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Crises and Disasters

Introduction

As indicated at the beginning of this section, some factors are likely to contribute to the continued growth of tourism, whilst others will potentially lead to a halt in growth, or even a downturn in tourism numbers. Crises and disasters are very likely to have an immediate effect on tourist numbers, will almost certainly lead to a change in image of a tourism destination and may even significantly affect tourism, in the longer term, leading to major changes in specific locations, wider regions or even at the global level.

Key perspectives

In addition to the effects of global warming discussed in Chapter 11, there are other events, and factors that can cause serious impacts on tourism. These can be classified as crises or disasters. Some of these are natural, whilst others involve some form of human agent that contributes to the issue. Some happen very quickly whilst others are more gradual. The effects of some are localized, whilst others can have global impacts. It may be possible for areas affected to recover quickly from these events, or it may take much longer depending on the cause of the crisis or disaster.

Despite the fact that the type of events referred to above can have every serious impacts on tourism, they have until relatively recently been little researched. Faulkner (2001), in attempting to create an agenda for this type of research, tried to distinguish between disasters and crises. He indicated that it is generally accepted that crises tend to be associated with ongoing change that an organisation has failed to respond to and therefore not adapted, while a disaster is the result of a sudden event (or events) that an organisation has failed to respond to at all.

There is still a lack of agreement on the meanings of crisis and disaster, but as Evans and Elphick (2005) suggested, perhaps the most useful typology of such events focuses on their gestation period. They draw on the work of Seymour and Moore (2000) who distinguish between 'cobra' events (sudden and unexpected) and 'python' events (where the build-up is slower, but the grip gets worse over time). Booth (1993) uses a similar analysis, but produced three types: gradual threat, periodic threat and sudden threat.

Of particular importance in relation to crises and disasters in tourism and the effects they may have, is the very nature of tourism itself and in particular, what motivates tourists to be involved in certain types of activity. As we saw in Chapter 2, there are a range of motivations for tourism which can be summarised under the headings 'push' and 'pull' (see Iso-Aloha, 1980; Ryan, 1991). Other than certain types of high risk adventure tourism (e.g. white water rafting, kite surfing and bungee jumping), the great majority of tourists are motivated by a desire for enjoyment, but in a safe environment. The safety, security and well-being of tourists is therefore of paramount importance to the tourism industry and providers of tourism experiences (Page and O'Connell, 2009; Seakhoa-King, Augustyn and Mason, 2021).

On an individual level, if a holiday 'goes wrong', then the industry may face some form of legal action and be required to compensate the customer. The individual concerned may also use word-of-mouth communication to dissuade potential tourists from using the specific industry provider. This can become very serious for the industry if a large number of individuals have been affected by a major issue. Media interest in a 'tourism problem' can also affect the image of the industry. Subsequently, the industry may need to change its behaviour in relation to the events that led to the crisis or disaster and embark on new marketing. At the destination level, there can be a significant issue for the image of the location and consequently tourist numbers may decline, requiring some form of response from tourism planners and managers in the destination, as well as the likelihood of a revised marketing strategy. A decline in tourist numbers may well result in the loss of jobs and livelihoods for local residents in tourist areas, which will also need to be addressed by politicians, planners and managers in affected destinations.

Natural events, crises and disasters

There are a number and variety of natural events that can greatly influence tourism. For example, the eruption of a dormant volcano on the Caribbean island of Montserrat in 1997 severely disrupted the tourism economy, not only because of the perception created that the island was a dangerous place to visit, but because the eruption covered some of the island's tourism resources in lava and ash, preventing the use of these for tourism activity (Mason, 2016).

Storms, floods and tsunamis are other natural events that can cause major disruptions to tourism activities. Although it is generally known, with some degree of accuracy, when such events might occur and even where, the specifics of the force of individual events, precisely when and exactly where they will occur is still not possible to accurately predict. So, in the example of the major tsunami that hit Southeast Asia and particularly Indonesia, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka on Boxing Day 2004, this was not predicted and its impact was far more significant than any other such event in the recent history of tourism (Holden, 2016). The tsunami resulted from a major undersea earthquake along the coast of Indonesia.