

# **The Overtourism Debate**

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# **The Overtourism Debate: NIMBY, Nuisance, Commodification**

EDITED BY

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# Preface

‘A funny thing happened on the way to the baseline future – something else!’ (Hines and Bishop, 2013, p. 43). In the Spring of 2020, cities that used to see their streets and squares filled with visitors and residents, with the corresponding lively bustle and, sometimes, tensions between those different users, are empty and in lockdown. Restaurants and bars are closed, hotels have seen their occupancies fall to 6% and air traffic has been all but paralysed. Instead of the ‘visitor economy’, we now see children play in formerly overcrowded streets, and uncommon examples of wildlife returning to Europe’s metropolises constitute a bizarre illustration of ‘the contested use of urban space’.

So, in addition to the question whether overtourism is a thing, which the authors have tried to address in this book, we now need to look into an even more challenging one: will it ever be a thing again? It is not unthinkable that some of the things we used to do on our holidays will remain impossible, unpopular, unaffordable or illegal: going on a cruise, to a theatre or moving through the tourist masses in cities like Venice. More importantly, every crisis comes with post-crisis resolutions about a fairer and more sustainable world, resolutions that may, however, be abandoned as fast and as completely as a gym in the month of February. It seems there are three plausible scenarios for the future of travel and tourism: besides this well-intended but perhaps unlikely turn to sustainability (Hall et al., 2020), we may either go back to where we were, or we may, even if we would like to return to growth curves, be withheld by the conditions of an uglier world: increased unemployment and poverty, plummeting consumer confidence, fear, closed borders and nationalist protectionism.

In any case, what has become clear is that a world without travel is not what anyone had wished for, probably not even the fiercest anti-tourism protesters. People’s livelihoods depend on tourism, even entire regional economies, causing much wider aftershocks beyond those directly employed in hotels, restaurants or airlines. The impossibility to travel comes at a bad moment when voices around the world can be heard to put America, Britain or France first; the risk is that an economically inspired turn to protectionism will be followed by countries turning in on themselves socially and culturally.

However, it is a logical fallacy to assume that, because there is undertourism, overtourism cannot exist – or the other way around. Developing tourism is a complex process with many strategic choices, not a dichotomous decision. Many systems are characterised by lower and upper limits; if we do not eat, we die, but if we eat too much we also suffer health problems. Droughts in northern Europe

and floods in arid regions show that opposite excesses are more likely to indicate that a system suffers an imbalance, rather than that is approaching a solution. Demand for travel has been suppressed, but not eradicated; that is a good thing. The causes of uncontrolled growth are also still there; that is more problematic.

What should be done to plan for a responsible recovery? As several chapters in this book observe, overtourism – visitor numbers experienced as excessive by residents – is mostly addressed at destination level, whilst the root causes lie in the demand side. So if destination authorities cannot effectively intervene, who can? In travel and tourism, numerous businesses benefit from demand growth without any possible accountability for the negative external effects of that growth. We have relied too much on the moderating effects of free market mechanisms, which in reality hardly exist.

If this crisis clarifies one thing, it is that, whether it is in the search for vaccines and therapeutics, the restart of international travel, the planning of our cities or the rethinking of tourism, science may be better at providing answers than market dynamics. A responsible recovery of tourism does not only mean one in which negative externalities are reduced or accounted for, but also one where the access to even scarcer space and amenities will not remain limited to the high-spending, so-called ‘quality tourist’. This requires a continued interdisciplinary effort that avoids both dichotomous answers and fixes that only serve short-term interests.

**Jeroen A. Oskam**

Amsterdam, 24 May 2020

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