

# A brief discussion on overtourism and sustainable development

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**Abstract:** This report briefly reviews and sorts out the proposal of sustainable development theory and clarifies the definition of the term "overtourism". Through a series of cases of famous tourist destinations around the world, the issues and impacts of overtourism are revealed, and some solutions adopted by governments and organizations in various places are reviewed critically. Overtourism has become a global problem for a long time, and the development of sustainable destinations is an inevitable path for the global tourism industry. But it does not have a unified solution. To solve this problem requires the joint efforts of all stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Destination; Overtourism; Global tourism industry.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Objectives

Overtourism has increasingly become a global phenomenon, which not only affects the sustainable development of the tourism industry, but also has a negative impact both on the economy, society and culture of the destination, and the quality of life of local residents and the experience of tourists. This report attempts to summarize and explore various ways and possibilities that can solve this problem through the discussion and analysis of overtourism of the most serious tourist destinations in the world at present, and calls on more stakeholders to pay attention to and try to solve this problem. This is not an easy subject, the healthy and sustainable development of the tourism industry requires the participation of all of us.

### 1.2. Basic Methodology

This report is a secondary research based on some typical cases and existing academic research. Through the sorting and analysis of cases, the problems and impacts brought by overtourism are discovered, and a series of strategies and policies adopted by various governments and organizations in response to overtourism are summarized and analyzed. And then give personal suggestions and opinions on overtourism issues.

## 2. Background Literature Review

### 2.1. Sustainable Development Theory

The concept of sustainable development was first proposed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in 1980. They (IUCN, 1980) pointed out that:

Human beings, in their quest for economic development and enjoyment of the riches of nature, must come to terms with the reality of resource limitation and the carrying capacities of ecosystems, and must take account of the needs of future generations. (p.1)

Other views (WRI, 1993) emphasize that sustainable development is to achieve economic development without reducing environmental quality and protecting natural

resources. Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland (1987) said in her report *Our Common Future* that sustainable development is to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, this is currently the most influential and authoritative definition of sustainable development. According to Agenda 21 (UN, 1992), the theory of sustainable development includes three aspects: sustainable development of resources and environment, sustainable economic development and sustainable social development. Among them, the sustainable development of resources and environment is the prerequisite, the sustainable economic development is the foundation, and the sustainable social development is the ultimate goal. The principle of sustainable development is recognized by the world and has become the starting point and destination of all development. Therefore, sustainable tourism development has also become the principle and direction of world tourism development.

### 2.2. Definition of "Overtourism"

As the size of the middle class around the world continues to expand, more and more people use their disposable income for travel, and there are now more tourists in the world than ever before. Tourism, especially the outbound tourism of emerging economies, on the one hand promotes the development of the global economy, on the other hand, it also brings many adverse effects to tourist destinations. The word "overtourism" was born in this context. In 2016, Rafat Ali, the CEO and founder of Skift first mentioned the term "overtourism", he (Rafat, 2016) wrote:"

Overtourism represents a new construct to look at potential hazards to popular destinations worldwide, as the dynamic forces that power tourism often inflict unavoidable negative consequences if not managed well. In some countries, this can lead to a decline in tourism as a sustainable framework is never put into place for coping with the economic, environmental, and sociocultural effects of tourism. The impact on local residents cannot be understated either.

Later, scholar Greg Dickinson suggested to include "overtourism" as a new term in the Collins dictionary. He defined this term as: "The phenomenon of a popular destination or sight becoming overrun with tourists in an unsustainable way." (Greg, 2018) In the same year, the

Oxford English Dictionary listed "overtourism" as the word of the year. In recent years, large-scale protests against overtourism have erupted in some European cities. Obviously, this unsustainable tourism method has caused tremendous pressure on the infrastructure of tourist destinations and the lives of local residents, and has attracted the attention and dissatisfaction of many people. The World Economic Forum (WEF) stated that although the tourism industry has indeed produced significant economic benefits, it must undergo a sustainable transformation. (WEF, 2017)

