, another warned, *"In reality, heritage tourism is often an economic resource for developers, or a resource to provide political organizations in developing countries with a budget."*

Some thought tourism could educate the masses through experiential learning. However, *"high numbers of visitors, who are often well-intentioned but ill-informed about cultural norms, local flora/fauna, etc., can cause a lot of damage."* As awareness increases, demand also increases, producing pressures on cultural and environmental resources. *"Tourist visits to cultural heritage sites can educate a larger audience about diverse peoples and places. However, in the process, sites can become overcrowded, overbuilt and commodified beyond recognition."*

Respondents recognized valorization as an intangible benefit of tourism development. It can grow locals' feelings that their culture is valuable and worth protecting and lead to **revitalization movements and culture change**. However, this becomes problematic when locals are divested from their power to determine the direction of culture change. *"I see in my own sites how tourism introduces a means for livelihoods... Making a living takes many forms, and the marriage of tourism is not as troubling as the imbalance of power that seems to continue through touristic encounters from colonial and neocolonial transactions."* When *"coopted by corporations or non-local institutions,"*

tourism development can *“cause disenfranchisement, economic oppression, or fail to fulfill lofty promises,”* raising concern that most development practices are *“no longer for locals.”*

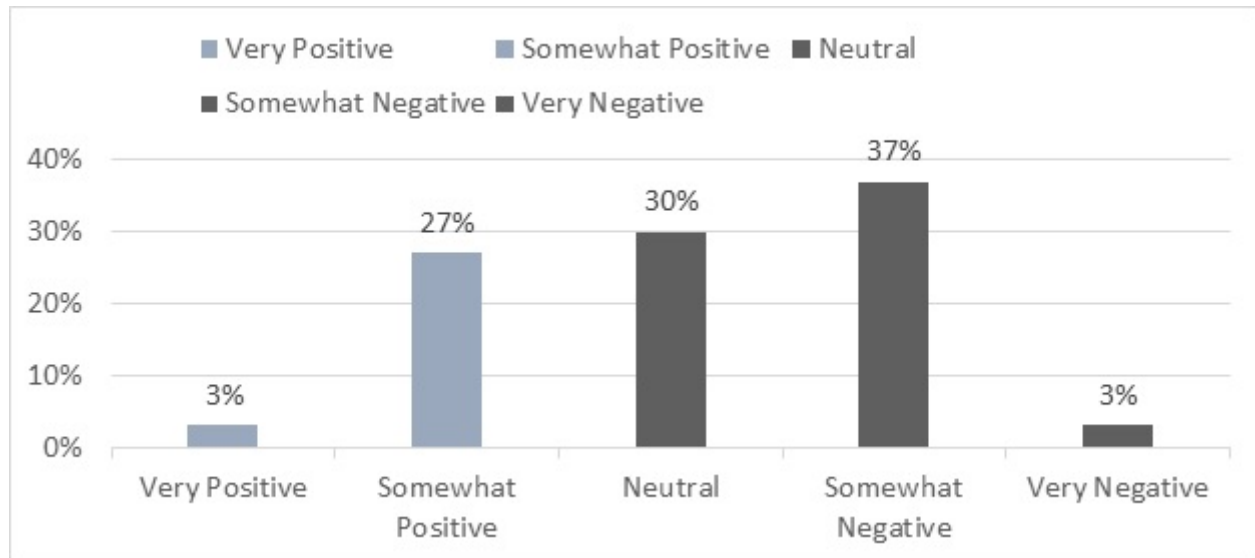


Figure 2: Opinion on tourism's impacts on heritage sites. Michael A. Di Giovine/ATIG survey 2017

Defining sustainability

Nearly everyone stressed that sustainability is ultimately people-centered within a larger ecology: *“Sustainability must include people. Any time we imagine sustainability as excluding people we have missed the point entirely. We need to learn to change how we live with nature, not to artificially separate man from nature.”* A people-centered view of sustainability allows peoples to determine their own means of reproduction and culture change: *“Sustainability is not about preservation,”* another respondent warned.

Definitions focused on growing and adapting, rather than salvaging and preserving; *“Sustainable practices do not diminish future generations' use options.”* This requires *“respect, mutual understanding and meaningfulness”* between stakeholders. *“A focus on preservation or conservation often leads to the exclusion of people. Sustainability at its core is about use.”*

How can tourism be sustainable?

Mass tourism certainly puts pressures on sites and the locals who live and use them, **as the cases of Venice and Dubrovnik demonstrate**. However, contrary to the dominant view in preservation policy, heritage sites do not have static or intrinsic value to be protected from tourists, but, rather, gain meaning when people visit them. ***“Tourism is critical for heritage sites; without tourists, who would sites be aimed at?”*** Yet their management—and what values they should communicate vary from stakeholder to stakeholder and site to site.

Indeed, heritage values, which privilege Western-centric notions of authenticity and preservation, often differ from indigenous use values at living sites. They can be ***“loci of identity, places where meanings are constructed and contested.”*** Rather than considering this as problematic, preservationists should encourage diverse meanings: ***“Such sites may also constitute a ‘density’ of ideologies (if more than one group is represented), such that important exchanges such as interreligious dialogue may proceed in a rather limited geographical expanse.”*** That is, we shouldn’t seek to museumify sites, but comprehend their indigenous significances, usages, and potential. Sustainable tourism requires ***“educating people about cultural sensitivities and the particular cultural contexts associated with sites.”*** This requires a critical understanding of **the historical and social situated-ness of our own conceptions of heritage**; we (preservationists included) must be reflexive about our work.

