

Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

Discussion Paper Series

Lost in the Travel Pages: The Global Industry Hiding Inside the Sunday Newspaper

By Elizabeth Becker
Edelman Family Fellow, Shorenstein Center, Spring 2008

#D-45

Joan Shorenstein Center
PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government

Introduction

To most Americans travel means a journey of discovery, a well-deserved family vacation, an escape from the daily dullness of life, an outdoor adventure, or a plan for retirement. In other words, travel is an innocent or worthy indulgence.

Few imagine that travel is a \$7 trillion international industry.¹

Tourism rivals the oil industry as one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries. Globalization has helped, opening up borders long closed during the Cold War. So has the internet which has brought travel information and airplane tickets to every computer. The growth has been so stunning that many poor countries are climbing out of poverty largely on the money they've earned from plane-loads of foreign tourists.

There is a downside, a big one. Inexpensive travel has brought mass tourism to every sleepy corner of the world. Some 898 million international tourists are invading beaches, historic monuments, great cities and even greater wilderness areas, doing irreversible damage. Tourists have spoiled many of these places with their pollution, waste and thoughtless consumption of precious resources like water and electricity. Local cultures and local economies are reeling from the onslaughts. European countries worry they are losing their identities as tourists turn them into real-life Disney Lands; poor countries fear that tourists are destroying their natural resources as well as their souls. All of these countries fear being loved to death.

The Galapagos Islands are on the threatened list of world heritage sites. The temples at Angkor Wat, Cambodia, are sinking as the surrounding water table is drained by a forest of new tourist hotels; citizens of Venice are fighting to protect their own existence in a city

that has become occupied territory for tourists. Florida's Everglades National park is ranked as "a paradise in jeopardy."¹

But you'll read almost nothing about the juggernaut that is mass tourism today—not the good or the bad—in American newspapers. Tourism is that rare global industry that gets a pass from the media. It is largely ignored by news reporters even though tourism ranks at the very top of global industry and provides one out of every twelve jobs in the world, more than any other single industry.

Instead, you'll find tourism cosseted in the separate Sunday Section marked "Travel," a section devoted to articles about dream-like experiences in foreign countries, rare adventures on a mountain top or sybaritic days in the sun. Even the word "tourism" is shunned: it smacks of commerce, of sweaty crowds piling onto buses, monotone hotels, and condos littering the landscape. Some travel pages are indistinguishable from travel brochures.

If reporters covered the oil industry in the same fashion, an "Energy Section" would feature articles about the adventure of drilling for oil, features about oil discoveries in Canada, environmental efforts of the big oil companies and consumer tips on how to find the best gasoline stations in your neighborhood. There would be no examination of government subsidies to oil companies, their true effect on the economy and environment or their record profits.

There are several reasons for this journalistic anomaly. The original travel sections were a cross between the literary genre of travel writing and public relations firms promoting tourism. The sections were propelled by large amounts of advertising from the tourist industry, advertisements that quickly became a cash cow for many newspapers.

¹ *National Geographic Traveler*, November/December 2006; *Daily Telegraph*, April 11, 2008; *National Geographic Traveler*, Special Report, "Destination Scorecard", April 2008

Travel writing became part of the “lifestyle” genre with few clear reporting standards. The writers’ mission was to produce stories describing the experience of traveling to a certain destination and consumer stories to help tourists make the most of those trips. But unlike other lifestyle sections that critique music, movies, and restaurants, travel is a “good news only” section. As Nancy Newhouse, the *New York Times* travel editor from 1989–2004, said: “We never did the ten worst, only the ten best.”

Coverage of the tourism industry, according to more than one dozen travel editors interviewed for this paper, belonged in the business section of the newspapers, not theirs. But the business editors rarely cover tourism as a global industry.

There are other journalistic anachronisms to travel writing. The strong tie between the tourism industry and travel writers is the source of one of the oldest ethical issues in journalism: the willingness of many freelance travel writers to accept free airline tickets, hotels and meals. Newspapers forbid all their reporters, including those covering travel, from accepting gifts from the people, organizations, or businesses they are covering. But freelance travel writers routinely accept free trips and then write or broadcast stories without acknowledging that every meal, hotel room and airline ticket was paid for by the industry itself.

Journalists are not entirely to blame for missing the story of the tourism industry. Trivializing tourism is a national attitude. Americans and the American government have dismissed tourism as a hobby for decades. Until a few years ago, there was not even a way to figure out how much money was made from tourism. Now there is an international standard and the sums earned by tourism are astonishing. To get a handle on this industry, most countries have a tourism minister or a powerful tourism board charged with promoting and

regulating tourism and, increasingly, to make sure the tourists don't destroy the countries they visit.

Not in the United States. Historically, the American government has considered tourism an issue for the private sector. Promotion is done by the states. Federal stewardship and regulation is out the question.

This attitude was compounded by the attacks on September 11, 2001. American attitudes towards all travel changed profoundly. The Bush Administration instituted all-encompassing border security measures that became permanent and discouraged foreign visitors. To the chagrin of the American tourism industry, European newspapers in 2008 were reporting on tourists' disdain for their treatment at the hands of border "screeners" in articles with headlines like, "Travel to America? No Thanks," and "America: More Hassle than it's Worth?"

This study will examine how journalists cover tourism today and how reporters have missed the story of one of the most dynamic and influential global industries of our time.

Part One: The Travel Section

“What I discovered in our crossing and exploration of the Galapagos is hard to pinpoint: as with any such travels the epiphanies come later.”

—“Sailing toward Paradise” by Mathew Power in the *New York Times*²

“On those rare occasions when travel writers are allowed to express an actual opinion, it must be a completely harmless one that’s shared by the travel industry...”

—*Smile When You’re Lying: Confessions of a Rogue Travel Writer*³
By Chuck Thompson

Look at the Sunday travel section. Gorgeous photographs draw you to first-person accounts of exotic journeys through old Iran, sailing trips in the Caribbean or sexy nights dancing the tango in Buenos Aires.

The stories celebrate travel. The term of art is “destination pieces.” In routinely first-person articles, journalists describe the locale; give advice on the best cafes and restaurants, the must-see museums or jazz clubs, the ambience, and just enough local history and culture to distinguish one great experience from another. At their best, these articles are well-written high-end crib sheets for making your next trip enjoyable. Sometimes there are hints of the darker side of travel—the need to visit a country before tourists destroy its authenticity or before global warming melts glaciers on a mountain top.

