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### ABSTRACT

This commentary reviews the state of tourism and international development scholarship with special attention to publications from this journal, *Tourism Geographies*. Rather than assuming that tourism is the end game, or goal, as a body of researchers tourism geographers have often identified concerns about the exploitative impacts of tourism development on low income communities and countries, and negative environmental implications, especially when tourism is externally-driven. However, many of us have also asked, 'can tourism contribute effectively to international development, and if so, how?'. The articles resulting from this line of research focus on a range of approaches, from sustainable tourism through to inclusive and regenerative tourism, which show that there are ways in which tourism can facilitate rather than impede development. In a neoliberal-dominant world facing significant challenges including climate change, structural inequalities and complex conflicts, it is more important than ever that we keep this question – *can* tourism contribute to development and if so, *how?* – central to our research. After providing a concise history of research in this field, this article will discuss the value of some recent trends in tourism scholarship, as well as identifying research gaps and pointing to future directions for research by tourism geographers.

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## Introduction

The potential linkages between tourism and international development have long been recognised. Tourism, as is regularly noted, is a unique industry for countries in the global south as it brings the consumers to the places occupied by the producers of the products and service they are buying. This offers great potential, both for benefits and harm, to tourism locales.

As Turner and Ash observed almost 50 years ago in their landmark book on *The Golden Hordes: International Tourism and the Pleasure Periphery*, 'tourism has proved remarkably ineffective as a promoter of equality and as an ally of the oppressed' (1975, p. 53, cited in Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006, p. 1193). This article will explore whether anything changed since then that would lead us to view tourism in a more positive

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light with respect to international development, reviewing the history of writing in the field, the value of some recent trends in tourism scholarship, and pointing to future directions for research by tourism geographers.

'Development' in this context does not simply refer to an economic process, as commonly perceived. Rather, development is a multidimensional process leading to what can be described succinctly as 'good change' (Chambers, 1997, p. xiv). Due to the structural disadvantages still faced by global south countries in light of colonisation and globalisation, and the marginalised status of many communities where tourism is concentrated, development must also be seen as embracing values of social justice, self-determination and empowerment, as well as enhancing the wellbeing of peoples and environments in tourism locales.

Telfer and Sharpley (2008, p. 2) observed that 'the most common justification for the promotion of tourism is its potential contribution to development, particularly in the context of developing countries'. Ultimately it is vital to find ways in which tourism can work *for* development (Scheyvens, 2003), because it is one of the world's largest industries and is a key form of foreign exchange earnings in global south destinations. In addition, many people from the global south are involved in tourism and already are benefiting from this industry, or have ideas on how it could deliver more to the development of their communities and countries. Tourism is not *the* answer to development problems facing diverse communities around the world but it may provide assistance in meeting the goals of a number of these communities.

## Past research on tourism and international development

While in the 1950s tourism was identified as a modernisation strategy that could help newly-independent countries to create jobs and earn foreign exchange, in the 1970s and 1980s tourism was widely critiqued by social scientists as an industry dominated by large corporations which exploit the labour and resources of 'Third World' countries, cause environmental degradation, commodify traditional cultures, entrench inequality and deepen poverty. This was epitomized in the work of geographer, Stephen Britton, whose doctoral thesis focused on the political-economy of tourism in Fiji (Britton, 1982). An essential aspect of the geographical critique relates to who is controlling, and profiting most, from the industry. Tourism under capitalism is driven by the whims of overseas tourists, the interests of foreign investors, and the demands of supranational organisations. This is of major concern because '...decisions affecting destinations are made from afar. They are more likely to be concerned with profits than with the impacts on host environments and populations' (Cater, 1995, p. 202). Geographers have challenged the model of tourism development which enables such exploitative relationships.