### 3. Cases studies on Overtourism

#### 3.1. Cases and Issues

In 2019, the total number of tourists worldwide has reached 12.31 billion, and the total global tourism revenue is 5.8 trillion US dollars, accounting for 6.7% of global GDP (WTCF et al., 2020). In terms of distribution, 88.6% of global tourists are concentrated in cities in 20 countries. Among them, international cities are the main tourist destinations. In 2017, 79 international cities received a total of 440 million tourists, accounting for 36% of the total global inbound tourism. 95% of these international cities are from Europe, Asia Pacific and America (Figure 1). In terms of the proportion of inbound tourists from different regions to the total number of global international tourists, Europe has been the world's largest tourist destination since 2006, accounting for more than half of the total number of tourists (Figure 2). However, the revenue that these tourists have created for the European tourism industry has been declining year by year, and by 2019 it only accounted for 36.1% of the global international tourism revenue (Figure 3).

Distribution of destination cities (international) for inbound tourism

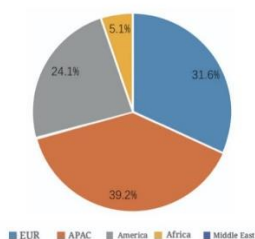


Figure 1. Distribution of destination cities (international) for inbound tourism

Source: World Tourism Cities Federation. (2019). World Tourism Economic Trend Report.

Proportion of inbound tourists in different regions of the world

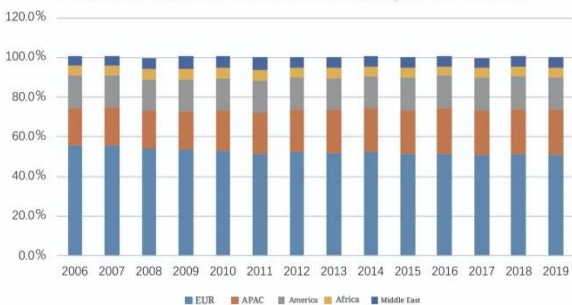


Figure 2. Proportion of inbound tourists in different regions of the world

Source: World Tourism Cities Federation. (2019). World Tourism Economic Trend Report.

Proportion of income from inbound tourism in different regions of the world

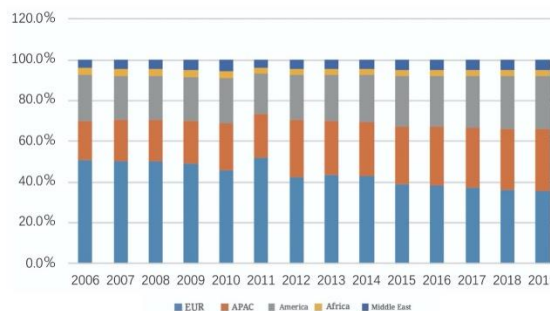


Figure 3. Proportion of income from inbound tourism in different regions of the world

Source: World Tourism Cities Federation. (2019). World Tourism Economic Trend Report.

It can be seen that in recent years, the overall volume of the global tourism industry has increased, and at the same time, these tourists are mostly concentrated in a few tourist destinations, especially in Europe. This has caused the phenomenon of "overtourism" in some popular tourist destinations represented by Europe. The most typical example is Venice, a famous historical and cultural city in the world. It was once a successful model of world tourism. However, after entering the era of mass tourism, the city has gradually been filled with tourists and has become more and more crowded. Not only has the urban environment, cultural heritage and social customs suffered severe damage, but it has not had much contributions on the local economy. 75% of tourists only stay for a few hours and spend an average of 13 Euros to buy cheap souvenirs (low-end plastic products and imitative ceramic goods). These low-budget day-trippers will not buy real handicrafts. Many local craftsmen handed down from generation to generation cannot afford the rent because they cannot compete with cheap souvenirs produced abroad. Now the number of these craftsmen is decreasing (Dan, 2019).

