

Pre-Emptively Managing Overtourism

Subjects: [Management](#) | [Green & Sustainable Science & Technology](#) | [Development Studies](#)

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Overtourism is the congestion or overcrowding from an excess of tourists, resulting in conflicts with locals. The World Tourism Organization defines overtourism as "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitor experiences in a negative way".

[overtourism](#)

[tourism](#)

[sustainable tourism](#)

[sustainability](#)

[Madeira](#)

1. Introduction

Before March 2020, it was not rare to read media reports on the issues of overtourism, antitourism or tourismophobia, based on examples of overcrowded places such as Barcelona and other major cities. The media did not fail to notice angry residents inviting tourists "go home" ^{[1][2][3][4]}. The increasing public dissonance was quite evident in the last quarter of 2019 ⁽⁵⁾, at a time when vocal complaints were heard about the negative impacts of overtourism ^[5]. As a result of such developments with far-reaching political implications, a number of destinations accelerated the inputting of measures based both on economic taxation and non-market parameters to manage overtourism. In its essence, overtourism is linked to two basic intertwined phenomena: an unacceptable and politically problematic reduction in residents' quality of life and decreasing levels of the quality of the tourist experience ^[5]. Anti-tourism movements organized by alienated residents aggregate activists and protestors determined to fight for a better quality of life for inhabitants of cities and rural areas ^[6]. Residents in major urban areas have experienced the negative effects of tourism development, such as rising rents and unaffordable housing leading to their displacement from the areas where they were born and grew up to the suburbs or other cities; noise and litter; access restrictions and degradation of the social fabric of local communities; along with changing neighborhood characteristics due to phenomena such as gentrification ^{[6][7]}. The lack of functionality of the city center as a result of the "urban touristification, museumification and disneyfication" is another matter for concern in some areas ^([8] p. 1, [7][9][10]). In a number of cases, the local residents have been forced to see "conversion of these neighborhoods into urban theme parks of a touristic nature" ^([11] p. 3; [7]). Overexploitation of natural resources has been felt by residents in the rural hinterland.

Tourists also have several reasons to complain. Tourists complain about ruined or degraded experiences as a result of long, uncomfortable and endless queues and the hours of waiting to visit the most popular museums and iconic urban parks. Even in smart cities applying ICT tools to manage carrying capacity issues, tourists may complain about limited seating capacity in many key tourist hotspots or about being invited to visit other unwanted alternative places.

Overtourism is seen as a complex, contentious and multidimensional contemporary phenomenon ([12], p. 14). Koens, Postma and Papp [13] consider that the “marketability and popularity” of the term “overtourism” sped up the data entry process into the academic debate of an ill-defined and difficult-to-operationalize concept. Such conceptual difficulties explain why González and Ruano [4] consider that a number of key stakeholders have succeeded in enforcing a particular narrative corresponding to their interests and aspirations, in terms of how tourism development must be understood and which type of solutions must be tested, implemented and maintained in order to cope with overtourism. Nonetheless, Dredge [14] and Pasquinelli and Trunfio [8] consider overtourism not as a new phenomenon but rather “an old wine in new bottles”, because the negative impacts of tourism have been examined in the literature since the 1970s. Moreover, most destinations are not yet on the verge of being overrun by an excessive number of tourists causing major disturbances [7]. The problem is whether the current trends of sustained growth will take the destination to its maximum installed capacity, and then to poor quality experiences and finally to the deterioration of the destination’s image abroad. In most instances, it is still possible to prevent an “unsustainable future”, based on the adoption of measures at the earliest phases of the mature stage of the lifecycle (2019).

In several cities, the rapid increase in the number of tourists has led to unsustainable mass tourism; to overcrowding and negative environmental impacts; resentment against the negative effects of cheap accommodation promoted by private rental via Airbnb; inflated prices in the real estate sector and increasing cost of life; unaffordable rental prices; dissatisfaction with their current lives; and gentrification in working-class districts [1][6][11][13][15]. Others have complained about the “extended presence of tourists that seemingly undermines the sense of community based on social relationships” ([6], p. 2). In other areas, the opposite phenomena have been observed, with residents and local politicians complaining about the current levels of underdevelopment of the tourism sector [16]. In such circumstances, most local actors demand more decisive action to fight the current high rates of unemployment amongst young residents, depopulation, an ageing population and the lack of opportunities for locally generated development. In these cases, a tourism-led growth agenda would be implicitly welcomed by a significant fraction of the population. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that overtourism is destination- or local- and neighborhood-specific, so that a one-size-fits-all approach is not advisable. This study’s objective is to shed light on the role to be played by the rural hinterland in lowering the pressure felt by the most recognizable tourist hotspots in established destinations.