But many are excessive. When travel writers see a stunning vista or have a chance encounter that leads to ruminations about a deeper understanding of life, the revelations mix uneasily with observations about 500-count Egyptian cotton bed sheets or the list of fine California wines on a Midwestern menu. The “I saw this, I ate that” school of coverage can veer too often into witty advertising copy that has lost its grounding in the venerable

² Travel, *New York Times*, December 23, 2007

³ *Smile When You’re Lying*, by Chuck Thompson, Holt Paperbacks, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2007

tradition of literary writing. Indeed, today's writers often quote the earlier masters to provide depth and a nod to the culture and history of a city or country.

And these are always *great* experiences. There is barely an acknowledgement of those surly crowds of other tourists thronging cathedrals, or the poverty outside some five-star hotels, and nothing about all those older male tourists traveling solely for the purpose of buying sex from an adolescent girls and boys.

There are wonderful exceptions. Countless articles are ripped out of travel sections every week and saved for planning a summer vacation: outdoor adventures in state and national parks, mountain climbing, surveys of country inns in California or Italy, or modern Asian cities.

But few travel pieces today match those written by master travel writers who did prodigious research and displayed their knowledge discretely, providing a real sense of place rather than the modern accent on the feelings of the journalist experiencing the destination.

Journalist Standards

As lifestyle pieces, the majority of travel stories are written outside the bounds of classic journalism. The standards of objectivity, thorough reporting, and transparent sourcing required in other sections of the newspapers are largely ignored.

But even the rules governing other lifestyle sections—where critics are required to make reasoned judgments—are absent.⁴ Travel stories do not include bad or boring experiences, lousy hotels, or the corrosive effect a string of new resorts are having on a once pristine beach and its wildlife.

⁴ Interview, Kelly McBride, Poynter Institute, March 11, 2008

The exception is the article with consumer tips. Here journalists can cast a critical eye on the accoutrements that are part of modern travel. Articles about the best luggage and traveling clothes and those with tips like “never check your luggage” are filling more and more space in the travel sections. Here journalists can compare airlines for reliability, hotels for their environment standards, and amusement parks for safety.

Catherine Hamm, the travel editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, has made news and practical consumer information her chief mission. Her staff broke the story of the passport logjam in the summer of 2007, which ran on the front page. Her section includes articles on the weakness of the dollar against the euro and the pound, how the price of gasoline has affected travel in southern California, a regular column that reviews hotels and another called “Down and Dirty” that reviews campsites.

Ms. Hamm said she emphasizes consumer reporting in the hopes of luring back the readers who fled to the internet which is chock-a-block with websites rating hotels, airlines, restaurants, and tours.

News standards do apply for the few journalists who cover tourism as an industry. California and Florida newspapers, states known for their tourist industries and Disney mass-tourism theme parks, stand out for their reporting of the tourism business. (The *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* are the only national newspapers that publish occasional articles on major aspects of the industry.)

Miami Herald reporter Douglas Hanks III covers tourism for the business section, not the travel section. The change in perspective is severe; his stories would never appear in the travel pages. Recent articles include the Florida tourism industry’s lobbying efforts to change the school year so high school students could work for the entire summer tourist

season. Another described debt-ridden Floridians taking their over-priced condominiums off the market and, instead, renting them by the week to tourists.

Mr. Hanks has also reported on the Florida tourism industry's practice of subsidizing journalists' trips to garner free publicity in news articles. In a 2006 article he interviewed British travel writers sipping free lobster bisque at an upscale South Beach restaurant on a free vacation in Florida organized by the Greater Miami tourism board and various restaurants and hotels. The publicist for the restaurant said giving travel writers free meals was the only marketing she did; the tourism board said it gives free or discounted trips to 300 travel writers a year.

The tourist industry calls these familiarization or "fam" trips and many freelance travel writers would be out of work without them. Laura Daily, a travel reporter and the 2008 president of the Society of American Travel Writers, a professional networking organization with over one thousand members, defends the free trips. As a freelance writer, she routinely accepts free trips from the destinations she covers.

"There is no way in this day and age that you can go to Antarctica and sell the story to newspapers without some sort of subsidy," she said. "If you're lucky a newspaper will pay you \$350 for a lead story."

She also said these free trips did not guarantee favorable coverage, making the point that freelancers are no different than other travel writers when they write only about the good aspects of a trip.

"No quid pro quo is allowed. That is a no-no. No coming on a media trip in exchange for a positive story," she said.

Most newspapers—including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Miami Herald*—forbid their reporters to accept any free

gifts from the tourist industry. Instead, the papers themselves pay the expenses for the reporter from their own budget. Free travel is a gift and considered a serious conflict of interest, not a neutral subsidy.

“If you take ethics seriously, the same policies that cover news gathering have to apply to travel coverage,” said Kelly McBride, an ethics specialist at the Poynter Institute. “Free travel is not acceptable.”

Jane Wooldridge, the travel editor of the *Miami Herald* disagrees—to a point. Her newspaper forbids staff from taking free trips but she will publish articles by freelance reporters who do. She argues that travel is so expensive that freelancers have little choice but to accept freebies.

“If you only have wealthy people writing travel, you’re going to miss stories—and have a disconnect with reality,” she said. “It’s a pile of crap that we’re all pure.”

From the public relations point of view, a recommendation for a client’s hotel in a newspaper article carries far more credibility than a well-written brochure. Virginia Sheridan is the president of M. Silvers Associates, a public relations firm that specializes in the travel industry. She says her relationship with journalists largely consists of pitching stories for her clients in the same way that political operatives pitch stories that help their candidates. And with today’s tighter deadlines and fierce competition among freelance reporters, she said, “our relationship with the lifestyle and travel and tourism journalists has gotten closer.”

Ms. Sheridan is also a member of the Society of American Travel Writers. She and other travel industry publicists routinely meet with journalists at conferences organized by the society. There they pitch stories and discuss trends in what Ms. Daily, the president, describes as “sort of like speed dating” where journalists hop from table to table to discuss new tourism venues, new trends and new trips paid for by the industry.

