

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN JAMAICA

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Introduction

The Jamaican tourist industry has witnessed explosive growth since the early 1970s. The growth in tourist arrivals was especially dramatic during the 1980s. At present tourism is the single largest source of foreign exchange earnings in Jamaica. The need for foreign exchange to service debts to multilateral agencies and to pay for imports has led to a situation in which tourism has assumed a central role in the economy. The tourism industry provides a quick and relatively efficient way of earning foreign exchange. To this end, the government has invested heavily in the tourism sector. For instance, between fiscal years 1979/80 and 1992/93, the Tourist Board budget increased by more than 300 per cent. Today, only the Bahamas attracts more visitors to its shores than Jamaica in the English speaking Caribbean region. Tourism has also become one of the main sources of employment for the country. In 1986, stop-over visitor expenditure in the island supported over 250,000 full-time jobs, and every 2.34 stopover visitors supported one job opportunity (*The Contribution of Tourism* 1986, 32). In 1992, jobs in the accommodation sector were distributed mainly between the major tourist areas of Montego Bay (32.0 per cent), Ocho Rios (34.2 per cent) and Negril (23.1 per cent).

The relative success of the tourism sector is not only reflected in the number of visitor arrivals, but also in the increased growth of visitor accommodation. For example, in 1986, there were 1,560 hotels but by 1992 this had increased to 1,758. In addition, during this period the number of apartments and guest houses increased by more than

400 per cent; and resort cottages by more than 50 per cent. The expansion in the sector led to a situation where many hotels were and are being constructed on coastal areas. The concentration of the tourist industry on sea oriented activity has resulted in the mushrooming of hotels and other forms of visitor accommodation along the north coast of the country. Unfortunately, this explosion in the tourism sector has not been accompanied by a careful assessment of its socio-economic or ecological impacts.

Socio-economic Impacts

Although Jamaica has witnessed a tremendous inflow of revenue from tourism, not enough of this revenue has been invested in the communities within the main tourist areas. This situation has basically created tourist enclaves, the sustainability of which are seriously in doubt. The conflict between growth of the tourist industry and the communities has resulted in a situation where hotels provided top quality accommodation for visitors but just outside these accommodations people live in abject poverty. Many of those who live in poverty migrated to tourist areas because of perceived employment opportunities in the tourism sector.

However, this migration was not accompanied by the provision of appropriate housing and other forms of public infrastructure for residents. The result has been the growth of squatter communities which have contributed to unsanitary conditions in many communities. Within these areas there is a large number of unemployed youth who seek to make a living either through the selling of services (ranging from the legitimate, to the illegal such as sex and drugs). The scramble to make a

living is so serious that visitors frequently complain of harassment from locals seeking to sell their wares. In a survey conducted by the Jamaica Tourist Board in 1992, it was found that almost two out of every three tourists interviewed complained of being harassed by locals. In addition, the majority of those surveyed identified harassment as the biggest problem they faced while staying in the country. Most of this harassment was in the form of people aggressively trying to sell their goods to visitors in order to secure an income.

Perhaps the most visible manifestation of enclave type tourism and the consequent neglect of communities is the sustained deterioration in the physical infrastructure of popular tourist areas such as Ocho Rios, Montego Bay and Port Antonio. Residents in Port Antonio consistently complain about poor roads and utilities in their communities. In fact, so serious is the problem that in surveys conducted by the Board of Tourism in 1992 and one by myself in 1994, a significant proportion of visitors interviewed complained that one of the negative features of the tourism sector in Jamaica was the deterioration of the country's infrastructure. In July 1994, a group of travel agents visiting the country stated that the level of poverty which tourists see on their way from the airport to their hotels could have a damaging effect on their psyches, because it could create feelings of guilt which could prevent them from returning to the country (*Financial Gleaner*, 29 July 1994). Studies also point to the need to improve the infrastructure in tourist areas (see, for example, Kauls 1986). If only for this reason, there are serious questions about the sustainability of the Jamaican tourism sector unless major changes are made.

During the 1980s the country witnessed a sustained growth in all inclusive accommodations for tourists. This type of accommodation ensures that the tourists are provided with a variety of services without necessarily interacting with the community. In my survey of 1994, it was found that a number of shop and taxi owners complained that these types of accommodations denied them and the community of business.¹

There is also tension among residents in tourist areas regarding the use of beaches on which hotels are closely located. In many instances ho-

tels supply staff to maintain beaches and charge a fee for public use, presumably to defray the cost of maintaining the beach. However, many residents feel that this fee is one way in which the hotels deny them access to the beaches.

Environmental Impacts

There are numerous environmental problems associated with the expansion of tourism in Jamaica. Some of these problems have been documented in the UNEP study entitled *Regional Overview of Environmental Problem and Priorities* (1989). According to this study there is the blasting of coral reefs to provide channels for the passage of small crafts into marinas and boating basins. Canals are also cut into residential subdivisions and poorly designed marinas become septic sinks because of poor water circulation, often induced by shoaling which prevents tidal flush. In addition, many hotels are without proper sewage treatment facilities. As a result, the raw sewage from the hotels is routinely dumped in ocean waters near to beaches used by tourists and locals for recreational purposes. In some cases, the waters become polluted with faecal coliform and other pathogenic bacteria. A second problem identified by the study is the frequent use of beach and road vehicles by guest and locals which destroys dunes and dune vegetation, thus contributing to beach erosion. Finally, the study refers to the frequency of large recreational outings by tourists, often to offshore islands, and caves which disturb the wildlife, and can destroy the fragile habitat of aquatic life.

