

# Overtourism

Subjects: Others

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Overtourism refers to a situation where the number of tourists at a destination and the nature of the tourism industry is perceived to be diminishing the quality of life of residents, the quality of experiences of tourists, and the quality of the physical environment, including both cultural and natural heritage [1][2][3][4][5].

Keywords: overtourism ; sustainability ; tourism management ; crowding ; tourism carrying capacity ; tragedy of the commons

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of overtourism has become increasingly used in media and academic commentaries about the sustainability of popular tourist destinations and their capacity to manage further growth. It has become the latest term used in the sustainable tourism literature to describe the tensions that exist between tourists, the tourism industry, and permanent residents in the sustainable development of destination communities and the creation of more sustainable forms of tourism [1][2]. Growing numbers of tourists at both natural and urban sites have caused various problems of crowding and business and residential displacement, which impact the quality of life for local inhabitants and the quality of the tourists' experiences and contribute to changes in the nature of the destination [1][2].

Overtourism is very closely linked to the concepts of sustainability and tourism carrying capacity[6][7]. The notion of tourism carrying capacity (TCC) was commonly used in the 1980s and 1990s, with the subject matter then becoming transformed into concerns over sustainability, while, more recently, the issue of overcrowding has emerged as a specific aspect of sustainable tourism [8][9]. Nevertheless, all these terms have a core idea, which is to identify when a destination has so many visitors that it is running down natural and human/social capital at a rate faster than it can be renewed; this is also framed with respect to a destination exceeding its carrying capacity and becoming unsustainable [3][7].

The manifestation of overtourism is commonly framed in the form of crowding [10]. In natural areas it can also be seen to result, for example, in damage to vegetation, littering, wildlife and ecosystem disturbance, water and marine pollution, and contributions to climate change [11][12]. In urban settings, negative impacts of large numbers of tourists include increased noise, localized inflation, and a decline in residential housing availability, to name a few [2][4][5]. These negative impacts can, in turn, lead to a decrease in the quality of life of residents and an increasingly negative attitude towards tourists and tourism [13].

Many elements of tourist destinations, such as streetscapes and public and green space, are a common pool resource, while national and regional art galleries, heritage sites, protected areas, and museums are also typically publicly owned [14]. It is usually accommodation, restaurants, and some products, such as casinos, entertainment, and themed attractions, that are privately owned [15][16]. However, the tourist customers of private businesses are also users of shared and public resources and spaces. Accordingly, tourist and tourism-industry utilization of such resources is often regarded by residents to not be in their interest [14]. Overtourism, whether in urban, rural, or natural areas, is therefore related to the use of the "commons" [17].

Overtourism and the concept of the tragedy of the commons are closely related ideas [4][18][19]. The tragedy of the commons is built upon an assumption that there are limits to the extent to which public resources/the environment can be shared and used, while overtourism focuses on overuse of common/shared resources at a destination by tourists and the tourism industry. Both concepts have evolved from rather rigid, deterministic frameworks to more normative, contextual notions [19]. The mutual characteristics of common pool resources and tourist destinations are:

1. Ownership of resources is held in common, including via public ownership, or shared by a large number of owners.
2. Individual users utilize the resource for personal benefit. It is often in the interest of commercial users to utilize the resource as much as possible to obtain additional revenue. However, the loss due to overuse, which may be a financial

loss, a reduction in personal satisfaction level, or a reduction in access, is shared among all users. This can lead to overuse of the resource.

3. No private individual is usually willing to invest with the aim of improving the resource as there is no guarantee that the return to investment would go back to the private investor. This is why government is usually the institution responsible for improvements, either via direct investment or regulation.
4. Control of access to the resource is difficult. This can be for a variety of reasons. For example, boundaries may be difficult to delineate and police, the size or area of the resource may be very large, or control may not be accepted due to political reasons, including that it is a common and/or public space.

By their very nature, tourists and the tourism industry “consume” tourist destinations by utilizing, to a greater or lesser extent, its various tangible (e.g., landscape, parks, and green space) and intangible (e.g., culture, atmosphere) common and public resources. The development and use of some of the resources is especially planned for tourism and promoted to tourists by, for example, visitor centers and destination marketing organizations, but often tourists become unplanned users of local resources, for example through the discovery of attractive viewpoints <sup>[20]</sup>. The development of tourism at a destination invariably means that the appearance of a place changes. Nature destinations become less natural and elements of the rural landscape become commoditized and change, as does the townscape. Thus, tourism facilities become embedded within regions but may also sometimes stand out as isolated elements in space <sup>[15]</sup>. These elements of tourism development can also, paradoxically, sometimes change or diminish the overall attractiveness of the destination, depending on what the attraction is <sup>[21][22]</sup>. Tourism can therefore have very real effects with respect to the consumption of environments, landscapes, and places <sup>[20]</sup>.