“Travel journalism is really about relationships,” said Ms. Daily.

Tom Fiedler, the former executive editor of the *Miami Herald* and now Dean of Communications at Boston University, hired Mr. Hanks to take a sharp look at the industry. He said his reporters were never allowed to take free trips and that he was unimpressed by the ethos of travel writing, where the line between a tourist pamphlet and a travel piece is far too fuzzy.

But, he noted, few industries bring more advertising revenue to newspapers than the tourism industry.

“I don’t know if it’s a cultural mindset that takes hold so you only write good new stories,” he said. “If you were looking at it cynically, it is a conspiracy of silence.”

History

The travel section began as a Sunday supplement with predictable local stories and a very few foreign travel pieces. The industry pushed for the stories as much as journalists back then.

Stuart Newman remembers those days. He opened his own public relations firm in Florida immediately following World War II after his discharge from the U.S. Army Air Corps. His focus was the burgeoning tourism industry—palm trees, beaches, and deep sea fishing—several decades before Disney World opened in Orlando, Florida, and changed the state forever.

Mr. Newman said that when he wanted a story in one of the local newspapers he “would frequently go to the city rooms of the *Miami Herald* and *Miami News*, sit at a manual typewriter, use their copy paper and knock out stories.”

To encourage Miami newspaper reporters to do the writing themselves, Mr. Newman said he gave away airline tickets, hotel rooms, meals at restaurants and drinks at nightclubs of his clients. The now defunct Pan American Airlines agreed to provide free tickets but only to journalists who signed a letter of understanding saying they would write about their destination in return.

“In the 1950s and early 1960s the *Miami Herald’s* travel editor had no problem with complimentary travel,” he said. The *New York Times*, though, was always the exception, he said, and never took anything for free.

The travel sections came into their own during the 1970s as more news organizations were sending out travel reporters and setting their own agendas. The cost of travel was dropping and newly in reach of the middle class, who in turn had grown wealthy enough during the post-war boom to afford leisure travel. As more people traveled the industry placed more advertisements in the newspapers.

The 1980s proved to be the golden age for newspaper travel writing, exemplified by the travel pages of the *New York Times*. The sections were huge, running from 38 to 46 pages. Reporters routinely wrote articles of 2,000 to 3,000 words that often read like literary essays.

The Vietnam War was over and Americans were ready to spend their strong dollars on leisure and foreign adventure. Drab post-war Europe had fully recovered and was once again showing off its culture and cuisine to mystified Americans.

Michael Leahy was the *New York Times* travel editor from 1982 to 1986 and he credits Arthur Gelb, the newspaper’s managing editor, with the decision to make travel writing “livelier and more ambitious.”

With that mandate, Mr. Leahy published articles by the newspaper's foreign staff, including R. W. Apple, Jr., the London bureau chief whose well-researched and witty articles on Europe became the standard for travel writing; Drew Middleton, the military correspondent who wrote vivid set-pieces like Churchill's command post; and Joseph Lelyveld whose travel articles from South Africa wove the cruel reality of apartheid into the dazzling landscape of the continent.

Mr. Leahy went far afield when commissioning stories from luminaries in other fields. Muriel Spark, the novelist, wrote about Tuscany; V.S. Pritchett, critic and essayist, wrote on Seville; Patricia Wells, the food critic, on Paris restaurants; Sari Nuseibeh, a Palestinian academic, wrote on Jerusalem as an Islamic city; and Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and author, wrote about Jerusalem as the Jewish city of David.

It didn't hurt that advertising from the tourism industry often accounted for one-fourth of newspaper advertising revenue.⁵

"The sections were very, very fat but you have this Chinese wall between the advertising side and the editorial side. All I knew is I had great big sections and the luxury of space," said Mr. Leahy.

These grand travel essays reflected the final flowering of what would soon become a vanishing era, when tourists would spend weeks exploring a small corner of France or Italy and savor the history as well as the cuisine without breaking their budgets.

Already bargain travel was becoming shallow travel with group tours promising "Europe in Seven Days." Mass tourism was translated into swarms of American or Japanese tourists led by guides through some of Europe's most breathtaking museums at an equally breathtaking pace.

⁵ Newspaper Association of America, www.naa.org/TrendsandNumbers/Advertising-Expenditures.aspx

In a nod to the growing consumer movement, Paul Grimes, another former *New York Times* foreign correspondent, started the column “Practical Traveler” in 1977. He wrote some of the first pieces about airport hotels, the new lower-priced cruise ship vacations, and, in a real sign of the times, the competition between Greyhound and Trailways for more customers on their bus lines. (Today bus lines have abandoned much of America.)

Then geopolitics broke open the travel pages. The Berlin Wall came down in 1989. The Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991. China opened its doors to the West. The stubborn borders of the Cold War no longer divided the world. The Baltic countries, Eastern Europe, and the Mekong Delta were no longer off-limits.

The world opened to tourists overnight and it was difficult to keep up.

“We covered a great deal more of geography,” said Nancy Newhouse, former *New York Times* travel editor.

With more countries to cover and more practical news to report, Ms. Newhouse commissioned shorter articles. She also saw her section shrink, dropping down to 24 to 30 pages at most. Travel advertising was still lucrative but the *New York Times* had other ways to spend the money.

“I certainly wanted good writing but newsier, so that the whole consumer movement in traveling was reflected,” said Ms. Newhouse.

She, too, used *New York Times* reporters extensively but with her broader mandate. Where an issue on autumn in Europe in the 1980s may have centered around one 3,000 word article, the new travel section of the 1990s on the same subject would feature eight much smaller articles describing all of the changes of a reunified Europe: with new light rail lines and restored museums, old capitals like Prague or Budapest were coming back to life.

Freelance writers in Japan, Italy, and France wrote new “Frugal Travel” columns, alternating with a new “Choice Tables” column based on the idea that food was a reason to travel. (“Everyone always wants to do food,” said Ms. Newhouse.)

As if all those political changes were not enough, the internet arrived on her watch and soon Ms. Newhouse instituted a column called “cyber-scout” which introduced travel page readers to the internet and the idea that of online booking for hotels and airlines. The first columns were among the smallest in the newspaper, running at a mere 300 words.

