

Preface

Demand or degrowth of tourism: Tourism development and its future design

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COVID-19 has drastically curbed tourism development and growth in the tourism industry following 2020. The global pandemic forced us to alter our rosy forecast of the growing tourism industry. No one could have predicted this sudden change in early 2020. However, the possibility of a serious and long-lasting “dark age” for tourism surely became a reality later that year; according to the latest WHO figure, the COVID-19 virus had infected 183 million people globally by June 23, 2021 and contributed to 4 million deaths.

It was not easy to control COVID-19; however, it was apparent that limiting mobility could inhibit the spread of infection. Many of us felt that this infectious disease had an unwelcome impact on our day-to-day lives and even our leisure activities. Most countries introduced restrictions on transportation and social events. Consequently, tourism activities have been seriously affected with antivirus countermeasures aiming to avoid human contact in every aspect of the tourism process. Tourism is vulnerable in this context because the core of tourism is mobility, interpersonal exchange, and experiencing another culture through interactions at the destination. Therefore, not only tourism-related industries but also most service industries were crucially affected in both management and employment.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) impact assessment, international tourist arrivals fell by nearly 75 % in 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Asia and the Pacific recorded sharp decline in arrivals of 82%. The UNWTO also estimates that more than 100 million tourism-related jobs have been lost since this turndown. In a recent survey by the UNWTO, many tourism experts estimated that recovery would not reach pre-COVID levels until 2023 or later. Moreover, half of the interviewed experts suggested that the complete recovery of tourism activity to 2019 levels would occur in 2024 or later. This is because many countries continue to maintain travel restrictions.

Regardless of national economic distinctions, tourism is an important source of income. According to the UNWTO, this is particularly true for many developing countries, which account for 50 % of the total exports obtained from the tourism industry.

Despite this, nations had limited choice and thought the spread of COVID-19 infection could be prevented by tight restrictions on behavior, including tourism activities in leisure time.

This was a huge blow for the global tourism industry. Almost every tourism operator has experienced a sharp decline in tourism demand. According to the International Air Transport Association, world revenue passenger-kilometers in April 2020 showed a striking 94 % reduction from the previous year. Airlines were pushed to cancel nearly 90 % of their flights. The same can be said in the lodging industry, which were hit by cancellations of reservations from the spring of 2020 to now. The slower the pace of recovery from this sudden disaster, the more adverse effects on the economy not only locally but also nationally, regionally, and internationally.

Not only the tourism industry but also tourists worldwide are disappointed to lose the opportunity to have freedom of intercommunication and unrestricted travel as many countries restricted the free movement of people even in their daily lives. The widespread discontent of people who consider travel and leisure to be a crucial part of their lives is observed in many countries. Most of us agree that tourism itself allows a valuable experience of different cultures that has long been sustained traditionally and historically or established as a subculture in large modern cities. People on the street are again eager to have rich and satisfactory tourism experiences through their travel and leisure time.

To address the above situation, governments and international institutions have implemented concentrated countermeasures since the start of the global pandemic, and the silver lining is steadily coming into view. As stated before, the complete recovery of the international travel and tourism industry was expected to commence from 2023 to 2024. At this moment, the global tourism economy is starting to show signs of partial recovery. Almost every person interested in travel and tourism cannot agree more about the need for rapid, absolute restoration from the damages caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Our current interest is when we will be able to travel freely to experience pleasure and obtain our safe and comfortable day-to-day lives that we commonly enjoyed before.

However, is full recovery to the level of the most prosperous days for tourism the best option for all of us? We again need to consider the days of overtourism before 2019 when several destinations had struggled with the severe pressure of overwhelming tourists. It is true that tourism activity and the tourism industry contributed to job creation and economic prosperity of the nations. At the same time, we experienced a loss of our local culture and feelings of unity in the community. Tourism is a truly double-edged social activity.