Geographers have continued to contribute place and space-based critiques around 'exclusive enclaves' which lead to marginalisation of resident populations and also to their exploitation at the lowest levels of the tourism labour pool. The implications are particularly apparent when small island economies are dominated by large, foreign-owned resorts that repatriate their profits and contribute to high levels of economic leakage (Britton, 1982). It has been suggested that the privatised spaces and places of tourism—including islands owned by cruise liners—have only increased in recent years (Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019).

From the late 1980s through to the present, however, some scholars have focused on possibilities for achieving more equitable and sustainable tourism development. These viewpoints vary. Some are rather limited in their aspirations, adopting barely reformist paradigms such as encouraging large businesses to adopt corporate social responsibility practices or to select a few of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to align with. In response to this, rather than taking a 'Tourism First' approach to CSR, Hughes and Scheyvens (2016) advocate for companies to take a 'Development First' approach involving a more long term vision developed in conjunction with community members, and focusing holistically on social, cultural and environment well-being rather than just tokenistic environmental projects and some economic benefits. Another example of approaches offering only slight reforms might be those that focus on nature, or culture, or heritage, but apart from conserving or sustaining the 'asset' involved so that there is continued interest in visitation by tourists, they do little to enhance development outcomes for the people. More alternative approaches could involve resident communities exerting control over the nature and operation of these tourism endeavours as well as securing greater direct and indirect benefits from them.

Quite a number of researchers have, meanwhile, made genuine efforts to offer alternative approaches to the mainstream: for example, some approaches seek directly to alleviate poverty through tourism (Scheyvens, 2013), to promote justice (e.g. 'peace through tourism') (Rastegar et al., 2023), to empower communities to have more control over tourism development (Scheyvens, 2003). More deep-rooted examples might use tourism as a vehicle to promote solidarity with the oppressed, or reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settler colonial societies (Rastegar et al., 2023). One approach suggests that tourism development needs to aim to be more explicitly 'inclusive' (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018, p. 592)—which these authors describe as 'Transformative tourism in which marginalized groups are engaged in ethical production or consumption of tourism and the sharing of its benefits'. Interestingly, unlike some other approaches targeting involvement of the marginalized, inclusive tourism seeks ways in which those typically excluded from tourism can be consumers of these experiences as well. Increasingly the above ideas have moved beyond the pages of academic journals and into policy and strategy documents for governments and development agencies.

Yet despite these promising indications of various new approaches to tourism which suggest the industry is moving in a more sustainable and responsible direction, there continue to be strong critiques about the possibilities of tourism to contribute to international development (Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Bianchi has challenged us to move beyond a rose-tinted glasses view of these alternative approaches and to check whether new approaches to tourism such as pro-poor tourism, ecotourism and so forth, '...represent isolated examples of endogenous development, or begin to challenge the very asymmetrical structures of tourism production and exchange' (2002, cited in Telfer & Sharpley, 2008, p. 55)? Bianchi argues that we need to understand the power relations and discourses that shape tourism policies and plans, as well as highlighting the way in which the 'entrenched power of regional economic and political elites, is likely to undermine the prospects for a just model of sustainable tourism' (2004, p. 495).

Thus tourism geographers have launched critiques against the dominant neoliberal development model which is based on a deregulated global market and an ideology of unlimited growth (Fletcher et al., 2019). This ideology has been evident in the celebrations of various governments that tourism has ‘returned to normal’ or is ‘continuing to grow’ post-pandemic. This then removes the onus on governments to promote more sustainability and equity in the sector by, for example, regulating the activities of the multinational corporations operating cruise ships or hotels. Niewiadomski (2014), in his analysis of the operations of the largest hotel consortia around the world, found that many do not actually own the real estate on which they operate their business. This means they are ‘asset light’ in many global south countries in which they operate, and can thus practice low commitment to the host country and quickly move their operations in the case of political, economic or environmental disruptions.