Then there was color. Thanks to improved technology, the *New York Times* added color photographs to the travel section in 1993, adding another layer of radical change to the section, which was constantly adapting to an expanding list of places to visit and ways to enjoy travel, until the new millennium brought two disasters in a row.

The first was the bursting of the “dot com bubble,” when stocks for many internet ventures collapsed, slowing down travel and reducing the advertisements that went with it. But that crisis was minor compared to the long-lasting effect of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11.

Planes were grounded across the country. Travel suddenly seemed the most dangerous thing in the world. “What really changed us radically was 9/11,” said Ms. Newhouse. “It never went back to what it was. It was like being hit on the head with a baseball bat.”

Luckily, her feature for that Sunday was on railroad travel. She commissioned an article by the novelist Francine Prose on traveling with fear. There were far more articles about traveling within the United States—“the Viva America kind of thing”—and the inevitable stories about security including six-column photographs of armed guards at airports.

A third problem hit by 2003, when the internet was proved it was a serious and permanent competitor to the news business. The travel section started to shrink as the convulsions in the newspaper business led advertisers to migrate to the internet—and not necessarily to newspaper websites. The section went from its peak of 40 pages down to the current size of 16 pages. Sections of the tourism industry, such as travel agents, nearly disappeared.

The days that the travel pages were coining money were over. The year before the Sept. 11 attacks, travel advertising still ranked as the single biggest contributor to newspaper ad revenue or 18.68 percent. By 2005, travel advertising had dropped to third behind coupon marketing and public utilities/telecommunications advertising.⁶

To keep up with the fast-paced change in tourism, reporters began writing about niche tourism: ecotourism, gay-friendly tourism, medical tourism, wine tourism—the list grew from the 1990s through to the end of Ms. Newhouse’s tenure in 2004.

Stuart Emmrich, the current editor of the *New York Times* travel section, said his mission is to give readers a sense of the experience they will have on their trips. “At the *Times*, I try to use travel as a way to write about culture, literature, politics, art,” he said.

Under Mr. Emmrich the travel section is a mix of nearly every genre: the big cover destination piece, consumer news, niche stories like yoga vacations, and service pieces that explain “what are your best options if you’re going on vacation, the high to low end, adventure, what’s new.”

One new theme is a search for countries and cities that are still authentic, places that have yet to succumb to tourist overkill. Mr. Emmrich said he is looking for new angles to describe the most popular destinations and a way to answer comments from readers who

⁶ Newspaper Association of America, *ibid.*

said they wanted to see Alaska before it melts, Laos before it becomes modern like Vietnam, and countless other places threatened by pollution, the warming climate, or tourists like themselves.

Even with this ambitious agenda, the travel section remains a slim version of its predecessors. Fourteen page sections are common. There are fewer articles by *New York Times* foreign correspondents, some of the Sundays sections are written entirely by freelance reporters, and articles by famous essayists or novelists have largely disappeared. Travel websites and blogs are stealing readers.

“Our competition is everybody and everything,” said Ms. Hamm of the *Los Angeles Times*. “Travel news and information is so big out there—guidebooks, websites, magazines, that we compete with anything that takes time or eyeballs away from us.”

Just as they are hit with this multiplier force of competition, travel editors are asked to do more with less even though travel advertising remains a relatively bright spot for newspaper revenue.

“Travel is designed to make money for the paper,” Mr. Emmrich said when asked why he had only one staff reporter.

Despite their mission statements and the hard work it takes to put out their sections, travel editors know their pages are meant to attract advertisements. They are not and never have been an essential part of the journalist mission of a newspaper. Newspapers know how many of their readers travel overseas, go on cruises, and take vacations within the United States. That is critical information for selling advertisements to the industry.

But newspapers know little about tourism industry itself.

Without reporting on the tourism industry—in the way that the food section is complimented by hard reporting on agribusiness and farm policy or the fashion pages by

news reporting on global garment trade agreements or sweatshops in China—tourism is treated as a pleasant hobby, in the tradition of tourist brochures and blogs, and newspapers have missed one of the biggest stories of the globalized world.

Part Two: The Missing Story

“And tell me this: I must be absolutely sure. This place I’ve reached, is it truly Ithaca?”

—*The Odyssey* by Homer

“Tourism is arguably the largest cluster of industrial sectors in the world.”

—Geoffrey Lipman, Assistant Secretary General,
The United Nations World Tourism Organization

The Industry

The journey is one of the most ancient and deeply felt stories in world history. Literature and religions celebrate the journey as the simile for a full life of adventure, discovery, hardships and finally redemption in faraway lands. At least that was travel before the emergence of package tour aboard a cruise ship.

Religious pilgrims were some of the first true mass tourists. They traveled as a group to foreign lands where they paid innkeepers and Church officials to stay and fulfill a devotional duty or view a religious spectacle. Famously, Christian believers trudged to the northern Spanish city of Santiago de Compostela when local officials declared they had recovered the relics of St. James the Apostle in the 9th century, inaugurating a pilgrim’s route that enriched the region immeasurably and does to this day, albeit with atheists traveling with the faithful.

Similarly, the Ottoman Empire transformed the religious pilgrimage of Haj into steady income for the local Bedouin tribes by bribing them to protect rather than rob the foreign Muslim pilgrims crossing their land on their way to Mecca and Medina. Until oil was

discovered, those foreign pilgrims who bought camels from the Bedouin and lodging and food along the route were the main source of money for the area.⁷

Thomas Cook began his travel agency arranging a pilgrimage of sorts, hiring a special train to transport citizens to a temperance meeting, a mix of the religious and the social reformers, in Loughborough, England in 1841.

None of these wayfarers were called “tourists.” They traveled with purpose: to pray, to learn. Even those people fortunate enough to make the grand tours of Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries, many organized by Mr. Cook’s agency, viewed their travels as educational as well as pleasant excursions. They all, however, fulfilled the basic role of modern-day tourists by leaving the foreign countries wealthier for their visits.