In general, the environmental problems associated with the growth of tourism in Jamaica can be divided into the following:

- a. destruction of reefs
- b. water pollution
- c. sand erosion and
- c. poor sewage disposal.

These problems are vividly documented in a study by Kauls (1986) in which he conducted a case study of Negril. The study indicates what can happen in situations where there is rapid unplanned growth in the tourism industry. According to Kauls, up until 1960 Negril was considered one of the most inaccessible areas of Jamaica. The few tourists

that came, mainly those preferring a simple rural setting, stayed at the homes of the people living in the area. In the first half of the 1960s a tourist cottage and hotel were opened in the area. By the end of the 1960s the number of hotels and cottages had increased to nine; and the small population had grown to 1,166. Tourism replaced fishing as the chief source of income for residents of the area. By 1975 Negril was recognized as a tourist destination and there was a rapid growth in tourist accommodation and the construction of an airstrip linking the town to other major towns in the country. The emphasis placed on tourism during the 1980s resulted in further development of the area. Negril is now one of the fastest growing tourist areas in the country with the highest visitor to population ratio.

The expansion in the industry was not without its problems. Most of the establishments in Negril are located along its two coastal roads. According to Kauls:

It took 25 years to nearly exclude public access on the by now 7 miles of almost continuously human altered cliff shore and to reduce the stretch of beach free of construction to less than 20% of the 4.5 mile log Bay. (Kauls 1986,58)

Between 1965 and 1982 the population in Negril increased from 500 to 2,440. Some of the problems created by tourism in Negril as well as other tourist areas in Jamaica are listed below:

1. The decline in the natural productivity of reefs by about 75%. This is due to the destruction of a unique eco-system, a spawning ground for several species. The result is accelerated erosion of the beach.
2. Reef degradation due to water pollution, breakage of coral, snorkeling boats which anchor directly on the reef, boat traffick which break and pollute the reef, and the growth of various forms of algae on the reef due to over-fishing.
3. Denudation of vegetation for construction purposes especially on cliffs. This construction has also damaged the cliffs as well as the underlying caves. The destruction of cliffs, caves and vegetation has resulted in reduced storm protection for the island.
4. Erosion of sand in shallow lagoonal waters due to the decimation of algae and sea grass reduces the attractiveness of the feeding ground for many types of fish, often harvested by locals.

These are only some of the environmental problems created by the expansion of tourism in Negril and other places such as Montego Bay and Ocho Rios.

Suggestions for Sustainable Tourism

It is clear from the foregoing that fundamental changes have to be made if tourism is to become sustainable in Jamaica. As the evidence indicates there is a question as to how long benefits from the industry can continue given the level of harassment, deteriorating infrastructure and environmental degradation.

To deal with the social problems, there is a clear need for investors in the tourism industry, along with government, to invest in the provision of proper infrastructure (such as roads, utilities and public parks) in tourist areas. It is also in the interest of everyone for investors and governments to provide affordable housing for the ever increasing populations in those areas.

To protect workers and organize the activities of the informal economy, while at the same time controlling harassment of tourists, there is need for effective regulation of the plethora of small vendors along tourist areas, perhaps through a licensing process. However, for this to work, vendors should be able to advertise their goods and services through or with the assistance of hotels and the Tourist Board to tourists. Anything less than this will not succeed, given the fiercely competitive environment in which large numbers of vendors sell similar items, occasionally to the chagrin of the hotel owners and tourism officials.

Increasingly, newly established companies are required to conduct Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) before they begin operation in Jamaica. To be sure, many hotels in tourist areas are now required to do this. However, with the possible exception of Negril, there appears to be very little community involvement in this process. Since the construction of hotels will have an impact on the environment and the people in it, it is important that the public gets more involved in the development of tourist areas. The establishment of hotels along coastal areas, especially in parishes such as Portland and West-Moreland tend to affect people's livelihood through the reduction of fishing and other agricultural areas. The discharge of effluent in the sea and the blocking of coastal areas once accessible to locals can lead to reduced employment op-

portunities for those in traditional occupations, such as fishing or farming. Of course the hotels also bring with them prospects of new jobs and ultimately a larger population in the area. All of these changes bring with them potentially serious problems which should be addressed before the hotels begin to operate. There is a need for citizens to engage in debating the merits and demerits of different kinds of tourism in their area, so that they can more readily cope with changes which will ultimately occur when hotels are opened. Such involvement can result in more preventative action by the citizens and hence the long run stability of the community. The alternative can be abrupt changes and alienation of citizens, thereby reducing the possibility of concerted community action when serious problems arise.

End Note

¹These findings were reported in the form of notes by interviewers in the field who were conducting a survey on the attitudes of tourists to Jamaica as a destination.

References

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