Delving into the spaces that attract attention from tourism geographers interested in development issues, it is perhaps not surprising to find that resorts and hotels, as noted above, are often the focus of critique. Other spaces which have attracted attention include towns, villages, longhouses, and orphanages. Considering the specific situation of more vulnerable peoples, tourism geographers have also, for example, challenged tourism to prevent exploitation of minors as can occur, for example, through volunteer tourism. Mostafanezhad (2013, p. 319) argues that there is a particular ‘geography of compassion...[that] maps onto the Third World child’. While not condemning outright the intentions of young ‘First World’ tourists who come to volunteer in countries such as Thailand and Cambodia, she is concerned that ‘the ways in which we participate in humanitarianism...have worked to depoliticize global justice agendas’ (Mostafanezhad, 2013, p. 333). Other geographers have examined how the movement of labour for tourism can be explicitly exploitative, as demonstrated in Cheer’s (2018) exposé of the global supply chain for this sector with ample evidence of exploitation and lack of human rights as associated with modern slavery.

### **Current trends in tourism and international development scholarship**

Some key trends influencing tourism and international development scholarship in recent years come from the aligned fields of degrowth of tourism, post-capitalist pathways, and regenerative tourism. The neoliberal ideology discussed above has driven an incessant appetite for growth, and critical scholars have asserted how this growth has come at the expense of the natural environment and quality of life for local residents and those involved in delivering tourism products in many tourism destinations around the globe (Mowforth & Munt, 2015). In light of serious concerns about overcrowding, disrespectful behaviour by tourists and increases in the cost of living as numbers of visitors soared, ‘overtourism’ was identified as a serious issue in localities ranging from European cities to beaches in Thailand, especially in the years immediately preceding the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to this, and other concerns about tourism models centred on maximising profits, the idea of ‘degrowing tourism’ has taken hold (Fletcher et al., 2019). Degrowth is based on principles of sufficiency and equity, so that everyone has enough to live well. It does not necessarily seek an end to tourism, but it does require consideration of post-capitalist

possibilities whereby 'the rights of local communities [should be placed] above the rights of tourists for holidays and the rights of tourism corporates to make profits' (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019, p. 1926).

Considering pathways to tourism as a mechanism for post capitalist possibilities (Fletcher et al., 2023), is important. Some suggestions include ensuring there is stronger tourism governance in order that tourism contributes more to the public good, rather than private profits (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020, p. 618). For example, this could include city authorities implementing regulations restricting new short term rental housing due to residents being priced out of inner city areas, or resisting incursions of tourism on nature as occurs when hotels privatise large stretches of beachfront (Fletcher et al., 2023). Too often companies are merely encouraged to undertake voluntary measures to protect the environment, which is an example of the neoliberalisation of nature. Conversely, Saarinen and Wall-Reinius (2019) assert these governments have a critical role to play in terms of devising effective policies, plans and regulations. This is what could prevent further privatisation of nature, land grabbing by tourism businesses and the like.

Degrowth and post-capitalist possibilities are not, however, just about restricting tourism. Rather, they assert the need for a change of focus so that tourism aims to '...restore vital social and ecological goods to communities that have been foreclosed by the pressures of capitalism' (Higgins-Desbiolles & Everingham, 2022, p. 4). This might involve, for example, supporting local tourism businesses over multi-national corporations (Fletcher et al., 2023), or initiating cooperatives which support local workers to become owners of hotels that were previously in the hands of foreigners (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Tourism geographers are also now focusing on how tourism can enhance social and ecological wellbeing in particular locations: '...we are championing thriving, wellbeing and care where humans and other beings share this finite Earth system with driving principles of equity, responsibility and justice' (Higgins-Desbiolles & Everingham, 2022, p. 4). For example, Movono and Scheyvens (2022) demonstrated how communities in many Pacific island destinations experienced enhanced social and environmental wellbeing during long months of border closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic: these communities now want future tourism to occur in ways that complement their ways of life rather than taking over completely.