The intervening two world wars interrupted the growth of the travel industry and it was only in peacetime that true mass tourism took hold. By 1960, after a decade of the middle classes getting used to the idea that international travel was safe and fun, the tourist count was at 25 million. By 1970 it was up to 165 million. Last year, in 2007, there were 898 million tourists packing their suitcases and circling the globe in search of adventure and pleasure.⁸

These tourists spent an awful lot of money. The best estimate of the cash spent for foreign and domestic travel is \$7 trillion; several United Nations agencies consider tourism the world’s largest industry.⁹ Tourism ranks first in trade of international services, according

⁷ Heydemann, Steven, editor. *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*. Berkeley: University of California Press, c2000 2000. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft6c6006x6/>

⁸ U.N.W.T.O. World Tourism Barometer, January 2008
http://unwto.org/facts/eng/pdf/barometer/UNWTO_Barom08_1_excerpt_en.pdf

⁹ United Nations World Tourism Organization, U.N.Environment Program,

to the World Trade Organization. Tourism also ranks as the globe's biggest employer, supplying eight percent of all the jobs in the world.¹⁰

With those numbers, tourism belongs in the same company as the world's top industries: energy, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, information technology, heavy industry, textiles. But you will not find it there. In the United States, economists, politicians, government officials treat tourism as a loose category of many low- and high-tech companies and jobs: airline companies, cruise ships, resorts, restaurants, and hotel chains along with a multitude of maids and waiters, chefs and stewards, and mechanics and technicians who keep everything running. They ask how can this be called a single industry and if it were, how would you measure its earnings?

For many years the United States government could not figure out what tourism meant to the economy. When the gross domestic product index was created in 1937 tourism was not included as a distinct industry. The United Nations, prodded by many of its member nations after World War II, took action. Countries in Europe were banking on tourism to spur their recovery—aid from the Marshall Plan was specifically targeted to reviving tourism. They needed a method to figure out much money tourism brought in and thereby understand the workings of the industry. The U.N. commissioned a high-level group of economists to create the Travel and Tourism Satellite Accounts which calculates the money earned each year by the tourism industry.

The United States adopted the initial version of that system in 1998 and suddenly the commercial grab bag called tourism looked impressive: in 2006 tourism earned \$1.2 trillion.¹¹

¹⁰ International Labor Organization - 14 September 2007
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/sector/sectors/tourism/emp.htm>

¹¹ "Tourism in OECD Countries 2008: Trends and Policies" p. 218

That makes tourism a significant part of the \$13 trillion American economy. One out of 16 Americans workers are employed by the tourism industry – more than in construction, the business and financial industries, agriculture, education or healthcare.¹² And tourism is one of the rare bright spots in America’s record trade deficit. The United States’ biggest services export was foreign tourists who spent \$85.8 billion in 2006 alone, according to the Department of Commerce.

In other countries, tourism is treated as a major industry and accorded a high priority in government. There are ministries of tourism or national tourism boards in nearly every country on every continent: there are ministries in India, Australia, Thailand, the Bahamas, Turkey, and Greece and national tourism bureaus in Japan, Great Britain, France, and Tanzania, to name just a few.

These organizations promote tourism to their countries; their official websites feature lush videos and heart-stirring music very much in the tradition of high-end sales jobs. At their best, the government bodies also act as stewards to regulate and protect the most popular tourist spots. For many developing countries, tourism is considered the best chance to climb out of poverty and their governments have bet their future on luring thousands of wealthy foreigner visitors to their countries.

In 2003 the United Nations took the tourism section out of one U.N. organization and elevated it to its own separate special agency: the United Nations World Tourism Organization. Headquartered in Madrid, the new organization’s responsibility is to promote sustainable tourism—that is tourism that protects the environment, the culture, and the heritage of a country, as well as providing statistics and research on the industry.

¹² Ibid.

In practical terms, the UNWTO concentrates on helping poor nations in the belief that if done correctly, tourism is the best and quickest way to transfer wealth from the rich to the poorer nations. The U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals rely on expanded tourism to help lift up poorer countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and large swaths of Asia where it is considered the single biggest vehicle for poverty alleviation.

“For pandemic poverty elimination, especially in Africa, the United Nations sees tourism as the single biggest vehicle for the foreseeable future,” said Geoffrey Lipman, the Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations World Tourism Organization.

With the backing of global lenders like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, developing nations have poured large sums of money into their tourist industries, building airports and roads and subsidizing hotels and resorts. Those investments usually pay off, with the 100 poorest countries reporting that tourism provides between two and five percent of their GDP.¹³ For half of the world's least developed nations, tourism is the second largest source of foreign exchange after oil. In a world with widening gaps between extremely wealthy nations and far poorer ones,¹⁴ tourism has become the last resort of development hope for countries with few resources other than beautiful scenery.

However, tourism earnings often go into the pockets of international and foreign companies, not to the countries that the tourists have visited. Referred to as “leakage” by economists, this is the big trap for countries who want to get rich quick with tourism. To attract tourists from wealthy nations, poorer nations often import expensive goods like pre-packaged foods, hotel furnishings, building materials and even “native” trinkets cheaply

¹³ Lisa Mastny, *State of the World 2002*, Linda Starke, editor (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 2002)

¹⁴ “The World Distribution of Household Wealth,” by James Davies, Anthony Shorrocks, and Susanna Sandstorm, published by the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University, December 5, 2006, found that the wealthiest one percent of people owned 40 percent of global assets and the bottom half of the world adult population owned barely one percent of global wealth.

manufactured in China to make tourists comfortable. Those imports not only eat up profit from the tourist trade, they undercut local farmers, manufacturers, and artisans who might otherwise have benefited from the arrival of rich foreigners.

The second big trap is those packaged tours, especially cruises, because tourists aboard those ships spend very little money at their destination. Most money from on-board food and lodging goes in the pockets of international corporations that own ships.

Mr. Lipman also argued that tourism is important to the U.N. because it has played an historic role bringing peoples and countries together. Tourists routinely return from foreign lands with a deeper appreciation of a different culture—for better or worse—and governments rely on this public diplomacy to iron out other difficulties.

“The first subject on any government accords is tourism; the first thing on the agenda when they make peace. Look at India and Pakistan. They sent buses across the border, first thing,” said Mr. Lipman.

The potential of tourism to raise emerging nations out of poverty is rarely part of the academic research of development economists in the United States. Dani Rodrik, professor of international political economy at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, said that “tourism economics is not up there in the pecking order of what the smartest professors are researching.”

