

AN OVERVIEW OF OVERTOURISM: CAUSES AND IMPACTS

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Abstract

Overtourism is a major challenge in tourism today, which manifests itself in destinations exceeding their carrying capacity and leading to negative economic, environmental and socio-cultural consequences. This phenomenon is due to inadequate tourism management and global trends that promote cheaper travel, the popularity of short trips and seasonality. Overtourism results in the destruction of natural and cultural heritage, overcrowding, higher cost of living, commercialization of culture and dissatisfaction of locals and tourists. The aim of this article is to analyze the causes and consequences of overtourism. Special attention should be paid to the promotion of sustainable tourism, the control of tourist numbers and the management of resources to protect local communities and the natural environment. The paper seeks to provide recommendations for balanced tourism development that ensures the long-term sustainability of destinations while reducing the negative impacts on local communities and culture.

Key words: overtourism, sustainable tourism, tourism destination

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of global tourism has brought considerable benefits, but has also led to the pressing problem of overtourism. Defined as an excessive influx of tourists that exceeds the capacity of a tourism destination, overtourism has become a critical issue for policy makers, residents and industry stakeholders. This phenomenon is driven by several factors, including affordable travel options, the proliferation of social media showcasing beautiful destinations, and a lack of effective management strategies. As a result, many popular tourism destinations are

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overcrowded, which has a detrimental impact on local communities, the economy and the environment.

The phenomenon of overtourism emerged prominently in 2016, when Skift, a prominent media and marketing company specializing in travel, first introduced the term. It serves as a warning about the potential dangers posed to popular tourism destinations worldwide, highlighting the inevitable negative repercussions that arise when tourism develops without adequate planning. According to Ali (2016), it is crucial to address the economic, ecological, and socio-cultural impacts of tourism to achieve sustainable growth. The term is crafted to provoke concern regarding the consequences of unregulated tourism, urging stakeholders to take notice (Ali, 2018). In recognition of its growing relevance, the Oxford English Dictionary designated "overtourism" as the "word of the year" in 2018, defining it as "an excessive number of tourists visiting well-known destinations, causing harm to the environment and negatively impacting the lives of local residents" (Lexico, 2022).

The aim of this paper is to delve into the causes and impacts of overtourism. Overtourism impacts communities, economies, and ecosystems, fundamentally altering the character and viability of tourism destinations. Through an examination of its impacts, this study underscores the urgent need for a shift in tourism practices that prioritize sustainability.

2. Understanding Overtourism

Overtourism is a relatively new term used to describe a persistent problem, as Dodds and Butler (2019) note. Concerns about the negative impacts of tourism have been around since the 1960s, but the scale of these problems has increased significantly over time. The term refers to the excessive negative impacts that tourism can have on local communities and the natural environment. In contrast to mass tourism, which simply refers to a high volume of tourists, overtourism refers to situations where even a relatively small number of tourists can overwhelm the capacity of a tourism destination (Koens et al., 2018).

Several factors contribute to the rise of overtourism, including lower travel costs due to low-cost airlines, the increasing popularity of middle-class travel and the accessibility of affordable accommodation options such as Airbnb (Goodwin, 2019). In addition, aggressive marketing by destination management organizations and technological advancements in online bookings continue to drive tourism growth (Gowreesunkar & Seraphin, 2019). Poorly planned tourism development and inadequate management frameworks exacerbate these problems and make it more difficult to control overtourism (İçöz & Bozkurt, 2021).

The core problem of overtourism is that it leads to traffic congestion and overcrowding in popular tourism destinations, which significantly affects the quality of life of residents. The causes are often due to changes in tourist behavior and tourism policy models (Żemła, 2020). Overcrowding not only affects the everyday experiences of locals, but also leads to tourist dissatisfaction as tourists struggle to enjoy the attractions of the destination (UNWTO et al., 2018). Scientists

point out that overtourism occurs when tourism exceeds the carrying capacity of a destination, resulting in environmental degradation and a lower quality of life for locals (Peeters et al., 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019).

In larger destinations, the impact of overtourism can be concentrated in certain areas, while in smaller destinations it is often more difficult for locals to escape the presence of tourists and tourism infrastructure (Dodds & Butler, 2019). In places such as Venice and Barcelona, this has led to a negative perception of tourism, resulting in movements such as anti-tourism, where residents actively resist the influx of tourists (Araoz, 2011; Oklevik et al., 2019; Capocchi et al., 2019). These reactions are also symptoms of unsustainable tourism growth (Milano et al., 2019).

In order to combat overtourism, the goals of sustainable development must be prioritized. Rather than focusing solely on increasing tourist numbers, destination management should carefully consider which types of tourism should be promoted and which should be restricted (Benner, 2019). Butler and Dodds (2022) emphasize that despite the recognition of global trends contributing to overtourism, there is still a reluctance to effectively manage or reduce excessive tourist numbers at all levels, from local to international.

3. Impacts of Overtourism

Overtourism has increasingly strained relations between local communities and tourists, leading to a growing sense of frustration and hostility towards tourism. The concerns expressed by residents often go beyond the mere inconvenience of overcrowding and touch on deep-seated social, economic and environmental issues that threaten their quality of life (Hristov et al., 2021). The overwhelming influx of tourists puts immense pressure on local services such as restaurants and parking lots, causing significant disruption and dissatisfaction within the community (Butler, 2018).