## **2. Managing "Overconsumption of Areas**

One of the earliest ideas for managing the “overconsumption of areas” was to set use limits or “caps” on the number of visitors at a destination <sup>[20]</sup>. The idea was introduced by the US national park service <sup>[23]</sup> due to crowding and is the core of the idea of tourism carrying capacity (TCC). TCC has, since the 1960s, been used in wilderness and tourist destination management. It assesses the impacts of tourism from the point of view of the impact of visitors on the environment and the physical carrying capacity as well as from the point of view of the impact people have on other people, that is, the psychological carrying capacity <sup>[24][25]</sup>. Carrying capacity is also at the heart of Butler’s tourism area lifecycle (TALC) model, where he argues that, when the TCC of a destination is reached, the destination will potentially decline and lose its attractiveness or, in other words, become the victim of overtourism and become unsustainable <sup>[21]</sup>.

The perception of crowding occurs when the sociocultural carrying capacity is overstepped, a tipping point usually defined by personal and community norms <sup>[26][27][28][29][30][31]</sup>. Norms refer to criteria that are used to evaluate behavior and the environmental and sociocultural conditions of the destination <sup>[32]</sup>. Norms can be differentiated as either social or personal norms. Personal norms refer to the expectations of an individual, e.g., an expectation that a nature experience would be characterized by solitude, making the individual more sensitive to crowding <sup>[26][33][34]</sup>. In contrast, social norms are shared by different members of a group, but they can also vary between nationalities and social groups <sup>[26][35]</sup>. Social norm theory assumes that there is a group agreement or consensus about suitable social and environmental conditions at a destination, which can be used to create standards of quality based on users’ preferences <sup>[26][29]</sup>. The normative approach has mainly focused on issues of crowding in terms of encounter norms. These define the number of other people a person can tolerate meeting or having contact with at a destination within a given time <sup>[32]</sup>.

If visitors have normative standards regarding the various aspects of their experiences, then such norms can be used to help set basic standards of quality to maintain or aim for <sup>[32]</sup>. By doing so, social carrying capacity estimates can be set and management actions undertaken <sup>[29]</sup> to satisfy the majority of site visitors. In other words, overtourism can essentially be avoided. The options of evaluating limits or setting caps have mostly been limited to single tourist sites rather than entire destinations <sup>[9]</sup>. An explanation for this lies in the growth model that underlies most tourism <sup>[36][37]</sup>. Since the 1960s and the development of mass tourism, an increase in tourist arrivals has been regarded as a primary goal in tourism development. The main reason for this is that an increase in tourist arrivals arguably creates various economic benefits, among others, in the form of increased national or regional economic growth and employment options. The general assumption is that limiting tourist numbers would hinder the economic potential of the tourism industry <sup>[1][4][6][9][18][38]</sup>. This perspective is also represented by several supranational organizations, such as the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), all of which advocate for tourism growth <sup>[9][39]</sup>. Growth is not seen as the root of the overtourism problem but rather ineffective management <sup>[6]</sup>. For example, this is reflected in the title of the World Travel Market Minister’s Summit, coorganized by UNWTO in London in November 2017: “Overtourism: growth is not the enemy, it is how we manage it <sup>[40]</sup>.”

Despite the importance of resident perceptions of sustainability in a tourism context <sup>[41]</sup>, there appears to be only limited awareness among the public about the impacts of tourism and most people are resistant to making significant changes in their travel behavior. Furthermore, the public seem to depend on the government to tackle the problem <sup>[42]</sup>. Such a situation perhaps reflects the commons problem of people not recognizing their individual contributions to the problem of overtourism and the overall sustainability of tourism <sup>[14][22]</sup>. Nevertheless, the public and, in particular, the residents of destinations associated with overtourism have increasingly become involved in the discussion about how to manage overtourism and its effects.

Iceland is one of the destinations which has been most associated with the concept of overtourism, in particular in the international media discourse<sup>[43][44]</sup>. Tourism in Iceland grew rapidly from 2010 to 2019, much higher than in most other countries<sup>[45]</sup>, with Iceland reaching a ranking as high as thirteenth on a list of countries with the highest ratio of tourists per inhabitant<sup>[46][47]</sup>. However, whether Iceland suffers from overtourism is not as black and white as some in the international media have made out<sup>[44]</sup>. For instance, the attitudes of both visitors and residents generally remain favourable towards tourism and there is no social movement opposed to tourism<sup>[43][44]</sup>. In addition, while it has been found that perceptions of overcrowding have increased at certain destinations in Iceland<sup>[8][48]</sup>, tourists remain generally satisfied with their stay in Iceland<sup>[49]</sup>. Compared to perceived crowding there are other factors such as activities engaged in and market characteristics which may be far more important in determining satisfaction levels<sup>[48]</sup>. Finally, tourism in Iceland has for a long time been very seasonal and concentrated in time, with the majority of tourists coming in the summer. Attempts to decrease seasonality have only been successful in the capital area and along the south coast<sup>[8]</sup>. Yet, the international media have portrayed overtourism as a problem which plagues Iceland as a whole<sup>[44]</sup>. Iceland thus provides an interesting example of a destination said to suffer from overtourism, as it presents the complex issues associated with the concept.

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