International travel and cross-border mobility showed rapid growth during the 2010s. The UNWTO proudly predicted the continuous expansion of international inbound tourism from 1.4 billion in 2018 to 1.8 billion in 2030. This optimistic forecast was backed by substantial changes due to the accelerated pace of globalization, strong world economy, and growing middle class. Information and Internet technology potentially affected this. Regretfully, the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has betrayed this expectation.

After long hibernation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we were eager to return to normal. Due to this upward momentum, a dramatic rejuvenation of tourism is expected to be accomplished at the earliest possible date. Most experts in the travel and tourism industry would like to return to the 2019 level of international travel because we still remember the ever-increasing demand and strong market of the 2010s.

However, the size of the tourism industry and the number of tourists traveling to the destinations at that time were above a sustainable level. As proof of this, many destinations, such as Amsterdam in the Netherlands, Barcelona in Spain, and Kyoto in Japan, were struggling with over-tourism at that time. In contrast with people involved in the tourism business, local residents and workers in small economies complained about it because they lost more than they gained. We should note that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be the great reset of this upward tendency toward infinite development based on the maximizing strategy of the use of our limited resources. Therefore, we must rethink tourism development.

Most of us believe that the growth of our society and economy is necessary for a better life. Nonetheless, we started to doubt the myth of development because of environmental destruction, climate change, unequal society, and poverty in the low-income class. In fact, development itself is not likely to be synonymous with progress toward a prosperous society. Centrally, the word “degrowth” has gained increasing attention from environmentally conscious people. What, then, does this word mean?

The original idea of degrowth was first discussed in the 1970s when Rome Club published a report called the Limit of Growth. It suggested the need for an alternative way of constructing an economy and society. Following the remarkable publication of “Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered” by English economist Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, the debate over relentless economic development significantly influenced people through the 1970s. Unfortunately, even though experts have blown the whistle and gained

a certain interest from high-minded individuals, it could not contribute to controlling the growing demand for economic development. People in the 1980s thought degrowth was an unlearned lesson, and many born in that decade eagerly sought to realize it. The collapse of the Soviet Union generated pushback and neoliberalism-based expansionism of the economy.

The negative environmental impact and distraction of the pristine ecosystem worsen the environmental condition beyond the least acceptable level. We must be serious about climate change as it may cause irrevocable alteration that is likely to affect current human society and future generations. Despite recognition of this urgent global issue among diverse countries and states, the progress of countermeasures is slow. Governments worldwide have not fully informed their citizens of the urgency of the issue. However, at the same time, a great many among the public have come to acknowledge “inconvenient truth”

Tourism is the behavior of individuals with extraordinary experiences. Therefore, a large number of researchers believe that current environmental issues should be solved first in daily life and the local community where most of us spend a substantial portion of our lives. However, in this era of mobility, people on the street may spend most of their free time away from their day-to-day routines. Therefore, it would be a great opportunity for us to experience greater social change to solve current environmental and social issues, even in leisure time away from where we spend our daily lives. In this sense, tourism is likely to play a significant role in motivating our behavioral transformation by offering extraordinary experiences at varied destinations. Tourists can temporarily experience sustainable degrowth, which is an alternative to capitalism and neoliberalism.

There is no reason to be afraid of stagnation in the economy if we adapt to a stable society. The myth of limitless growth has become a thing of the past. Soon or later, we will have greater social change to establish a green society with a stable economy. If not, we may lose the future of our planet. Thus, restoration to the original state of tourism in the 2010s is not mandatory. Our mission is to pursue happiness rather than growth-based prosperity.

In order to accomplish this change, we must address several technical and institutional issues to alter our society from a consumer-driven culture to a stable green economy-based culture. Needless to say, communities that are destinations and departure places for tourists are at the core of this social change. We again consider the importance of green community growth.

There is still time ... Brother.

About the author

Asami Shikida is a leading member of the Japanese association of tourism studies. He had work experience as an expert in tourism management for a sustainable regional and community development. Currently, he is a Professor of Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (JAIST). He has been actively involved in ecotourism and community resource based tourism strategy research and community development through tourism with particular reference to the rural and urban creative relationship.