A similar example is Budapest. Low-cost airlines, sharing economy (such as Airbnb), and "ruin bars" (an entertainment venue built on abandoned buildings to sell cheap alcoholic beverages) have attracted a large number of tourists with low consumption levels. These tourists not only failed to contribute to Budapest's economic growth, but also caused local housing prices to rise and noise disturbances (Ivett et al., 2019).

In Sagarmatha National Park in Nepal, feces brought by a large number of tourists caused the nearby garbage tunnels to be quickly filled. These human wastes are infiltrating the waterways in the area, some of which lead to drinking water wells. And people's testing of nine water sources in the area found that seven of them were seriously polluted by E. coli (the Economist, 2018). There are various fountains throughout Europe, and tourists often use them as wishing pools, throwing coins and sometimes paper money into them. An increasing number of coins may block the drainage system of the pool and endanger the health of aquatic life. The staff in the scenic area must regularly clean the coins in the pool, but this undoubtedly brings them a lot of unnecessary trouble.

There are many examples of this. At the beginning of the rise of tourism as a new service industry, some countries and cities placed high hopes on the role of tourism in promoting economic development, and were full of goodwill and welcome to tourists. However, with the rapid increase in the number of tourists, more and more local residents feel that their original peaceful life has been compromised: the original

beautiful natural environment has been destroyed, the original geographical features have been over-commercialized, and the local infrastructure has been overwhelmed. Housing and commodity prices are rising, noise, garbage, crowding... the living space of local residents is constantly being squeezed and destroyed. They began to feel disgusted by the influx of tourists, from welcoming to boycotting and protesting. These once-famous tourist destinations eventually became victims of "overtourism".

### 3.2. Policies and Strategies

In response to the increasingly serious overtourism crisis, governments have taken many measures to try to solve this problem. For example, levying exit taxes to tourists (such as Japan, New Zealand, etc.), increase entry fees or overnight taxes (such as Paris, Barcelona, Berlin, Rome, Maldives, Dubai, Amsterdam, etc.). Other countries and cities have begun to restrict tourists. Venice has set gates at the main entrances and exits of the ancient city; in April 2019, the Philippines announced that Boracay, a tourist attraction, would be closed for half a year. The reason was that the number of tourists was too large and the island's sewage pipes were insufficient, causing the entire island to become a "septic tank". In China, many scenic spots have adopted online reservations and time-based ticket sales to limit the number of tourists, especially during the Golden Week. Some tourist destinations try to control the flow by increasing the ticket price of scenic spots. Although the above measures (tax collection, traffic restriction, diversion, etc.) can indeed temporarily relieve the number of tourists, they cannot fundamentally improve the phenomenon of overtourism and solve the current conflicts between various stakeholders in the tourism industry.

Some international tourism organizations or institutions have formulated prescriptions from the perspective of sustainable development and long-term and healthy development of tourism. For example, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has put forward 11 major strategies, 68 specific measures and 12 policy recommendations on the phenomenon of overtourism. Among them, the measures most recognized by the residents of the destination include: improving the city's infrastructure; communicating with local businesses and invite them to participate in the process of tourism planning; regulate and guide tourists' behavior in tourist cities; distribute tourists more evenly throughout the year; and encourage the contact and integration of local residents and tourists, etc. (UNWTO et al., 2019). These strategies and measures provide destinations with a relatively systematic methodology to alleviate the overtourism problem. However, there is no single solution to the overtourism problem in the world, especially because the problems faced by each destination are different, which still requires local stakeholders jointly explored creative solutions for this.

Regarding the various policies and measures adopted by the governments or organizations for overtourism in various tourist destinations in the world, the author classifies them as follows:

For tourists:

- Formulate tourist codes of conduct, guide tourists to correct behavior, and set up strict supervision and punishment mechanisms. Use the collected tourist tax or fines and so on for the maintenance and development of tourist destinations.
- Set up tourist consultation service points in scenic spots

to provide foreign language tour guides and other services.

