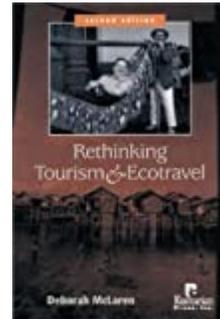




Deborah McLaren. *Rethinking Tourism and Ecotourism*. CT: Kumarian Press, 2003. xvi + 221 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56549-169-4.



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How to Become a Responsible Traveler

Mass mobility of the second half of the twentieth century has roots in the natural human desire to see new places, in the earlier high-society traveling, and in the modern pursuit for leisure. Moreover, “travel and tourism can be thought of as a search for difference.”[1] The problem is that now something really different, and it has been like this for some time, can be experienced only by visiting distant places and cultures. Visitors have means to travel, and the visited have to deal with the (sometimes unwanted) interest in them, their culture and/or the territory they inhabit. Following the old colonial path, the visitors usually try to organize the place they visit to match their standards, and since they mostly come from the economically wealthier parts of the planet, they cannot escape “the old arrogant Western Ego that wants to see it all, know it all, and take it all, an Ego that is isolated by its belief in its own superiority.”[2] In other words: “Must the tourist always be an imperialist and an exploiter?”[3] The consequences of the meeting of that ego and the distant places exposed to it are the subject of the revised edition of Deborah McLaren’s book, first published in 1998 with the title *Rethinking Traveling and Ecotourism: the Paving of Paradise and What You can do*

to Stop It.

In the prologue, the author explains why she wrote the book on the global tourism industry and the boom in ecotourism. When she visited Jamaica, looking for the idealistic picture she expected to find, she was disappointed: “What I found was very different from what I had imagined” (p. ix). The country was controlled by the tourism industry, whose growth proved to be destructive for ecology and people, and caused serious social discrepancies. The noted problems are elaborated later in the book, the core of which is divided into seven chapters. The chapters also include short contributions written by scholars and other professionals involved in tourism: David Barkin, Chris Beck, Charles R. de Burlo, Cynthia Harrison, Norbert Hohl, Martha Honey, Ron Mader, Kaleo Patterson, Anita Pleumarom, Crescencio Resendiz-Hernandez, and Luis A. Vivanco. Their views are valuable and give additional touches of reality and interpretation to the book.

Chapter 1 (“An Overview of Tourism”) is not just an overview of tourism, but also an outline of the entire book because it introduces all of the author’s important issues of concern, some maybe too soon. McLaren first

gives a very short historical overview of the development of tourism, from pilgrimages and the Grand Tour to the modern tourist industry. The emergence of the industry caused deep social changes in the less developed areas. It promised jobs, economic growth and infrastructure development, but also put the local residents into fights for land and water rights. Tourism thus created enclaves of western society in remote countries, and proved to be a vehicle for globalization and interference of international corporations. A possible compromise suggested here is the development of sustainable tourism.

The tackling of sustainability and change problems—structured around the divide between the wealthy north and the poor south of the planet—continues in chapter 2 (“The Promises of Tourism”). It can be summarized in a single sentence: “Welcome to paradise—while it lasts” (p. 21). Marketing and advertising create the picture of paradise, with ideal scenery and atmosphere attractive to tourists. What happens back stage is usually very different: “The tourism industry follows a well-trudged corporate path that exploits people and resources around the world in the name of economic growth” (p. 27). The locals become service employees instead of business owners. McLaren suggests that much of the problem could be solved if the resorts were domestically owned, putting native futures back under their own control.

The guest-host relationship is in the center of chapter 3 (“Guests and Hosts: Disillusioned with Paradise”) and may be the most interesting part of the book. Even if at first they are not aware of the events behind the scenes, the guests soon realize how limited their paradise is and often become prisoners of their hotel. However, the disillusion seems to be mutual. The locals sometimes seem to embrace the changes brought by the industry and the tourists, because the more well-to-do guests help perpetuate the false image of paradise. In a specific example, the idealized western consumer culture often appeals strongly to the younger local population. In the hosts’ imagination, the tourists are not workers, but only care-free vacationers. Local perceptions of tourists’ everyday lives are skewed by their limited exposure, making them want to be more like the tourists. The problem is that the tourists, in their everyday lives, are not the carefree and concern-free personalities they seem to be when on vacation. “The consumer culture that tourism brings with it often promotes ... the ‘psychological pressure to modernize,’ as locals begin to feel inadequate compared to the tourist consumer culture and psychologically compelled to reject what they see as their own poor culture” (p. 40). And there is the real contradiction, because in

many ways, the tourists want the hosts to be locked in the past and show the authenticity that would suit their preconceived ideas and idealizations of the local lifestyle.

