

7

Environmental Impacts of Tourism

Introduction

The environment is made up of both natural and human features. Human settlements set in the countryside may contain a large number of attractions for tourists. Often the natural environment is referred to as the physical environment. The natural or physical environment includes the landscape, particular features such as rivers, rock outcrops, beaches and also plants and animals (or flora and fauna), many of which are tourist attractions and have been discussed in Chapter 3. This chapter is concerned with the impact of tourism on the environment.

Key perspectives

The environment is being increasingly recognized as the major resource for tourism. It has been noted that tourism depends ultimately upon the environment, as it is a major tourism attraction itself, or is the context in which tourism activity takes place (Holden, 2008). However, tourism–environment relationships are complex. There is a mutual dependence between the two, which has been described as symbiotic. Williams (1998) explains this relationship as one in which tourism benefits from being in a good quality environment and this same environment should benefit from measures aimed at protecting and maintaining its value as a tourist resource. Whether or not the relationship is beneficial, what is clear is that the environment is affected by tourism and the environment also has effects on tourism.

As we have seen earlier in this book, Hall and Page (2014) refer to the limitations of the use of the term tourism impact, when it is considered as just a one-way process. Hence, it is the existence of a two-way process between tourism and the environment that makes the relationship so important in any discussion of the geography of tourism and the case study at the end of this chapter, focusing on the Norfolk Broads, provides more details on the complexity of this relationship.

In the post Second World War period and especially since the beginning of mass tourism in the 1960s, it has become clear that the relationship between tour-

ism and the environment has become unbalanced, meaning that in the past 50 or so years, tourism has become a major cause of environmental damage to the environment, rather than a force for enhancement and protection.

Despite a general awareness of the impacts of tourism on the environment, there is very limited in-depth knowledge and long-term understanding of these impacts due to a number of factors:

- Research into the environmental consequences of tourism tends to be reactive (in other words after a problem has occurred), so there is a lack of baseline information to compare with and then monitor any changes.
- It is often not easy to separate the environmental impacts that are attributed to tourism from other commercial/industrial activity and even non-human induced natural environmental changes.
- It can be difficult to separate changes made by tourists from those made by locals.
- The impacts of tourism may occur over a long period and can be cumulative and incremental rather than being evident through a sudden change.
- Spatial displacement of impacts is relatively common in tourism; for example, aircraft emissions contribute to climate change, but the effects are felt in locations distant from the place of emissions.

(after Holden, 2016).

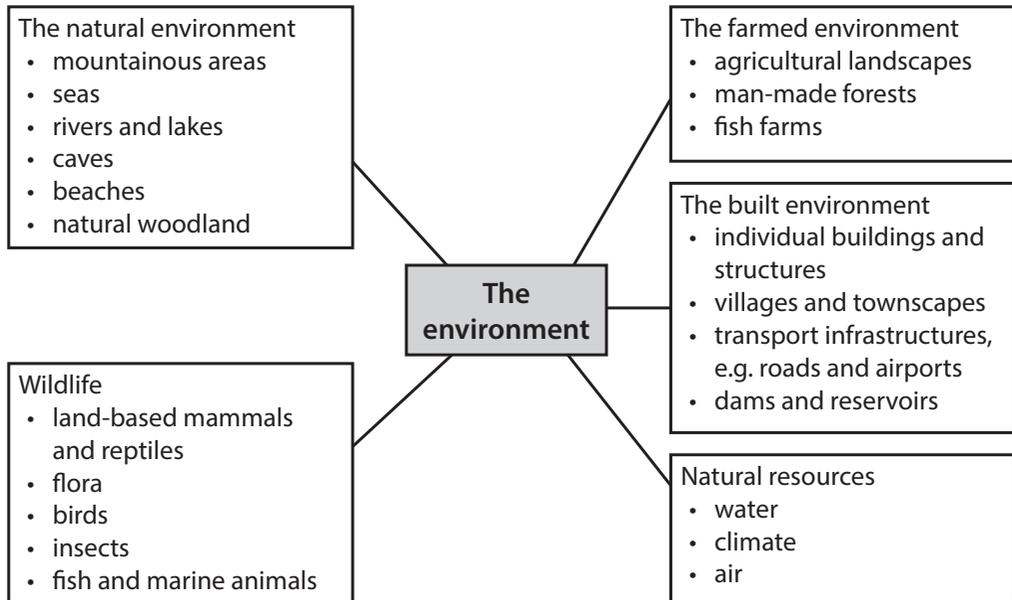


Figure 7.1: The scope of the environment (source: Swarbrooke, 1999)

The term *environment* is often assumed to mean no more than the physical or natural features of a landscape. However, as Figure 7.1 shows, according to Swarbrooke (1999), there are five aspects of the environment. These are: the

natural environment, wildlife, the farmed environment, the built environment and natural resources. Figure 7.1 indicates the components of each of these five. It should also be remembered that these five aspects are not separate entities, but linked. For example, a fox (wildlife), may live in a woodland (the natural environment), will certainly consume water – a natural resource, is likely to visit farmland in search of live prey, and increasingly will go to a town (the built environment) in search of food, some of which may have been thrown away by humans.

Factors affecting impact

Chapter 6 indicated the main factors influencing tourism impacts and it is advisable to reconsider these again. However, in relation to environmental impacts the following are particularly significant:

- The 'where' factor: some environments are more susceptible to tourism impacts than others.
- The type of tourism activity will affect the nature of impacts.
- The nature of any tourist infrastructure will also be important.
- When the activity occurs is important, particularly any seasonal variation.

In relation to the 'where' factor, a rural environment is likely to be affected differently, in comparison with an urban environment. A rural environment may be more fragile than an urban one, because it comprises a natural or semi-natural landscape, which could have rare plants and/or animal species. Even a farmed, rural landscape may be susceptible to damage by tourists because it is not designed to cope with significant numbers of visitors.

However, an urban environment, being a largely built one, can usually sustain far higher levels of visiting than most rural environments. This is not just because a city has, for example, roads and paths, which minimize the direct impacts of tourists' movements, but it is also the result of the nature of the organisational structure such as the planning process in urban areas (Williams, 1998). However, tourists are also particularly attracted to sites that are coincidentally fragile, such as cliff-tops, coasts and mountains (Ryan, 1991; Williams, 1998).

The nature of the activities tourists are engaged in will greatly influence the impacts they have. Some activities lead to minimal impact on the environment and are not resource consumptive, whilst others can be very resource consumptive and damaging to the environment. The scale of activity and numbers involved in tourism can be very important in terms of effects. However it is not always the case that the more visitors there are, the greater the impacts will be. For example, 50 sight-seeing tourists on a bus are likely to have relatively little effect on the actual environment travelled through (although the bus may contribute to pollution and traffic congestion). However, five visitors in an off-road vehicles in a mountain or dune environment may well have far more direct impact.