Regenerative tourism scholarship is growing at pace and is purported to provide a transformational approach to tourism (Bellato et al., 2023). It also draws from Indigenous values and has a focus on intergenerational wellbeing thus, rather than just trying not to cause any damage, it aims to give back more than it takes (Becken & Kaur, 2022, p. 59). This approach to tourism is undoubtedly ambitious, seeking to enhance the wellbeing of people, places and environments involved in tourism. Writing on regenerative tourism blossomed especially during the pandemic years, which is also when many countries started to seriously reflect on a decline in tourist numbers and what types of tourism they wanted to promote in future. Thus regenerative tourism has been written into the plans and strategies of a number of countries and localities, yet often it is being applied in a rather superficial way or, as Bellato et al. (2023) warn, it has been co-opted to serve the interests of those pursuing economic growth.

In applications of regenerative tourism that are true to the original tenets of this approach, however, we can certainly identify post-capitalist tendencies. Perhaps the most transformative recent example of tourism practice combining elements of regenerative tourism, justice tourism and inclusive tourism, and moving beyond tourism aimed simply at capitalist accumulation (Fletcher et al., 2023), is The Retracing Native Footsteps project. Born out of a chance meeting between a Māori and an Aboriginal tourism operator (Nadine Toetoe and Kaleb Comollatti) at the World Indigenous Tourism Alliance (WINTA) conference in Western Australian in early 2023, this project sought funding from government and industry partners to support the co-founders to organise cultural tours and exchanges for their Indigenous young people. These youths, from remote communities, then visited each other's countries, sharing Indigenous histories and experiences, as well as engaging in culturally-based tourism endeavours, with the aim of transforming their lives through building solidarity with other Indigenous people and enhancing pride in their cultures: 'This whole programme has been able to completely reignite my passion for culture and for tourism', said Braydon Saunders (Guditjmara Man, VIC Australia—Native Nations Tracing Indigenous Footsteps, Facebook page, 22 November 2023). There are plans to expand this programme to Queensland, Australia, and British Columbia, Canada, in future. After only 6 months of operation, this programme won the New Zealand Tourism Award for Industry Collaboration & Alignment. The initiative gained sponsorship from mainstream industry stakeholders such as hotels and airlines, and it is anticipated that these partners will go on to promote and sell Indigenous tourism products to international travellers worldwide, helping visitors to develop greater cross-cultural understanding and practice reciprocity through their travels.

### **Gaps in the literature and future research directions**

While *Tourism Geographies* does not purport to focus on countries in the global south, in its 25 year history it is apparent that some regions, such as Europe, North America and Australasia, have had more attention than others. Within the global south countries in central America and southeast Asia, along with China, feature relatively well, but other parts of Asia, most of Africa and South America are rarely featured. Small island states get some attention, but many individual states with a heavy reliance on tourism income are apparently not the focus of work by tourism geographers. Indigenous tourism within settler colonial states like New Zealand and Canada is discussed in *Tourism Geographies* and that also aligns well with international development themes of overcoming inequalities, achieving justice and sustainable development.

In future it would be good to see more attention to the overlooked global south countries which are heavily reliant on tourism income, but to do this well it is worth taking advice from Chang (2021). He notes that we tend to over-generalise when we apply geographical labels, such as talking about tourism in 'Asia'. The same applies, of course, to research discussing 'the Pacific' (including my own work), 'Latin America' and 'Africa'. We need to ensure our research is nuanced and that we communicate carefully without falling for stereotypes or generalisations. Furthermore, to diversify the geographical focus of studies on tourism and international development it would

also help greatly if we had more scholarship that celebrates those writing from non-Western standpoints and on the basis of non-Western knowledge systems, including Indigenous knowledge (Adams et al., 2021; Chang, 2021). Drawing from a plurality of perspectives should also provide much greater insights into the possibilities for tourism to contribute to poverty alleviation, empowering communities, peace-building, overcoming inequalities and achieving more sustainable development. For example, Mika and Scheyvens (2021), discussing Māori communities living along the Whānganui River in New Zealand, share the perspective of several tourism operators who seek to control numbers of tourists in line with their role as *kaitiaki* (guardians) of the river, which enables more authentic cultural experiences and prevents environmental damage in this ecologically special area.

