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"Why call it tourist season if we can't shoot them?" – Towards the Utopian sensitized tourist

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for increased awareness of local cultures through an educational approach, as it is explored in the CultSense project. The tourist experience is a multi-layered phenomenon moderated by a dynamic relationship with the places visited and local populations. A holistic approach to tourism tensions and challenges, as well as a more pro-active attitude from all stakeholders involved are important in finding strategic solutions. The project proposes an alternative approach, developing bottom-up initiatives that give a voice to local actors and develop global intercultural awareness for (young) travellers. The dissemination of methodological and pedagogical tools by third parties should add to the body of knowledge around sensitized forms of tourism, stimulating non-demeaning and non-patronising attitudes achieved through a grassroots approach.

'You cannot close a city'

Antagonistic attitudes towards tourists were highly mediatised as a result of high tourist numbers in cities like Barcelona and Amsterdam. But do tourist 'invasions' justify these tensions? Or are negative reactions explained less by numbers and more by the influence of tourists' behaviour on locals' wellbeing? If tourist behaviour is the problem, is it possible to influence their awareness of local cultures through a pedagogic approach? This paper argues for increased awareness of local cultures through an educational approach, as it is explored in the CultSense project.

The term overtourism arguably frames the tourism experience as negative, harmful and, ultimately, blameful. The anti-tourism graffiti slogan 'Why call it tourist season if we can't shoot them?' reflects such negative attitudes to high visitor numbers. However, we argue, such negative feelings and attitudes towards tourists are inflated by the myopic overtourism discourse in the media and, at times, in the academic literature. It became easy to frame it as a problem and easy to find a solution: degrowth.

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However, as the covid-19 pandemic indicates, the term overtourism wrongly positions the debate. With the pandemic, undertourism has suddenly emerged. It seems that the tourist can be blamed in any case, either because they visit a destination, or because they don't. Either way, the tourist is dehumanised and objectified – the tourist is not a human being, but a walking wallet. The early effects of the pandemic unveiled structural issues in tourism and governance, triggering a review of social and economic models of destination development.

The tourist experience is a multi-layered phenomenon moderated by a dynamic relationship with the places visited and local populations. Fostering ways in which this relationship can flourish positively is therefore a priority. As Udo states 'You cannot close a city (…). You have to make solutions for the future to cope with the local world' (Ellwood, 2017). Many cities are developing strategies to secure better alignment between the needs of visitors and locals in order to decrease tensions (Richards & Marques, 2018). These strategies seek to construct bridges of understanding, based on openness, respect and awareness, hoping to counter the negative effects of tourism, especially when society is looking for a 'new normal'.

About responsible ways of travelling

The debate on the negative consequences of tourism is not new. The early 1990s also saw greater interest in alternative forms of tourism, such as slow tourism, responsible tourism, green tourism, sustainable tourism, eco-tourism, regenerative tourism, fair tourism, ethical tourism or mindful tourism.

The responsible tourism concept started as an alternative to mass tourism, offering a form 'of socially conscious tourism practice' (Caruana et al., 2014, p. 115) embraced largely by the industry. However, there is still a challenge in understanding the tourist perspective on this so-called responsibility. The work on mindful tourism by Moscardo (1996) and later on sustainable tourism (e.g. Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2015) has brought new insights on the tourist perspective.

However, as Wheeller (1991) emphasised nearly three decades ago, questions need asking: what does responsible mean? What is the cost of responsibility? In his critique of responsible tourism, Wheeller (1991) presents the conundrums of travelling and exposes the contradictions that tourism was subject to then – and which are even more pertinent today: growth of world population, increased mobility and pressure on destinations.

Responsible tourism would then be 'an umbrella term embracing this supposedly more caring, aware form of tourism' (Wheeller, 1991, p. 92). After his plea for 'coming to terms with our own hypocrisy' (Wheeller, 1991, p. 96), many places are still crying out for new resolutions of these tensions. The perfect solution might not exist because it is a complex societal phenomenon, a *wicked problem.* Nevertheless, a growing number of initiatives seem to be emerging worldwide in an attempt to find a balance between welcoming tourists and creating respect for local communities.

Educating the tourist

Initiatives such as protocols, manifestos and projects about responsible tourism have long been developed (e.g. The Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism, an outcome of

the International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, 2002) and efforts have been made to address issues of tourist behaviour. When Chinese outbound tourism boomed, an impressive volume of complaints about the behaviour of Chinese tourists abroad surfaced. To try and counter this, the Chinese government issued guidelines in the *Guidebook for Civilised Tourism*, issued by China's National Tourism Administration (2013). This guide could of course be viewed as a national-paternalistic attempt to control outbound tourist behaviour, aiming to maintain healthy diplomatic relationships and a positive image abroad. But China was not the only one.

Japan has also recently been attempting to educate its international visitors, showing them how to behave correctly and detailing the boundaries that should be respected in Japanese culture. The use of signage has been one of the strategies to explain the Japanese etiquette. 'We want them [the tourists] to display good manners while experiencing history and culture' (Ota in McCurry, 2019), for example, by making them aware of private property or understanding that taking pictures in some areas 'goes against the local rules' (Ota in McCurry, 2019).

