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Conclusions and the Future

In this book, I have attempted to cover a very broad subject, namely the impact of tourism on the marine environment. The text and the case studies together present the reader with a picture of the situation at the time of writing, which is late 2019 and early 2020. However, the situation is changing rapidly, not least due to the pace at which global warming is affecting the oceans and the rapid growth of the tourism industry in many parts of the world. In this final chapter, I will try to bring everything together and make a number of points by way of a conclusion although I hope that for many readers this chapter will stimulate them to find out more and undertake research that takes our knowledge of this fascinating subject further. Given how important the oceans are to the tourism industry and tourists it is highly surprising, and perhaps almost shocking, how little of the tourism literature focuses on the relationship between tourism and the marine environment.

Before we look specifically at this relationship, though, I believe that it is important to start by setting the scene by looking at the 'big picture' that provides the context for the relationship between tourism and the marine environment.

The 'big picture'

This book has been written at a time when the news media is full of stories about global warming and, for the first time, it appears that these stories are increasingly focused on the impact of climate change on the oceans rather than on land. This increased prominence in the media makes sense because the warming of the oceans is a major factor in the growth of extreme weather events that have been experienced on land in recent years, particularly in coastal communities. Furthermore, the melting of glaciers and polar ice caps as a result of global warming is leading to rising sea levels, which means the threat of more frequent and severe flooding in coastal communities and eventually the destruction of low-lying coastal settlements altogether. Rises in water temperatures and sea levels pose a major threat to both the marine environment across the world and the lives of people in low-lying coastal communities.

These issues also pose a particular threat to the tourism industry, given the important role which coastal destinations play in the vacation experiences around the world. Given the dependence of much of the tourism industry on clean beaches and unpolluted seas, it is very worrying that in the past few years a number of major threats to the both have been identified from pollution of the ocean and beaches by plastic, including microplastics, as well as pollution from industrial and agricultural run-off coming from inland sources. So, the crisis facing our oceans is having an increasing impact on tourism, and this can only get worse unless global warming and plastic pollution are tackled effectively, which frankly seems unlikely, at the time of writing. Rather than being seen as a potential victim of global warming, tourism needs to be seen as a significant contributor to the problem, not least but not solely, through the effects of air travel. Leisure car use is also a significant contributor to global warming and every part of the tourism industry has a carbon footprint, no matter how small they may be; no part of tourism is currently carbon neutral!

Tourism is also responsible directly for a number of negative impacts on the marine environment and our oceans which we will now consider in terms of the cruise industry and tourism in the coastal zone.

The main impacts of the cruise industry on the marine environment

We have seen that until recently relatively little attention had been paid to the impacts of the cruise industry but that has now all changed. As the cruise market has grown and cruise ships have become larger and larger, the spotlight has begun to be focused on the sector. This has also been stimulated by media coverage of legal cases against cruise companies relating to them being accused of breaking rules which exist to limit the environmental impact of cruise ships. Photos of huge cruise ships towering over small ports of call and the impacts of thousands of cruisers being disgorged in destinations for just a few hours has started a debate over whether cruising is sustainable in the longer term. This has been reinforced by the fact that cruise ships now seem to be everywhere, even to fragile marine environments such as Antarctica. It is clear that the cruise industry contributes to global warming through its emissions and also causes pollution from fuel spills and waste disposal as well as injuring and killing marine wildlife accidentally. While cruise companies are beginning to take sustainability more seriously, not least due to the effects of the court cases referred to earlier, they still need to do more and be more ambitious in their targets. They also need to do more to make their consumers aware of the impacts cruising can have and encourage their passengers to behave more responsibly.

■ The main impacts of tourism in coastal destinations on the marine environment

In Chapters 4 to 7 we explored the impacts of tourism on the marine environment in the coastal zone, which covers coastal communities, beaches, and inshore waters – the area of sea which is close to the land. This is where most of the impacts of tourism on the marine environment are concentrated, including:

- Wildlife disturbance and harm caused by irresponsible wildlife-watching.
- Wildlife disturbance, pollution of the seas, and noise pollution from marine leisure activities including diving, boating, jet skiing, and sea angling, for example.
- The depletion of marine wildlife through over-fishing and the taking of souvenirs such as dried sea horses and pieces of coral, for instance.
- Short- and long-term harm to the marine environment caused by coastal infrastructure projects including the construction of artificial islands, beach nourishment and desalination.
- Plastic pollution of the marine environment from coastal destinations and potential marine pollution from inadequately treated sewage.

These impacts tended to be highly concentrated in small geographical areas around destinations although their effects will be felt further afield given that the ocean is an open system. We did see evidence that some voluntary initiatives by groups of activists, enlightened entrepreneurs and representative bodies of some marine leisure activities are beginning to make a difference, albeit a modest one.

■ The ocean bites back!

The ocean can 'bite back', particularly when Man mistreats the planet and the marine environment specifically. Most extreme weather events have their origins in and above the oceans, but their destructive power is largely felt when they make landfall and often for hundreds of kilometres inland. The frequency and severity of such events appears to be increasing due to the effects of global warming.

There seem to be a growing number of shark attacks on humans, despite the fact that shark populations are under pressure, some of which is being blamed on the warming of the sea and the fact that more sharks are coming close to shore, sometimes because marine protected areas are creating rich concentrations of prey fish. At the same time the global spread of tourism and growth in various water-sports is bringing sharks into contact with more and more people. Over-fishing may be making it harder for sharks to find food in their traditional hunting grounds forcing them to come closer to shore, while some suggest that urbanisation and runoff into inshore waters is creating silty conditions that sharks favour for hunting.