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Georgia Lee

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Tourism, Biodiversity and Information

F. di Castri and W. Balaji, eds. Backhuys Publishers, Leiden 2002. Hard cover, 488 pages plus index. ISBN 90-5782-107-9. Price US\$65. Email: backhuys@backhuys.com

Review by Georgia Lee

THE UNITED NATIONS DESIGNATED 2002 as the International Year for Ecotourism. Tourism has become one of the most important economic sectors, a driving force of change in landscapes, environments, and cultures. While tourism can make significant contributions, mass tourism ends up as self-destructive, reducing the diversity of landscapes, species, cultures and identities.

Sustainable ecotourism programs need to be designed for biosphere reserves, national parks and other biodiversity-rich areas. Such programs must be designed to implement the Seville Vision of Management of Biosphere Reserves in the 21st Century: "Rather than forming islands in a world increasingly affected by severe human impacts, biosphere reserves can become theatres for reconciling people and nature. They can bring the knowledge of the past to the needs of the future."

The seven sections and 28 chapters by the 39 authors of this book deal with the relationship between tourism and biodiversity and are an outgrowth of a Symposium held in 2000. To help unify the various papers, each section has an introduction.

Subsequent to the Preface by di Castri are the following sections: Relevance of Tourism and Biodiversity in the Information Society; Geographic Regions: the Coastal Zones; Geographic Regions: the Islands; New Trends in Biodiversity Conservation; Sustainability and Economics; Communication and Education for Tourism Development; and Epilogue.

The section on islands was of particular interest to this reviewer. Following discussions concerning several islands from Malta to Tasmania, Chapter 15 deals with the Galápagos and Easter Island, written by Christophe Grenier. The author cites the growth of tourism for Easter Island as increasing from 2,800 in 1974 to 20,600 in 1998. Grenier points out that tourism plays a leading role in the rapid decrease in geodiversity because tourism results in growth. As a leading industry that generates money, it uproots and replaces other modes of economic and social relationships and thus tourism is not an ecologically sustainable activity (p.241-2). For tourism to be ecofriendly, there must be an economic stake in conservation.

Tourism implies mobility, increasing urban sprawl, and the economic power of automobile and aircraft. In today's world, people spend less time at any given place, with a result of more energy consumption that in turn contributes to global warming and local pollution. It also reduces geodiversity as it implies inequality: only the wealthy are usually involved, coming from the most developed regions of rich countries: "Tourism is the relationship between rich people on holiday and poor people at work" (p. 242). Tourism also implies Westernization.

The problem with short-stay tourism is that it leads tourists to take in a place only through fleeting images; they lack time to really discover nature or the culture. Easter Island tourism impacts the island's archaeological sites but more importantly, increasing tourism and its associated immigration from mainland

Chile threatens Rapa Nui's cultural survival (p. 248). Tourism growth increases hostility between Rapa Nui inhabitants who want more tourists to come, but reject the invasion of their island by Chileans who are attracted by jobs related to the development of tourism. The entire lifestyle of the island now is affected by Chilean schools and television that slowly but surely is wiping out the use of Rapanui language by young people. It is estimated that by 2003 there will be 50,000 tourists and 5000 inhabitants (p. 249-50). Already Easter Island has the highest rate of vehicles per inhabitant in Chile. Paved roads open up areas to vehicles and motorbikes. This is the surest way to destroy the touristic attraction of the island (p. 250).

Grenier suggests that a minimum stay be imposed so that visitors to Easter Island spend more time, such as one or two weeks, and this would eliminate the 2 or 3-day visitors. The rationale for longer stays is that this reduces energy consumption per tourist-day, and longer stays (but with fewer persons), would lead to greater diversity in the local economy. The author points out "Time and silence are touristic values, allowing visitors to appreciate and even to be transformed by the experience" (p. 253).

Free immigration should be forbidden (p. 250-1).

The following chapter, Number 16, by di Castri, continues the small island discussion. He points out that Easter Island is becoming a clear example of tourism monoculture. Local agriculture is collapsing, with most foodstuffs coming from mainland Chile. Farmers are now tourism operators, and handicraft producers grind out products for tourists. Workers from the mainland usually manage and operate general services (p. 266).

The aftermath of September 11th is mentioned by di Castri (p. 276) as affecting tourism: it dropped by some 30-40%. Tourism from the United States virtually collapsed, while the numbers of visitors from Europe decreased dramatically.

The author suggests that closer contacts between Rapa Nui and French Polynesia will probably be the best means to maintain and promote a genuine Polynesian culture on Easter Island. And di Castri recommends that UNESCO's Biosphere Reserves take a more proactive attitude to introduce more appropriate management practices by the Rapa Nui National Park (p. 279).

The Epilogue, Chapter 28 by di Castri, deals with tourism after the 11th of September. He notes that security and safety are now prime requisites for tourism development (p. 484). Tourism is now expected to grow only 1.5% to 2% as compared to 7.4% in 2000. Problems range from reluctance to travel by air to the unpleasantness of travel with its delays, lost luggage, etc. Declines are more severe in the 5-star resorts than in small or medium sized hotels. It is clear that geopolitics now is playing a role in tourism (p. 486). The author concludes by stressing the need for diffused touristic activities, greater concern for local cultures and environment, the need for an ecosystem approach to biodiversity as the basis for tourism, and with cultural identity, local empowerment and pride as the foundation for community participation (p. 487).

This is an important book and one that should be referred to by all those involved in tourism or with an interest in problems of globalization and biodiversity.