A tendency in tourism research generally has been to focus on international travellers while overlooking other important groups such as domestic and diaspora tourists (Scheyvens, 2007). The pandemic led to a shift in focus for many countries, however, due to closures of borders to international travellers which was devastating, at least at first, to the tourism-related economy. This led, in many cases, to a re-valuing of a more diverse range of tourists including domestic tourists on mini-breaks and families rediscovering their rural roots (Adams et al., 2021). We need more research on these types of tourists, the experiences they desire, the spaces they occupy and the development contributions they bring. Domestic tourists can include, for example, school groups, or more vulnerable groups whose travel is subsidised as we see with social tourism. The diaspora market is broadening too. For example, Adu-Ampong and Dillette (2023)'s work on 'Black travel' to Ghana has found that in addition to those United States residents of Ghanaian origin interested in slavery heritage travel there were now significant numbers of people who wanted to travel to explore their roots more generally, or for business, or to engage in general leisure travel in Ghana.

There is still a tendency for researchers to provide case studies of what is happening in a particular location and what that might mean for tourists, businesses, or people living there. Such largely empirical research does not necessarily provide insights into how tourism could support the broader goals of international development as outlined in the previous paragraph. There is still a tendency to see tourism as the answer to development, a 'soft', less-polluting industry. Rather, tourism geographers should be ready to question, 'Is tourism the right industry to pursue in this place at this time? If so, how should it be pursued?'. The answer should be based upon local voices from those who bear the costs but do not always fairly share the benefits of tourism in particular places. Their voices should take precedence: they are not just another 'stakeholder'. Alongside their voices, the voice of nature needs greater consideration (see below), especially in this era of unprecedented climate change which is impacting on the wellbeing of all life on this planet.

Chang thus makes a case for research on Asian tourism to be 'more theoretical, inclusive and emancipative' (2021, p. 725). His points should be directed to wider research on tourism and international development. While searching for strategies for more sustainable and equitable international development, as scholars of tourism and international development we thus also need to be ready to systematically recognise and critique structural power associated with neoliberalism. Particular attention should

be devoted to places or situation where people or nature might otherwise be exploited or have their rights undermined by tourism. For example, at a recent Pacific Island cruise forum in French Polynesia, a speaker for one large company stated that there was huge demand for cruise tourism, and, because other major bodies of water such as the Caribbean and Mediterranean sea were 'full' in terms of cruise ship schedules in years ahead, they would be sending more cruise ships to the Pacific whether the countries were 'ready, or not' (Personal communication, September 2023). As researchers we need to be alert to the tensions between and among different stakeholders in tourism, to seek out the views of local action groups speaking out against tourism, listen to the concerns of counter-tourism movements, and seek insights from think tanks or others that are monitoring tourism's impacts in particular places. We could also pay attention to locations where governments or local authorities, or tourism associations themselves, are effectively regulating or taxing the tourism industry in order to control negative impacts and enhance positive impacts.

The way in which we research and share our findings is important too. Tourism geographers could do less research 'on' marginalised others and more research 'with' them, including action research embodying visions of justice. To practice reciprocity and ensure that robust, evidence-based conversations are taking place within the tourism sector—not just the universities and in academic forums - we should also be ready to share our research in creative ways (podcasts, blogs, comics, cartoons, public talks). This more 'public intellectual' role could help us to reach—and inform - a wide range of tourism stakeholders, including the private sector, governments and communities. Ideally, such information might encourage discourse which help to uphold the rights and wellbeing of more marginalised communities under threat from tourism or demonstrate alternative ways of doing tourism that are more regenerative and equitable in nature.