2. From Overtourism to Opportunities to Promote Greener Sustainable Growth Development

Overtourism has been one of the most researched topics in recent years. However, there is a lack of consensus as to the type of measures that would be appropriate. As observed by Mihalic [16], overtourism remains a contentious issue, with various interpretations and theoretical approaches provided in the literature [13][17][18]. The literature provides several definitions more suitable to understanding the current dynamics in urban settings and tourism hotspots. For example, Nepal and Nepal ([6], p. 4) understand overtourism as “a phenomenon of a popular destination or a sight becoming overrun with tourists in an unsustainable way: (See also [19]). Gülşen et al. ([20], p.

1) link overtourism to a “very large influx of visitors at a destination that causes various negative consequences in that particular space”. Overtourism also refers to “the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or visitors in a negative way” ([21], p. 4). On the basis of a wider geographical definition, Higgins-Desbiolles [22] understand overtourism in the context of exceeding carrying capacity limits, by declaring that “overtourism describes a situation in which a tourism destination exceeds its carrying capacity—in physical and/or psychological terms”, which leads to “deterioration of the tourism experience for either visitors or locals or both”. Most authors agree that if “allowed to continue unchecked, overtourism can lead to serious consequences for popular destinations” [12][21][22]. Koens et al. [13], quoted by Pasquinelli and Trunfio [8], identified five main themes in overtourism: “(a) overcrowding in public spaces; (b) pervasiveness of visitor impact due to inappropriate behaviors; (c) physical touristification of city centers and other often-visited areas; (d) residents pushed out of residential areas partly due to Airbnb and similar platforms dedicated to apartment rental; (e) pressure on the local environment”. From a measurable point of view, Nepal and Nepal [6] argue for a “healthy density” of tourists, defined by the number of visitors per square kilometer and the right intensity in terms of the number of tourists across the destination [5]. While most scholars agree on a limited number of qualitative aspects, a consensus is yet to be reached regarding quantitative targets and which policies work in practice. Territories such as Madeira, which are not yet teeming with tourists, should look carefully at the analysis developed by Nepal and Nepal [6].

Even the concept of sustainable tourism, which is part of the prevalent paradigm governing people's understanding of tourism development, while “intellectually appealing”, fails to a large extent to be put into effect [22][23]. Despite the hype surrounding the idea of sustainability, the measures implemented “allow essentially the same behavior as before” ([24], p. 121). As observed by Chettiparamb and Kokkranikal [25], there is no consensus on how to implement the concept of sustainability, and the current set of measures is “not yet close to sustainability” ([25], p. 528, [26]). Moreover, in many cases, despite all of the publicity, such measures are “alarmingly unsustainable” ([27], p. 117).

The negative impacts of overtourism are real. Both tourists and residents may complain about overloaded infrastructure due to heavy traffic and traffic congestion. Environmentalists highlight very high levels of energy consumption, massive waste generation and damages to natural ecosystems caused by pollution and overuse of scarce natural resources. Others point out the current threats to the local culture and heritage as a result of mass tourism, which threaten the destination's overall identity and cultural integrity [28], inducing inflation, leading to unaffordable housing for the middle class and real estate speculation coupled with the gentrification of old neighborhoods, as well as unemployment in the off-season due to the overdependence on tourism, as mentioned by most authors. In other cases, the problem lies not in the number of tourists per se but in arrogant tourists' behavior, generating tourism-phobia and anti-tourism reactions amongst locals [29].

Given the many potential negative impacts, the number of voices in academia advocating a degrowth agenda is hardly surprising [30]. However, for all purposes, tourism is the mainstay of the economy of islands, with most locals compelled to adopt a “pro-growth ideology” whether they want it or not and to follow a “growth fetish of tourism” in line with the neoliberal paradigm ([12] p. 1930), [31]. In most cases, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and non-