Destinations also resort to digital means to convey such messages. In 2016, the destination marketing project 'Inspired by Iceland' launched the Iceland Academy, where they 'teach you the most essential things you need to know before visiting Iceland' (Inspired by Iceland, 2019), presenting educational videoclips about 'avoiding hot-tub awkwardness', among others. The word that resonates in the Icelandic initiative is 'responsible' – in this initiative, tourists are stimulated to take responsibility for their own actions and prepare to be better tourists in Iceland.

Although these initiatives are mainly at a national level and directed top-down, international bodies such as UNWTO have a *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism*, which resulted in a set of 'tips for a responsible traveler'. Besides responsibility, the emphasis here is on the positive impacts of tourism. UNWTO appeals to 'make tourism the force for good and set a good example for other travelers!' (UNWTO, 2020).

In these different initiatives, two complementary movements can be observed: one inwards, as in China, where it is of national interest to provide educational guidelines on how to behave abroad; another outwards, where destinations themselves decide what is important for others – the tourists – to learn about local cultures before or while visiting (as in Iceland or Japan).

These growing movements, initiatives, guides, projects, publications indicate what could be considered an educational turn in tourism. Most of them aim to educate tourists at home, before their departure to the chosen destinations, increasingly using digital means. This educational turn expands beyond the curriculum of future tourism professionals. In this respect, formal and informal education should be brought closer together as there is a need for change in the current tourism landscape – a change which shouldn't be based on veiled accusations blaming the tourist. Yet crossing our arms, accepting the hypocrisy and contradictions, and becoming simple spectators of a ripple of negative effects doesn't seem to be a healthy foreseeable option either.

The rise of sensitized tourism?

A holistic approach to tourism tensions and challenges, as well as a more pro-active attitude from all stakeholders involved are important in finding strategic solutions. These

should include not only national, top-down institutions, such as governments and National Tourism Organisations, but they could also include grassroots stakeholders and support bottom-up actions. We would agree with Castillo (in Marcus, 2019) that it is also our responsibility to 'educate and encourage new world ambassadors committed' to consciously contribute positively to the places they live in and visit. Some pro-active initiatives, such as the ARCTISEN project, focus on cultural sensitivity as part of this responsibility (https://sensitivetourism.interreg-npa.eu/).

Creating awareness of local cultures is a way to foster what could be called sensitized tourism – a tourism experience geared to increasing knowledge and awareness of habits, attitudes, principles, behaviours, beliefs, lifestyles and rituals of the locals. There is a need to research and develop strategies to increase visitor awareness of local cultures so that tourists have more appreciation of the places they go to and that they are appreciated more by the people living in those places.

However, as Wheeller (1991) asks 'The notion of educating the tourist/traveller in destination awareness is surely idealistic. Just how is the Utopian sensitive traveller to be created?' (p. 96). The project CultSense – Sensitizing Young Tourists for Local Cultures (2021–2023, www.cultsense.com) approaches this question from the perspective of education, and suggests integrating co-created tools transversally in tourism, culture and leisure curricula, which can be expanded to other contexts. The idea behind the project is to allow space for a bottom-up approach in terms of awareness, working from within, with young people, who are future professionals, as well as present and future tourists.

This project brings together an international team of researchers to develop a common methodological approach and co-create pedagogic tools aimed at young travellers. Digital friendly resources will be co-created by students in different countries, teaching staff, and, wherever possible other local residents and industry stakeholders. The project proposes an alternative approach, developing bottom-up initiatives that give a voice to local actors and develop global intercultural awareness for (young) travellers. The dissemination of methodological and pedagogical tools by third parties should add to the body of knowledge around sensitized forms of tourism. This sensitized tourism agenda should stimulate non-demeaning and non-patronising attitudes achieved through a grassroots approach.

This may seem idealistic or naive, but the experimental nature of the project is hopeful, and pursues an educational turn in tourism which fosters sensitized tourism. The tourism advocated here is multi-dimensional and can only work when tackled from its different perspectives of (formal and informal) education; (intercultural) awareness from hosts, visitors and service providers; and a realisation that every human being can have a role as host and/or guest. The starting point and continuous thread to this holistic approach is to work towards culturally-sensitive practices in the tourism context. The role of educators and academia in this process of forming future professionals, we argue, is fundamental. The younger generations will become the future professionals in many different areas, directly or indirectly related to tourism (e.g. leisure, culture, events). These young professionals can in turn have an impact on the type of services they offer and how they frame them.

Academia, educational organisations, industry and policymakers have a social and professional obligation to contribute not only to the debate, but also to the research,

strategies and potential solutions. Even if it might remain out of reach, we will try and understand how to enable the emergence of the Utopian sensitized traveller. Covid-19 might have just given the pause tourism needs to rethink its future action by enhancing awareness of local cultures.

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