In tourism development, there is often a concerted effort to educate the locals about the benefits of embracing tourism. Respondents turned the tables, focusing on educating tourists on local culture and meaning, as well as conservation methods. In this way, tourists might become more aware of the pressures they put on sites. (Zoos have been particularly successful at this; as public support for keeping animals in captivity has waned, they have **reinvented themselves as conservation educators and advocates**.)

Sustainable tourism demands recognition that each heritage site is different, exists in a different context, is valued differently by locals, and elicits different experiences for visitors. Respondents thus expressed the need for dialogue and ***“ongoing spaces for debate, mechanisms for equitable conflict resolution.”*** ***“Tourism and the sustainability of heritage sites need to be in a dialogue with each other to address both intentions and goals; however, the ultimate goal should be for the community and not for the gain of the academic and/or organizational realm.”*** Such dialogues should prioritize the host community over the basic tenets of preservation. ***“Sustainable tourism at heritage sites should enhance and expand the interpretation and preservation options available to locals who construct and live the heritage. Truly sustainable benefits impact the bottom as well as top of***

economic and political power relationships... Sustainable heritage management does not equal profitable as determined only in economic terms." The focus should be on empowerment, something that the "**indigenous tourism**" niche addresses: *"Ask the local people themselves, including indigenous groups."*

Conclusions

"Anthropologists are more people-centered" and advocate for an equally people-centered understanding of sustainability. As one poignantly said, **"Sustainability relies on the roots of the tree, not the canopy. The top-down approach may produce fast, flashy results, but dry-rotted roots will fell any tree."** People on the ground include locals but also tourists—the audience for whom heritage tourism sites are ultimately geared, and who participate in the production of meaning at the site. Respondents also pointed out that "focusing on the local" means that there is no one-size-fits-all policy; these sites are extremely dynamic.

To be sustainable, tourism must empower locals at all levels of the decision-making process. **"When at all possible, let the people on the front lines determine what should be done, not bureaucrats or outsider elites."** This demands greater integration of human rights policy in tourism development policies. **"Cultural resource management must engage Human Rights Law as well as Intellectual Property Law more directly. Too much leeway is given to Development mentality people. Thinking as much about how to NOT DEVELOP is as important."**

Decisions should reflect how locals want tourists to understand and use their sites, and education should be a priority. The survey overwhelmingly shows that anthropologists are willing to help managers in this regard. According to AAA Executive Director Ed Liebow and President-Elect Alex Barker—who were consulted for this study—AAA is not seen as a resource for tourism-related activities, although the Association often responds to requests for assistance concerning the protection of tangible and intangible cultural resources. While we frequently address pressures related to infrastructural development, politics, legislation, and media representations of indigenous groups, we have never been asked to comment directly on tourism development issues.

Anthropologists take a uniquely all-encompassing approach to heritage and tourism; we are **"able to see the complexity and tension"** and can **"look at the bigger picture."** This leads us to **"incorporate the human dimension on sustainable tourism and heritage, while also recognizing that humans are only one species among many."** We are concerned with the relationship between the local community, sustainable tourism, and the surrounding environment. **"Development people may not appreciate as much the sanctity of the INTIMATE relationship of a people to its heritage... even if it SEEMS profitable,**

it may be MORE IMPORTANT to shut out tourists and keep some places inaccessible and OFF the cultural tourism grid." They urged tourism officials to consult the rich literature on the anthropology of tourism and the [AAA's Guiding Principles on Cultural Heritage](#), which clearly outlines these points and can be relatable to tourism. Finally, many wanted me to remind ICOMOS that anthropologists are willing to lend their expertise, and several asked how they can get involved; [managers can consult the Anthropology of Tourism Interest Group for more information](#). This synergy could be an excellent way to sustainably shape policy and advocacy efforts.

For more information on the International Cultural Tourism Committee at ICOMOS, see www.icomos-ictc.org.

To get involved in the Anthropology of Tourism Interest Group, or ICTC, please email michael@michaeldigiovine.com.

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James Phillips says:
August 28, 2017 at 6:10 pm

My experience and that of colleagues who research in parts of Central America really serves to underscore some of the caveats and concerns expressed by other AAA members about sustainable tourism. What can it mean, for example, to the Garifuna communities along the Caribbean coast of northern Honduras that are experiencing illegal and often violent seizure of

their lands that have gone to outside tourist development of “improved” beaches, spas, and golf courses? At the same time, government promotes environmental “preservation,” effectively barring Garifuna communities from many of their traditional economic pursuits in the now-restricted areas (a classic case of ‘green neoliberalism”). This is a two-pronged attack that reduces Garifuna communities from self-reliance to dependency on tourism. In this case, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has begun finding in favor of the Garifuna. So, as many of our colleagues have noted, sustainability is about the ability of people to continue to thrive in their own cultural ways. All else is contingent.

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