From a socio-cultural perspective, overtourism changes the structure of communities and makes them less liveable for locals. The influx of tourists can marginalize the local population, as their needs are often overlooked in favor of the needs of the tourists. Cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, while problems such as crime and the commercialization of local culture can threaten the social integrity and safety of the tourism destination. There is a risk that traditional ways of life may be diluted or lost because outside influences and behaviors are not in line with local values. Economically, overtourism can drive up the cost of living, making everyday expenses a greater burden for locals due to rising prices. It also creates a heavy reliance on tourism for economic stability, which can be risky when tourist numbers fluctuate. Furthermore, the funds often go towards the maintenance of tourism infrastructure, leaving fewer funds for projects that directly benefit the locals. The reputation of the tourism destination itself can be threatened if the burden of overtourism is felt by tourists and residents alike. The ecological consequences of overtourism are also a cause for concern. High levels of pollution, problems with waste disposal and the destruction of natural landscapes

are the result of increasing activities. Infrastructure development often prioritizes the needs of tourists rather than the everyday needs of local residents. In addition, the overcrowding of many tourist hotspots endangers both the natural environment and cultural heritage and undermines the unique features that attracted tourists in the first place (Peeters *et al.*, 2019).

These interlinked impacts highlight the wider challenges posed by overtourism, which threaten not only the sustainability of destinations but also the wellbeing of the people who call these tourism destinations home. The unchecked growth of tourism can strain public resources, disrupt social cohesion, and erode the very cultural and natural assets that make a tourism destination attractive in the first place. As tourist numbers grow, local authorities may struggle to keep pace with the demand for infrastructure upgrades, leading to inadequate public services and increased wear and tear on facilities. This can further exacerbate the frustration of residents, who may feel that their needs are deprioritized in favor of accommodating tourists.

4. Examples of Overtourism

Venice, a city in Italy is facing major challenges due to overtourism, particularly cruise tourism, which poses a threat to its sustainability (Benner, 2019). Local residents report that the influx of around 30,000 cruise passengers a day during the high season negatively impacts both their culture and the environment (Haince, 2016). In recent decades, Venice has experienced a dramatic increase in tourist numbers, which reached 5.5 million in 2019. Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused a drop to 1.3 million in 2020, numbers rose again to 5.7 million in 2023 (Statista, 2023). The city's economy relies heavily on tourism, but this has caused many locals to move to surrounding areas as they no longer want to live in their own city. Fears have been expressed that Venice could become a "museum city" without its original inhabitants (González, 2018). The high cost of living and the decline in quality of life, which is reflected, for example, in the fact that traditional stores are being replaced by low-quality souvenir stores, are contributing to this exodus (Venezia Autentica, 2022).

Amsterdam's (Netherlands) tourism industry has experienced considerable growth, fueled by significant investment in marketing and the rise of low-cost airlines, making the city a prime destination for travelers. However, this success has led to serious challenges, including a significant increase in poorly regulated vacation rentals such as Airbnb, which are exacerbating the housing crisis by taking properties out of the local market. Residents are increasingly frustrated as their neighborhoods become overrun with tourists, giving the impression of living in a theme park rather than a vibrant city. The influx of tourists has contributed to a homogenization of the city center, which has lost its unique character. Young families in particular struggle to find affordable housing, as many apartments are rented exclusively to tourists, resulting in a loss of community and essential services (Responsible Travel 2024).

Barcelona, Spain, is another notable example of overtourism. The challenge lies in the simultaneous arrival of many tourists, about half of whom are day-trippers, mainly from cruise ships. These tourists usually have little time to explore the city, which means that the main attractions such as the Sagrada Familia and Parc Güell are overcrowded. As a result, they spend little time outside of the major tourist centers, leading to dissatisfaction among both residents and other tourists (Responsible Travel 2024a).

5. Conclusion

Overtourism poses a significant threat to the sustainability and quality of life of many popular tourism destinations around the world. As the influx of tourists exceeds the carrying capacity of these places, the negative consequences go beyond the inconvenience of overcrowding and affect local economies, social structures and the natural environment. This phenomenon disrupts the daily lives of residents, leads to the commercialization of cultural heritage and places an undue pressure on infrastructure and public services. In addition, environmental degradation through pollution, resource depletion and habitat loss threatens the very attractions that draw tourists in the first place.

To overcome these challenges, it is imperative to adopt sustainable tourism practices that prioritize the needs of local communities and the preservation of cultural and natural assets. Efforts should focus on managing tourist numbers, promoting off-peak travel and diversifying the tourism offer to reduce the concentration of tourists in certain areas. Enforcing stricter regulations on short-term rentals and encouraging the development of alternative, less-visited tourism destinations can also ease the burden on popular locations.

Ultimately, balanced tourism development requires a shift from simply maximizing tourist numbers to improving the quality of the tourism experience for both locals and tourists. With a holistic approach to tourism management that emphasizes sustainability, responsible tourism practices and collaboration with stakeholders, tourism destinations can mitigate the negative impacts of overtourism while ensuring their long-term resilience and attractiveness.

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