Instead, he said, economists are far more likely to look into more familiar phenomena like global remittances as a promising way to help some of the world’s poorest nations. Last year immigrants working in the United States sent some \$268 billion home to their families in poorer nations. By contrast, tourism receipts are five times larger and did not require mass immigration, often illegal, to effect a major infusion of cash to poor nations.

“Tourism can provide economic transformation but it is very clear that success depends on whether the government does its job, coordinating, regulating, leading the private sector into wise investing and offering government subsidies for early investments,” said Mr. Rodrik.

Given the scale the tourism industry has reached, foreign officials favor discussing governance of tourism on a global scale. There is no code of conduct in tourism, no rules for good behavior. Sex tourism, for instance, has ballooned as part of the new global tourism, ruining the lives of millions of children and women. Questionable medical tourism is flourishing.

To realize the full potential of tourism would require sets of international regulations on par with regulations set in place for international trade in goods or assets.

American Exceptionalism

While the rest of the world has directed its full attention to the promise and peril of the rapidly growing tourism industry, the United States has taken the opposite approach.

The United States has refused to join the new U.N. World Tourism Organization, the only country of any significance that is not part of that body.

And the United States has consistently questioned the value of spending public money on the promotion or study of tourism in other international organizations. Connie Morella, the U.S. Ambassador to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development from 2003 to 2007, said in an interview that whenever the institution’s budget had to be cut, her instructions from Washington were to take the money out of tourism research.

“The United States consistently puts tourism as a low priority but the other countries would never allow those budget cuts. Tourism was too important to them,” said Ambassador Morella.

The United States is the only developed country without a nationally coordinated tourist program.

The immediate reason for the United States’ wariness towards tourism is the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. But the roots are deeper, tied to the recent ideological and political battles over the direction of the country.

Historically, the fifty states have done their own tourist promotions. Florida became the “sunshine state”. Virginia named itself the state for lovers. And everyone was supposed to love New York in its tourist campaigns. That chamber of commerce approach worked for the most part and tourism is a major industry in nearly every state and the District of Columbia.

In the classic tension between states rights and central federal control, the tourist industry was happy to leave responsibility at the state level. Leaving tourism to the states also eliminated any possibility of federal coordination or regulation with regards to the environment, sustainability, or stewardship. There was a small but fairly active tourism office within the Department of Commerce that handled the promotion of tourism.

When the Republican Party gained control of the House of Representatives in 1994, the new Speaker Newt Gingrich declared that government had no business in the tourism industry. It was a direct challenge to President Bill Clinton who held a White House conference on Travel and Tourism in 1995 to promote the industry that he said was the second largest employer in the nation.

In an ensuing budget battle in Congress, the Democrats gave into Republican pressures and abolished¹⁵ the 35-year-old Travel and Tourism Administration along with all of its overseas offices.

On the eve of the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, the United States gave up the very federal agency charged with smoothing the path for the foreign tourists. The Commerce official overseeing the agency said: “It’s an absolute outrage that we’re not promoting ourselves during the Olympics.”¹⁶

(The United States also withdrew from the U.N. tourism agency in 1996. When the agency was elevated to full-fledged status as the U.N. World Tourism Organization in 2003 the United States refused to rejoin, citing budget pressures.)

That was only the beginning of the dismantling of the United States’ promotion of tourism. The Sept. 11 attacks brought the industry to a halt and the government has shown little interest in its recovery.

The three-day grounding of all aircraft after the attacks was a prelude to a five-year assault on easy traveling in and out of the United States. Declaring a “War on Terror,” President George W. Bush and Congress expanded federal powers and spent billions of federal dollars to prevent other criminals from attacking targets in the United States. The Administration created the Department of Homeland Security to that end. With a budget of \$50 billion, the department is one of the largest created since the New Deal and includes the new Transportation Security Administration, responsible for screening passengers and luggage at U.S. commercial airports to prevent any other further hijackings or attacks on civilian aircraft.

¹⁵ *New York Times*, March 10, 1996, “Finis to Tourist Agency On Eve of the Olympics.”

¹⁶ *ibid*

The T.S.A. is enormous. It employs over 43,000 screeners, more employees than the Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Labor combined.¹⁷ And those screeners are charged with examining identification papers, airline tickets and luggage of everyone boarding an airplane in the United States.

The screeners' methods, dictated by the government, have made the single biggest reason for the decline of foreign tourists to the United States.

From 2001 until 2006 record numbers of foreign tourists traveled the globe, increasing at a five percent annual rate from 682 million to 898 million. But in that same period foreign visitors to the United States plunged by 17 percent. That translated into declining revenue: in 2005 alone the industry lost \$43 billion in anticipated revenue.¹⁸

In fact, there were more foreign tourists to the United States in 1997 than in 2007.

And the American tourism industry started to worry.

The Travel Industry of America, the industry's trade association, conducted a survey to find out why foreign tourists were staying away.

The answer was surprising. Tourists were not angry about the American War in Iraq or any other foreign policy issue. They were furious about the difficulty they now faced getting a visa to the United States and the treatment they received once they arrived at an American airport.¹⁹

"Rude," "disrespectful," and "annoying" were some of the better words used to describe how they felt, according to the survey.

¹⁷ "Terrorized into Absurdity" by Roger Roots, *The Independent Review*, Spring 2003

¹⁸ www.poweroftravel.org "A Blueprint to Discover America," January 31, 2007.

The Travel Industry Association, Washington, DC

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 7

There was evidence in foreign newspapers and websites confirming the worst. Travel to the United States meant a “spirit-crushingly frosty reception” according to an article in the London *Sunday Times* article entitled “Travel to America? No thanks.”²⁰

“A preflight e-interrogation, epic queues at immigration, thin-lipped questioning from aggressive border guards and an outside chance of a rubber-gloved rectal rummage are all part of the fun,” the article continued.

Condemning the T.S.A. was a common theme. The *Guardian* of London printed an article in February, 2008 with the headline “America—more hassle than it’s worth?” It included the question: “Why should information on a friend or relative pushing a passenger in a wheelchair to the gate at Prestwick be dispatched to the C.I.A.?”