Another important thread for future research on tourism and international development is a focus on resilience (Adams et al., 2021). All researchers in this field already understand the heavy reliance of communities in many parts of the global south on the tourism industry, and the challenges they face when this key source of revenue is suddenly 'turned off' whether due to a health crisis like the pandemic, an economic crisis preventing tourists from travelling, political or terrorist events that scare tourists away, or a disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. Due to climate change we are also seeing increases in the severity and frequency of floods, cyclones and droughts as well, which often cause havoc to tourism locales. We thus need to understand more about how sustainable livelihoods can be achieved by tourism-dependent communities in the global south, including how they can be supported to achieve greater economic diversification. In this work it will be important for tourism scholars to seek deeper meanings of resilience, beyond the neoliberal notion of 'bouncing back' to business-as-usual as quickly as possible.

Climate change is often the 'elephant in the room' when it comes to tourism research. Considering the number of global south destinations that are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change—coastal locations and small islands being key drawcards tourists—we urgently need to address this oversight. Loehr and Becken (2023), focusing on possibilities for change in Vanuatu, a Pacific island state identified as one of the most disaster-prone countries globally, note that to

significantly address climate change challenges it is essential to move from adaptation (e.g. adjusting tourism activities in coastal locations) to system transformation (requiring changes to underlying paradigms, worldviews and values). For example, this could include redefining the goals of tourism to focus more on enhancing wellbeing of local people and places, and working with rather than against nature. With respect to the latter, it was noted that restoring ecosystems through a Marine Protected Area provided resilience in the face of climate change. As other researchers have observed, 'More research is needed on residents' perspectives on rejuvenated ecosystems and how they may challenge and/or reinforce their understandings of the ecological limits of tourism development' (Adams et al., 2021, p. 931). Researchers could take the paradigm shift further still, focusing on the rights of both humans and nature by adopting more-than-human approaches: for example, when considering 'should tourism expansion occur in this river valley/mountainous area/coastal location?' we might ask the river/mountain/ocean. This aligns strongly with Indigenous worldviews (Mika & Scheyvens, 2021).

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that tourism geographers who are concerned about international development have made two major contributions to the field. Some have effectively exposed the negative impacts of tourism on more marginalised people and environments, while others have sought to find ways in which tourism can be a means for enhancing wellbeing of less advantaged peoples living in the global south. I make the case here for more scholars to actively bring the critiques and the alternatives together. Some of the promising bodies of work to come out of recent scholarship are focused on principles such as equity, sufficiency, thriving communities and flourishing ecological systems.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of geographers to this field is in challenging the notion that tourism is the end game, or goal. Rather, as a body of researchers we have often asked 'can tourism contribute to international development, and if so, how?'. In a neoliberal-dominant world facing significant challenges including climate change, the growing power of corporations and associated privatisation of land and other assets, and complex conflicts, it is more important than ever that we keep this question central to our research.

Ensuring our scholarship is critical does not mean that we cannot search for hopeful approaches and examples, identifying initiatives that seem to be inspiring beneficial change and are contributing significantly to people's lives and livelihoods, and ecosystem health, in various places around the world. Essentially, it would be negligent to cynically dismiss tourism's potential: to do so would be a disservice to the millions of poorer people around the world who, in struggling to enhance their wellbeing, are looking to tourism as an area of promise. Part of our role, as researchers and scholars, can be to consider what these people seek to gain from tourism and how they might be empowered to assert more control over this global industry, as well as 'calling out' the corporates, governments and elites whose motives are power and monetary gain for themselves while exploiting people and environments in the global south.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Regina Scheyvens** is Professor of International Development at Massey University in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her research seeks to investigate ways in which tourism can enhance the well-being of people and environments in tourism destinations, especially small island states. She would like to acknowledge multiple colleagues, research collaborators and participants whose views and insights have greatly enriched her academic endeavours.

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