For local residents:

Let local residents participate in the planning and management process of the destination, and adopt or consider the interests and opinions of local residents as much as possible. Use the development of tourism to increase employment opportunities, alleviate the employment problems of local residents, and enable local residents and tourism to develop together.

For destinations:

- Improve infrastructure, including increasing the carrying capacity of airports, hotels, parking lots, etc., building convenient and perfect public transportation networks and inter-regional connections, adding public telephone booths, public toilets and other facilities.

- Protect the natural environment. Promote and strictly implement garbage classification policies in tourist destinations, increase garbage recycling and reuse rates, and impose fines on tourists who violate regulations. A good example is in the U.S. Virgin Islands, people turned its trash into treasure by turned beer bottles into hand-blown art and sold them to tourists (Carol, 2016).

- Optimize tourism products, enrich the tourist experience of tourist destinations, and stimulate tourists to increase consumption; and develop new tourism projects near the destination to disperse tourists. An example of this is the North Coast 500, which has brought attention to a corner of the Scottish Highlands that few international tourists previously visited.

- Transform marketing strategies. Carry out off-season marketing and marketing to few people destinations to avoid excessive concentration of tourists in time and space.

- Protect the original cultural environment of the destination, avoid excessive commercialization, support traditional craftsmen, and increase support and publicity for intangible cultural heritage.

## 4. Conclusions

"Overtourism" is no longer just a local issue that a few famous tourist destinations need to pay attention to. It has become a global problem that affects various communities, natural areas and stakeholders. If it is not controlled and improved, it will cause serious social, economic and environmental impacts. Although the GDP contribution and job opportunities created by the tourism industry are higher than that of almost any other industry, the ecological environment of many tourist destinations is very fragile and once destroyed it will be irreparable. We cannot blindly pursue unrestricted growth of the tourism industry in the short term, but must follow the theory of sustainable development to allow the tourism industry to develop in a long and healthy manner. Some countries, regions or organizations have adopted some policies and strategies to try to solve this problem. This has provided valuable experience for other regions that have not yet taken measures. However, we still need a long way to explore it, and we also need the joint efforts of all stakeholders.

## 5. Recommendations

As tourists: The meaning of traveling is not to show off and take pictures, not to post on Instagram or Facebook. Be a tourist with manner and politeness. Respect local culture and residents, customs and rules; abandon all uncivilized

behaviors, including loud noises, littering, and destruction of cultural heritage. Don't follow blindly, you may not like the places where everyone goes, there may also be good scenery where few people go.

As local residents: Reflect the problems and impacts of overtourism on their lives to the local community, actively participate in local tourism planning and make suggestions. try to accept and accommodate tourists from different regions and cultural backgrounds, and communicate with them more.

As public sectors: Tourism is a special industry, and its "product" is a country/city. Therefore, government and public organizations always play a central role in the development of tourism. It can be said that the health and sustainable development of tourism in the future depends on the leadership and decision-making of the public sector.

- The fundamental reason for the overtourism phenomenon is the imbalance between people's growing tourism demand and tourism resources. Therefore, in order to solve this problem fundamentally, it is necessary to develop and create new tourist destinations.

- The development of tourism requires a lot of budget support. Government departments should strive to find new sources of funds. These potential investors (private entrepreneurs and funding agencies) are also the target of marketing.

- Actively use emerging scientific and technological means, such as the use of digital tour guides to track and guide tourists to diversion to places with few people.

Finally, more important than formulating these policies is to ensure that these policies can really be used in the practice of developing sustainable destinations, and to develop quantifiable metrics to evaluate and feedback the effectiveness of these policies, and make timely Adjustment. At the same time, the local government needs to pay attention to developing a diversified economy and not relying solely on the tourism this single industry.

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