

Preface

The upcoming war with overtourism: In the age of sustainability

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COVID-19 has significantly affected daily life worldwide, and most people have been forced to change their lifestyles and modes of living. Significant and drastic changes have occurred in our individual lives. Among these, the most important and serious threat is the freedom of movement. The global pandemic forced people to stay home in order to slow down the infection rate. The prevention of infectious diseases such as COVID-19 can be prevented by decreasing human contact. This measure was imposed by each state government, and people reluctantly accepted the mandatory order. Nonetheless, according to the latest WHO figure, by the end of September 2023, COVID-19 has infected 770 million people globally and contributed to seven million deaths.

However, with the help of the LNP-mRNA vaccine for COVID-19, we conquered the fear of further outbreak caused by this unprecedented virus. Quickly manufactured vaccines under emergency authorization have significantly affected prevention of the pandemic. In 2023, a Nobel Prize was awarded to Katalin Karikó and Drew Weissman for their scientific contribution to the development of effective mRNA vaccines.

However, more than three years after the decrease of mobility, tourism had been shrinking from its rosy dream days of rising international tourism activity to the darkness of its reduction. Many countries closed their boundaries to tourists to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and the number of international tourists declined by 90 % from the 2019 to 2020.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) impact assessment, international tourist arrivals plunged by nearly 70 % in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as compared to 2019 when the number of international travelers was 1.4 billion. This drop in numbers is equal to that of 30 years ago. Accordingly, revenue from the international air transportation sector showed a reduction of more than 90 % from the previous year. Among them, Asia and the Pacific recorded a severe decline of approximately 80 % in arrivals.

The pandemic caused an unprecedented disruption to the tourism industry, with a drastic fall in international demand due to widespread lockdowns and travel restrictions imposed

by countries to contain the spread of the virus. This has had a huge economic impact on tourism businesses worldwide, jeopardizing over 100 million tourism-related jobs. This was a huge blow for global tourism-related industries, such as the transportation and food industries. These industries are vulnerable to global pandemics and shrinking international tourism. Among them, small and medium-sized enterprises were in deep trouble because tourism is an important source of income. Notably, the impacts are severe for many developing countries, specifically small tourism states, which account for more than 50 % of the total exports obtained from the tourism sector. According to UNWTO, nations had limited choice and thought that the spread of COVID-19 could be prevented by tight restrictions on behavior, including tourism activities.

Many tourism experts have estimated that the recovery would not reach pre-COVID levels until 2023 or later. In 2023, a significant recovery from the COVID-19 period could be observed, and it is apparent that long-term restriction of mobility and a precautionary approach to prevent further infection with effective mRNA vaccines significantly contributed to this accomplishment. As predicted by tourism experts, the complete recovery of tourism activity to 2019 levels may be achieved in 2024. This significant recovery is welcomed by developing countries that depend heavily on tourism.

Tourists worldwide are eager to recover from disappointment. Thousands of world travelers are waiting for the restart of unrestricted international tourism to satisfy their curiosity and try to fulfil their desire to have freedom of travel. Most people, specifically those living in developed countries, consider travel and leisure a crucial part of their lives. Tourism can provide us with enjoyable experiences in out-of-the-ordinary environments and cultures that have long been sustained traditionally, historically, or newly created as a subculture in modern urban cities. People are eager to have memorable and satisfactory tourism experiences throughout their travel and leisure time. This has also led to the rapid expansion of the tourism activity of travelers because they had been waiting for liberation from the strict constraints imposed to prevent a further spread

of COVID-19. As a result of this tremendous desire, people who think that travel and tourism are crucial parts of their lives have resumed tourism activities as they did before 2019.

This has led to a rapid increase in international tourism. Recovery from COVID-19 was socially justified and strongly supported by tourists and the tourism industry. An intention to normalize tourism was also accepted politically, and the door to international tourism has been opened by countries throughout the world. Although travel and tourism are the sectors most affected by travel restrictions, a resurgence is apparent.

As noted previously, international travel recorded 1.4 billion tourists in 2019. Therefore, the topic of interest is how to catch up and return to the original state, hopefully with an increase from that of 2019. The current conditions and trends in international tourism show a successful path to this accomplishment.

However, recovery does not simply reassure tourism and its destination society. Excessive-recovery could occur. This state was referred to as overtourism in the late 2010s. Overtourism can be defined as a destination where tourism has an excessive impact on local society, culture, and the natural environment. Overtourism is caused by excessive growth in tourism supply and demand. Furthermore, the local community accuses tourists and the tourism industry of unsustainable use of cultural, natural, and spiritual resources at tourism destinations.

These phenomena were first reported in famous destinations, mostly tourist cities such as Amsterdam and Barcelona. The word then became a jargon or buzz word among the media when they criticized excessive tourism development and the massive concentration of tourists. Although this particular term began to gain attention after 2016, scholars and conservationists have repeatedly criticized the detrimental effects of tourism.

During the mass tourism age, these detrimental effects were intentionally ignored by the tourism industry owing to the rapid surge in international and domestic tourism. It was believed that the tourism industry is blameless; that it does not have adverse effects or is less disruptive than other activities because tourists do not extract anything from the destination.

However, the current controversy regarding overtourism has revealed its adverse effects. Tourism activities have negatively impacted the social and economic environments of destinations. We are in the middle of the early phase of the overwhelming surge in tourism activity caused by the end of COVID-19 restrictions on mobility. Furthermore, current web-marketing strategies are powered by the drastic development of internet technology, such as web-based induction and guidance of tourists to destinations. Media-induced tourism activities quickly surged because of the intentional and positive propagation of particular tourism attractions. In addition, tourism is likely to occur in residential neighborhoods of tourist areas. Quick and makeshift developments in cheap lodging for tourists have provoked community disturbances and pushed local rental prices up. People in the local community are facing complicated and serious problems caused by the surge of tourists.

This threat contributes to the growing focus on implementing responsible tourism worldwide. The tourism industry should follow this trend and create a stream of responsible and sustainable tourism.

In this sense, we need to remember the overtourism dispute before 2019, when several destinations struggled with the severe pressure of overwhelming tourists. Tourism demand, and supply tailored to it, contributed to job creation and economic prosperity of the community. However, simultaneously, we are forced to worry about the loss of community peace and feelings of unity in the community. Tourism is a double-edged social activity that is viewed as an ambiguous alternative.


How can we combat this problem under pressure from both tourists and the tourism industry in situations of excess demand? We should bear in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be a great reset for this upward trend in global tourism development. Therefore, it is necessary to reconsider tourism development.

One possible explanation for this is degrowth. The word was first discussed in the 1970s when the Rome Club published a report on the 'Limit of Growth.' This is an alternative for future economy and society. The relentless development of tourism must not continue because it does not contribute to sustainable development of the destination. Instead, we must pursue a balanced and sustainable way of utilizing tourism for both tourists and destinations. Tourism is likely to play a significant role in changing our ways of thinking by encouraging participation in the sustainable and wise use of resources at a destination. We should become conscious of the myth of limitless growth, even in our hometowns. To achieve this greater change, we must say good-bye to the media-induced and relentless demand for and consumption of destination resources. It is time to change to green economy-based tourism. Recovery from COVID-19 restrictions and the risk of overtourism are increasing. This is the first step in testing whether we will consume more to deplete our resources or return to the green destination on the right track. In this sense, we need to prepare for the upcoming war with overtourism, which is the very first stage of a real war to achieve sustainable tourism.

About the author

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Published November 30, 2023

 https://doi.org/10.37020/jgtr.8.2_93