

# **Tourism and Responsibility**

Perspectives from Latin America and  
the Caribbean

**Martin Mowforth, Clive Charlton  
and Ian Munt**

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New forms of tourism emerging in the last thirty years initially focused on nature and ecotourism, and the word 'sustainability' signalled a shift towards acknowledgement of the social dimension of new forms of tourism. The term 'sustainable tourism' has guided the implication that sustainability can be achieved, which may have led to the unfortunate belief that sustainable tourism is impact-free. The term 'responsible tourism' is now gaining popularity in part because it implies that all tourisms have impacts. This book discusses the responsibility, or otherwise, of tourism activities in Latin America and the Caribbean. It considers issues such as the reduction of poverty through tourism and the conflict between increasing volumes of air travel spent in our continuing search for pleasure and the resulting contribution to global warming.

Two major themes run through all the chapters: power and development. The authors believe that tourism can be adequately assessed only through a consideration of how it fits into the structure of power. It is also argued that tourism cannot be analysed without a consideration of its impacts on and links with development. This relationship between tourism, responsibility, power and development is explored in chapters covering both the macro level of responsibility (international politics and tourism) and the micro level of responsibility (local politics, poverty and tourism). The issues around the environmental impacts of tourism, indigenous peoples and tourism, urban tourism and sexual exploitation through tourism are also explored in detail. The authors look at methods of practising tourism responsibly or irresponsibly at the personal, company, national and international levels. The questions and dilemmas of 'placing' responsibility in the tourism industry are examined throughout the book.

The book illustrates all these themes and issues as widely as possible with examples and case studies from throughout the subcontinent, some documented nowhere else in the literature on tourism, and, where appropriate carries the voices of the local people involved. The book will be of importance to students and academics and to the work of practitioners of development and tourism-related projects run by both governmental and non-governmental aid and development agencies.

**Martin Mowforth** is a part-time lecturer in the School of Geography at the University of Plymouth where his work focuses on issues of environment, development, sustainability, natural disasters and tourism. He has been and still is an occasional development worker in the region of Central America.

**Clive Charlton** is a principal lecturer in the School of Geography at the University of Plymouth with a long-standing teaching and research interest in Latin America (especially Mexico). His work focuses on issues of environment, transport, tourism and development.

**Ian Munt** is an independent urban development consultant and has worked on projects with UN agencies, bilateral donors and non-governmental organisations in Central America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe.



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# Foreword

*Q:* ‘What’s the difference between ecotourism and mainstream tourism?’ asked the tourist.

*A:* ‘About 20 per cent’ answered the tour operator – referring of course to his profits, but showing no recognition of the need for responsibility towards the environment, society, culture or community.

So perhaps when Norbert Suchanek suggested in the German-language *Sustainable Travel* magazine that ‘Ecotourism is dead . . .’, he captured the mood of all those 1990s ecotourism enthusiasts and promoters who came to realise that their ‘eco-’ prefix needed either to be recaptured or replaced. And so, towards the end of last century’s last decade and more recently, the new forms of the tourism industry reinvented themselves with new labels: community-based tourism, pro-poor tourism and responsible tourism being foremost among them.

For the purposes of this book, we have chosen the term ‘responsibility’ and its association with the tourism industry as a central theme owing to its generic nature and the fact that it does not restrict our coverage of the many not-so-new forms of tourism. In fact, this is an issues-based book whose underlying theme of responsibility – individual, governmental and international – lies at the heart of philosophy, as Socrates and many others have made clear. But we do not delve deeply into philosophy – we are neither qualified nor able to do so. Instead, our examination of human responsibility is made through the prism of the tourism industry, and in reality our analysis is more of a series of illustrations rather than a philosophical treatise.

We would like to have chosen many other issues associated with the tourism industry, but for a variety of reasons and restrictions our coverage has to be limited. Through the few issues that we have examined, however, it has become clear to us that the underlying theme of responsibility is reflected through all forms of the industry and in myriad ways.

As an issues-based book, it is not designed to be replete with examples of good practice of responsible tourism that either gives the impression that tourism is a wholly beneficial activity or serves as a manual of how to practise tourism ‘correctly’. Rather, it is intended as a discussion of responsibility in tourism, which of course implies that coverage has to extend to the other face of the issue, namely *ir*responsibility.

Along with the underlying theme of responsibility, two sub-themes, power and development, run through all the chapters. It is a leitmotif of the work that tourism can be properly assessed only through a consideration of how tourism activities fit into the structure of power and privilege. We also argue that tourism is a development issue which impacts on the region in very specific ways – for instance through indigenous cultures, the environment and the phenomenon of sex tourism. These specific issues, and others, are covered in this book and our treatment of the field of study is an interdisciplinary one. A clear understanding of the tourism process and its relationship to development and power can be achieved only through an interdisciplinary approach which touches on environmentalism, socio-cultural studies, human geography, economics, politics and development studies.

The scope is obviously vast, but each chapter is intended as a picture painted with broad brushstrokes rather than many facts, details and panoramic knowledge. Details of some of the case studies spring from primary research conducted by the authors, but others draw upon secondary sources for their basic material. In all cases, they are taken from actual projects within the region and as far as possible they carry the voices and perspectives of the local people involved. Having read too many reports and conclusions drawn from the perspective of First World consultants and investors which make no reference to and show no understanding of the perspectives of local people affected by the industry and its developments, we believe that all future analyses of tourism and of development must take account of the local view. By ‘taking account of’, we mean something more than simply listening to and then ignoring or forgetting – see Chapter 3 on the meaning of participation.

We began this Foreword with a question. We now end with a series of questions which refer to the notion of responsibility in the activity and industry of tourism. The questions have been adapted from a series of questions which referred to ecotourism and which we first asked in the early 1990s. They are: Does the notion of responsibility in tourism offer the industry an environmentally and economically sustainable future? Or is it likely that, like ecotourism, it will turn out to be a morally and economically corrupt ideal? Will it, like ecotourism, become another vehicle for ecological colonialism fired by the environmental and moral frenzy of Western urban dwellers?

We believe the answers have become clear in a way that explains the devaluation of the term ‘ecotourism’ in the last fifteen years. To the modified questions relating to responsibility that we have posed here, we do not offer any answers. We simply believe that it is significant that these questions are now being asked. And we hope that all our readers will continually ask themselves these questions as they make their analyses of events, projects, activities and developments in the field of tourism studies.

Martin Mowforth  
Clive Charlton  
Ian Munt  
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