independent territories affiliated with the EU are reliant on tourism-led growth as a measure of last resort for development ([12], p. 1926, [32][33][34][35][36][37][38][39][40][41][42][43]). In the island context, adopting a degrowth agenda or eschewing the “growth imperative” while still struggling to reach high levels of human development is politically unpalatable for the moment. Even if most territories are eager to “diversify the economic structure away from the tourism monoculture”, “tourism remains an essential source of income that is capable of boosting and regenerating local economies ([7], p. 3). Nevertheless, It can be seen an “open questioning of an activity that had never before been the subject of such a profound debate in the media” ([4], p. 17). While tourism is no longer understood as a “goodness” ([5], p. 17), major changes in line with a radical transformation of the economy and society would imply “a drastic transformation of the tourism industry and its metabolism” ([12] p. 1927; [35]) at the global level. In most cases, partly by virtue of the absence of alternatives, SIDS are happy to explore the “never-satiated ... consumerist dynamic”, always ready to travel to “seek out newer and more novel tourism destinations and experiences” ([12] p. 1931; [27]). Tourists heading to islands “driven by restlessness, boredom and new ways to escape reality ... are perpetually seeking new experiences”, which has been matched at the island level by the development of new market niches and “alternative” products ([12] p. 1031; [36]). Islands can only move on to a more sustainable and greener stage if “structural changes” to the global economic model and tourist phenomena are made available globally ([3], p. 560).

It is worth mentioning that the tourism sector on islands may even be understood as a promotional tool for change [37] and a factor leading to sustainable practices [38]. As observed by Balsalobre-Lorente et al. ([37], p. 4) and Leitão and Shabaz [39], in the long run the tourism sector may even encourage higher levels of environmental awareness among residents and tourists alike based on the widespread use of sustainable practices and cleaner and greener energies, and as a consequence a contribution to tackle climate change.

For the reasons mentioned above, most islands continue to pursue a growth agenda “strongly embedded in a capitalistic sociopolitical system” ([16] p. 1, [40][41][42]) A similar phenomenon can be observed elsewhere, even in places overrun by tourists. Mihalic ([16], p. 6) observed that if most residents in overcrowded places benefit directly or indirectly from tourism, reaching a consensus on the issue is not easy. Contrary to expectations, a sizeable number of residents may even welcome higher numbers of tourists. A UNWTO [21] report on overtourism provides evidence to conclude that the “majority of residents in eight overcrowded European cities believed there should be no limitations to the growth of visitor numbers” ([21], p. 9). Most residents still prefer the status quo, which is “continuous tourism growth”; in fact, most fear a “deep transformation of tourism dynamics and tourism degrowth, as proposed by some pioneering contributions on overtourism” ([8] p. 3, [5][43][44]). Such voices, in all likelihood, would appreciate “that most value from tourism does remain locally” ([8] p. 1; [43]), which may lead outsiders to conclude that the reasoning behind the current protests are rather economic in nature. Backed locally by the electorate, policy-makers think that they will ultimately succeed in “coping with success” [16][45] by minimizing and preventing severe negative impacts, instead of becoming “victims of their own success” at a later stage ([46], p. 230). However, in practice, they live dangerously, constantly on a razor’s edge [6].

In a number of instances, the “problem” from the local residents’ point of view lies in the increasing levels of income inequality, which is quite often a by-product of the lack of tourism development in the periphery of the main tourism

hotspots. Small towns in the rural hinterland are prone to be overlooked by regional politicians, operators and investors [32]. In such circumstances, tourism does not contribute to the quality of life of those living in the periphery, and many local stakeholders are irritated by insufficient tourism opportunities and benefits. The evidence available suggests that residents welcome tourism if they can benefit directly or indirectly from it [6][16]. If politicians are well aware and conscious of this situation, they can implement measures to redirect and disperse tourists to less-known attractions based on the development of “new tourist routes” in the rural periphery to ensure the right densities of tourists both in the core and peripheral areas ([20], p. 1). In theory, this approach can generate higher levels of fairness and justice and degrowth (in the existing core areas) in a socially sustainable way [19]. Of course, this requires both investment in infrastructure and local entrepreneurial initiative. There is evidence to suggest that well-planned tourism dispersal to the rural hinterland may deliver substantial benefits to residents, without compromising sustainability and territorial cohesion [47]. On the contrary, this approach is likely to be effective in preventing the negative consequences of “overtourism” in the core areas.