Chapter 4 (“Tourism Development in the Local Community”) further follows the issues that emerged in the previous chapter. Since the global North (as the author calls it) pushes the global South into fast development, but also wants it to be locked in the past, culture clash is inevitable. The locals are displaced because of the construction of resorts and golf courses, real estate prices escalate and are affordable only to transnational corporations which then influence the land planning and layout design. The hosts go through three stages of tourist development—euphoria, apathy, and antagonism—and often end up as low-skill employees or worse, beggars, criminals, or prostitutes. While they have to deal with serious social, health and ecological issues, the tourists often have no sense of obligation to the local community, a lack that creates a growing host-guest disparity.

After presenting the problems in the first half of the book, in the last three chapters McLaren shows what the possible solutions could be. Chapter 5 (“Rethinking Ecotourism”) presents ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people” (p. 91). However, this kind of tourism is not faultless either. It needs detailed planning in order to minimize the jet travel impact on the climate and potential destruction of the wilderness. Furthermore, it is not sustainable and it offers no significant benefit for the locals unless they participate in it and run their own businesses. Ecotourism must be connected to other fields and integrated into the local economy. A solution could be found in the projects that promote integrated sustainable development (e.g. agrotourism network created by the European Center for Eco-Agro Tourism, or COOPRENA in Costa Rica).

Chapter 6 (“Ecotravel Issues for a New Century”) focuses on ecotourism certification, which often lacks standards and criteria due to inappropriate and inadequate legislation. The Blue Flag in Europe and South Africa, Certification for Sustainable Tourism in Costa Rica, and National Ecotourism Accreditation Program in Australia are pointed out as programs that award achievement, not intent. The U.N. proclaimed the year 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, and several international organizations (UNESCO, UNEP, WTO/OMT, World Bank) are trying to be active in the reevaluation of the tourism market.

In a manner similar to chapter 2, chapter 7 (“Rethink-

ing Tourism”) begins with the sentence: “Welcome to Paradise ... before it’s gone” (p. 137). In line with the responsible tourism movement that began to emerge in the 1970s, tourists are advised to question the nature of their tourism experiences, understand traveling as learning by living, use indigenous brochures and services, contribute constructively to the community, and develop relationships and communication with the local population. Educated, responsible tourists can leave less of an impact and sometime help the areas they choose to visit, if they prepare themselves well for the experience.

At the end there is a large list of various resources (pp. 165-206), extremely useful for further reading and research. It includes responsible tourism organizations; ecotourism organizations; general environmental, development and indigenous resources; responsible tour operators and programs; social and environmental justice programs; human rights and social justice organizations; short-term travel study programs; tourism-specific college and university programs; U. S. Government contacts; international organizations contacts; magazines, newsletters, journals, surveys and travel guides; audiovisuals; books; guides for students; and websites.

Deborah McLaren’s book will be found interesting by anthropologists, sociologists, economists, historians, environmentalists, as well as anti-globalists. Everybody with an interest in tourism, modernization, westernization, commercialization, social change, and environment will find something of benefit in this work. However, it seems that this book is primarily meant for the general public, an average tourist without previous knowledge of tourism and travel history or theory, as these

details are less evident. When it comes to the global South, the book, though focused mainly on the negative side of tourism development, leaves the hope that communication between tourist enclaves and the indigenous population can improve. One potential benefit, “the ultimate integration of tourism into the local community occurs when the local people discover the convenience and desirability of using facilities designed originally for tourists.”[4] McLaren strongly believes that the decision for such integration should be made by the locals. In the mean time, this work can be a handbook on how to become a responsible tourist. Tourists coming out of, for example, Europe’s Mediterranean and Atlantic vacation centers, which a century ago were no more than anonymous fishing villages, have had the experience of being both a destination population and travelers. They will certainly find this book useful when they leave their home by the sea and go to faraway destinations, on a search for a new “undiscovered” beach, yet another “real” paradise on earth.

Notes

[1]. Chris Rojek, John Urry, “Transformations of Travel and Theory,” in *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*, eds. Chris Rojek, John Urry (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 17.

[2]. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999), p. xxi.

[3]. Fred Inglis, *The Delicious History of the Holiday* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 144.

[4]. MacCannell, p. 169.

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