That article elicited 9,155 responses that covered 36 printed pages in just four days when comments were closed. The last entry was representative: “I think there’s a poetic justice lurking behind the new flight security measures demanded by the U.S. administration, and all the other American efforts to protect themselves from the inevitable. What they achieve mainly is to further isolate the Americans from the human beings on this planet. Everybody wins.”²¹

Travel blogs of scores of other nationalities unwilling to put up with the indignities and humiliation that they say is part of travel to the United States. German tourists even compared the U.S.-built wall along the Mexican border to the Berlin Wall, with the Americans cast in the role of the East Germans.

²⁰ *Sunday Times*, January 20, 2008

²¹ *Guardian*, February 12, 2008, “America—more hassle than it’s worth?” by Ed Vulliamy

Tourists also expressed the fear that one small slip-up could land them in jail, like the tourist from New Zealand who mistakenly over-stayed his visa by a few days and spent six weeks in a Detroit jail.²²

The tourism industry's study, published in 2007, also showed that the highest-spending tourists were avoiding the United States. Since the new security policies were imposed, there was a 20.7 percent drop in German tourists, a 19.2 percent drop in French tourists, a 7.6 percent drop in British tourists, and a 23.3 percent drop in Japanese tourists.²³

They still took vacations, but to China, India and Turkey, or to Morocco and Brazil and in record numbers. The decline in the value of the dollar in the last year has helped attract more European visitors, happy to take advantage of the bargain basement prices for an American vacation, and helping bring tourism back to the level reached before the attacks. But half of the tourists traveling to the United States came from Canada and Mexico, visitors who on average spend about one-tenth of other foreign tourists.²⁴

"Sept. 11 changed everything," said Geoffrey Freeman, senior vice president for public affairs at the Travel Industry of America. "Now, instead of being neutral, the government is putting obstacles in the path of our industry."

He continued: "Homeland Security seems to be asking: 'how do we discourage people from traveling today?' The travel industry thought that the government would roll back some of the security measures. It didn't happen. Among us, this has been a wake up call."

²² Rick Giles of New Zealand spent six weeks in jail for mistakenly overstaying his visa by six days in July, 2007. <http://www.starcanterbury.co.nz/localnews/storydisplay>.

²³ Ibid. p.5

²⁴ Ibid

After years of accepting the status quo, the industry group is now lobbying hard for a tourism promotion program that would be financed from public and private funds and run by the a board made up of the industry, the government, and higher education.

The government said “no” for familiar reasons. In a letter to Congress, the Administration said it “believes that tourism promotion activities should be financed and undertaken by the private sector and, where they desire, by states and local governments.”²⁵

Isabel Hill, the deputy director of the small office of Travel and Tourism Industries within the Commerce Department, said she can understand why the tourist industry is concerned. But the tide has turned, slightly. Revenue from tourism returned to pre-Sept. 11 levels in 2007, earning at least a \$1.2 trillion in 2007.

Overall, though, she does not dispute that America’s image has been battered by tourists unnerved by the extraordinary security measures adopted after Sept. 11.

For the foreigners who need a visa to visit the United States, the frustration is higher. Since the Sept. 11 attacks the United States has required all would-be tourists to be interviewed in person at an American embassy or consulate, which in continent-sized countries like Russia can pose a significant burden. The State Department is trying to reduce to one month the average time it takes to simply process a visa request. And most visa applicants are required to be fingerprinted through a biometric finger scan.

Susan Jacobs, the senior policy advisor for the State Department’s Bureau of Consular Affairs, said the travel industry is complaining too much.

“We’re not in the business of encouraging tourism,” she said. “These are small irritations but once people get used to them it won’t be an irritation at all,” she said. “We want a secure process where people are treated properly, with friendliness.”

²⁵ Letter from John J. Sullivan, General Counsel of the United States Department of Commerce, to Senator Daniel Inouye, June 26, 2007 files of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

But the debate is about more than courteous screeners and border guards. By bowing out of the international discussion about tourism, as the rich develop ways to encourage sustainable tourism, Washington is sidelined. It is similar to the position the United States took towards the Kyoto Treaty and the debate on global warming: let other countries devise standards and regulations and coordinate a global response without American participation. It is as if the United States thinks the idea of creating sustainable tourism is unnecessary, that tourism is not a threat to global resources, the environment, natural habitats, or the culture heritage of nations.

“We have the gestalt thinking that the U.S. has unlimited resources and that we can use them as we wish. That is immature,” said Ms. Hill of the Commerce Department.

“I hope that dialogue does begin to emerge where we recognize our limitations and how we have to regulate our resources as Europe does.”

In 2002 the United Nations called for extensive coordination of national, regional, and local tourism policies in order to regulate and monitor the effect of tourism on the environment and societies.²⁶ The National Marine Fisheries Service, which presented a paper on viewing sea life in their natural habitat, was the only official American presence at the summit.

26, The World Ecotourism Summit, Quebec, Canada, May 19-22, 2002

Part Three: The Hordes

“The World On Sale—Book Now!”
—Hurtigruten (Norwegian) Cruise Lines²⁷

“Tourism is like fire; you can cook your dinner on it,
or it can burn your house down,”
—United Nations Environmental Program²⁸

Walk into your favorite chain bookstore and compare the history and travel sections. There is no contest. History books take up a fraction of the space of travel books. In the 21st century, foreign nations are to be consumed, not studied.

It is far easier to find a travel book devoted to traveling through France than a history of France. The travel section has books with advice on what to see, what to eat, what to buy, where to stay and, by insinuation, what to ignore. There are travel books written expressly for retirees, for women, for gays and lesbians, for hikers, or for families with young children. There are magazines on spa and spiritual vacations, on wine vacations and, most recently, medical tourism.

Beyond the books, the magazines, the travel pages in the newspapers and the travel gurus on the cable stations there is the travel information that arrives through the mail slot. Invitations from college alumni associations, art institutes and professional associations invite like-minded colleagues to travel for enrichment and pleasure. Universities like Harvard or Yale sponsor two-week cruises with lectures by luminaries at \$10,000; Tulane University sponsors ten-day tours of Italy for \$5,000.

It seems an innocent if extravagant pleasure.

²⁷ Advertisement of the Hurtigruten cruise line, April 27, 2008 *New York Times* Sunday magazine.