Another critical advantage of pursuing a rural-based approach lies in offering real opportunities to accelerate a transition towards greener solutions for energy efficiency, innovative and sustainable architectonic and urbanity solutions and increased dependence on renewable energy. As pointed out by Nowacki et al. [48], tourism is considered an energy- and emission-intensive industry in need of a strategic redirection. Tourists heading to rural areas are more amenable to enjoying eco-friendly experiences, staying in brand new buildings, adopting all requirements or solutions according to best sustainable and greener practices and buying more green products. The evidence available suggests that such visitors may display eco-friendly behavior and a higher propensity to adopt a positive attitude and willingness to act towards complex and contentious environmental issues. Moreover, such visitors are more likely to use smart destination tools [49] owing to their academic background. Lilley et al. [50] claim that tourists opting to nature tourism and ecotourism in the rural hinterland are ready to welcome environmental initiatives, even those with significant impacts in terms of higher prices.

Several proposals to address overtourism have been developed in the literature, for example the optimization of tourist flows based on alternative products and alternative locations, as mentioned above, along with supply-side constraints and limits such as spatial planning, imposing limits to the number of accommodation facilities available and reducing demand in peak periods. The development of community-based festivals designed to build a positive image of urban areas, instill pride in residents and improve relationships between locals and tourists [51] have been suggested by Oklevik et al. [52], Peeters et al. [9] and UNWTO [21]. Tourism taxes and rebranding the tourism sector based on new attractions or shared experiences were the initiatives proposed by Séraphin et al. [51]. Koens et al. [13] discussed the issue of infrastructure improvements to reduce tourist pressure in the core areas, based on improved levels of accessibility to the periphery. Soares et al. [29] considered that controlling the level of access to public spaces based on technological solutions coming from the field of smart tourism can be useful in preventing certain areas from becoming overcrowded in certain days and hours. At the micro level, Peeters et al. [9] and Postma and Schmoecker [53] proposed compensation for residents financed by tourist taxes, and small projects compatible with higher shares of local employment and community engagement to reduce local conflicts. Demarketing was discussed by Gülşen et al. ([20], p. 1). The authors argued that destinations should adopt a

“proactive strategy for preventing large-scale issues that may arise due to overtourism and disorder” by redirecting marketing efforts to alternative areas.

Pasquinelli and Trunfio ^[8] indicated that overtourism can be solved based on a mix of regulation, management and marketing. The regulatory approach includes measures such as tourist taxes, licensing and control of the number of hospitality and commercial establishments in operation, as well as limited access to old towns and urban centers. The management approach tries to control the development path of the tourism sector without imposing coercive measures. For example, the DMO tries to anticipate market trends and involve a number of stakeholders in the co-creation of the destination to avoid conflicts of interest ^[8]. Measures to develop alternative routes in the rural hinterland, a new range of experiences in the urban landscape based on the cultural, historical and literary resources and other initiatives aimed at advertising market niches such as rural tourism, as strategies focused on dispersing tourists away from the most popular attractions, should also be envisaged. Such strategies can also be envisaged as leading to higher levels of involvement and participation of the local communities in the planning and development of their localities through the local elections ^[29]. Rasoolimanesh et al. ^[54] contend that the involvement of local residents in the tourism development process will lead to increased levels of awareness of the sector's benefits and costs, followed by increased levels of participatory involvement in the local decision-making processes. By the same token, Jaafar et al. ^[55] consider that the residents' level of information about the impacts of tourism will influence their level of support in favor of tourism development. In underdeveloped areas, further tourism development will lead to more jobs, quality of life improvements, public services and leisure attractions. Moreover, initiatives based on smart technologies (e.g., smart ticketing and dynamic pricing) can be employed to limit pressure on certain areas of the city and to push the benefits of the tourism economy towards less-crowded urban and peripheral areas ^[56]. As for dispersal strategies, which are often mentioned in the overtourism debate, research efforts should assess the degree of substitutability between established tourist hotspots and alternative solutions in the periphery by asking tourists about their preferences, expectations and constraints in this regard. Any attempt here must adopt a realistic stance to avoid deferring the problem or frightening off tourists, thereby exacerbating the negative effects.

The marketing approach is linked to the development of marketing and communication tools applied to new products ^[57]. For example, apps generating huge amounts of data can be used to profile visitors, define market niche segments, identify peak hours and convey messages adapted to the social media needs and learning needs of visitors in terms of social and environmental responsibility. Nowadays, a wide range of technologies is available to manage overtourism, such as “real-time technologies and travel cards to monitor tourist flows; apps to stimulate dynamic time-based dispersal; dynamic pricing and virtual reality to disperse tourist flows; social media usage by locals to promote alternative attractions and circulate information about traffic, parking and facilities; and digital platforms and big data analysis to assess tourism performance and impacts” (^[8], p. 4).

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