²⁸ www.padh.gpa.uep.org “Physical Alterations and Destruction of Habitats,” Tourism, U.N.E.P.
This anonymous Asian saying has become an anthem of sorts for many environmental groups.

But with little regulation or standards, those 898 million foreign tourists are turning into hordes that do inestimable damage to the environment, natural habitat, societies, and climate as they eat and drink their way around the globe.

Rain forests are being chopped down to make way for resorts as well as loggers. Spawning grounds are disappearing because of pollution from tourism and coral reefs destroyed by the anchors from tourist ships, according to United Nations and other studies.²⁹

The United Nations calls tourism a magnificent double-edged sword. Tourists who travel to another country, learn its language, culture, and history, and tour its countryside and cities can effectively bridge different cultures.

Managed thoughtfully, tourism can protect the environment as it has for a majority of Costa Rica's beaches and rainforests; it can save the elephants and gorillas of Africa, and protect the historic districts of Hanoi, Vietnam. It can be the least destructive way to transfer wealth from the rich to the poor world, bringing much needed hard currency to all strata of a developing nation.

Most of the time tourism fails on all of these counts.

As the chief industry that moves people around this planet, tourism is at the apex of the issues tied to human activity destroying the planet: climate change, destruction of wildlife and natural habitat, energy conservation, the depletion of natural resources— especially water—and the conflict of cultures.

Jonathan Tourtellot, of the National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations, said that in some instances, tourism's destruction is permanent. "I don't think

²⁹ <http://www.wcl.american.edu/environment/iel/sup3.cfm>. The American University's International Environmental Law and Policy – Coral Reefs. See all The Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network, "Status of Coral Reefs of the World: 2000."

there is a tropical country left with unspoiled beaches unless there are protected in a national park.”

When Tourism Fails

Cambodia offers a stark example of what to avoid in developing tourism.

Home to Angkor, the incomparable city of temples, as well as pristine beaches along the Gulf of Thailand, Cambodia has aggressively marketed tourism as a quick way out of its war-induced poverty. It has worked. In one decade, tourism has grown from 250,000 visitors to two million. The money they spent has grown just as nicely from \$103 million to \$1.4 billion in 2007.

The question is whether Cambodia can survive the tourists.

Already, the temples at Angkor are in danger. The incomparable temples built from the 9th to the 15th centuries are being crawled over by tens of thousands of feet. Just as many hands and elbows are damaging the statues and base reliefs without any appreciable monitoring or regulations. At night, bandits chop the heads off of those stone gods and goddesses and spirit them across the border to sell to antique dealers in Thailand.

And the temples may be sinking.

The government has allowed a forest of hotels to be built around the temples in the modern city of Siem Reap and filling them with hundreds of thousands of tourists—Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, American, and French—arriving on direct flights in the expanded airport. All these tourists are using so much water to drink, shower and flush toilets that the underground water table is emptying. Experts worry that this instability could cause the eventual collapse of the temples.

“Energy, water, sewage and waste are all significant problems,” according to a 2005 World Bank report on tourism in Cambodia.

Then there is the social and cultural effect of those tourists whose demands for easy and decadent travel.

“The single minded pursuit of high-volume tourism at Angkor has destroyed the social integrity of Siem Reap, which is now overrun with karaoke bars and sex tourism,” according to a study on the well-being of 94 World Heritage sites.³⁰

This mind-numbing flood of tourism is not without purpose. The chief beneficiaries are the families and friends of the top circle of government officials who have become millionaires several times over from selling concessionary rights and property and then pocketing the money rather than putting it into the government treasury.

The value for the average Cambodian is less obvious. The jobs in the Siem Reap tourist industry are generally low paying with long hours, little training, and unstable employment—a common problem in the tourism industry according to studies by the International Labor Organization. Indeed, the housekeepers, waiters, and busboys working at Disney World in Orlando, Florida, confront the same problems.

The government has now turned its sights to the beaches and islands in the Gulf of Thailand. They are selling what was once a magnificent area of mangrove forests, and terrain that was home to wild animals and birds. And they have brutally pushed out the peasants who once owned the land.

Independent newspapers in Cambodia are filled with stories about high-ranking government officials or their families laying claim to newly valuable property by arguing that

³⁰ *National Geographic Traveler*, November/December 2006

property documents of peasants are not in order. They take their cases to court, where the judges are easily corrupted and usually win.

“Cambodian officials are manipulating local courts to steal thousands of acres along the coast to build tourist resorts; they expel the peasants and burn their huts before their eyes,” said Naly Pilorge, director of LICADHO, a Cambodian non-profit human rights and justice organization.³¹

There are stacks of photographs documenting how this works. They show policemen dressed in tan leisure suits holding down peasants with sticks and rifles while other police burnt their thatched huts. The peasants are then forcibly pushed into the backs of trucks and driven to desolate areas of no interest to foreign investors.

There are similar stories of land-grabbing in Indonesia and Thailand where officials turn a blind eye after sufficient bribes have been paid.

Travel itself is a great concern to environmentalists. There is no consensus on how to measure the carbon footprint of someone taking a round-trip flight from the United States to Europe or Asia. But economists believe that the best way to offset the damage is to put a carbon tax on all the damaging activity. The more carbon intensive the journey, the more expensive and accordingly, less used.

“Putting a price on carbon is not easy nor a panacea but it goes a long way in automating carbon calculations,” said Andreas Papandreou, a visiting economist at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government.

³¹ Interview, Phnom Penh, November 14, 2007

The biggest culprit turns out to be cruise ships, those floating hotels that look so idyllic in the brochures. Cruise ships create three times more pollution per passenger mile than airplanes and 36 times more pollution than rail travel.³²

That pollution has already spoiled the waters of the Caribbean that, according to the United Nations, absorbs half of the 75 million kilograms of waste dumped in the world's oceans.³³

And with perverse logic, the most obscure parts of the globe are now the most fashionable for cruises. Visits to the two poles have increased dramatically. In Antarctica, cruise ship tourism increased by 430 percent and tourists on the land by 757 percent in the last decade. With the ships has come pollution that is threatening both polar oceans—just as the poles' glaciers are melting under global warming, adding new threats to that fragile region. Last year Norway banned all ships using heavy fuel oils from visiting Svalbard in the Arctic Circle.

“Tourism brings jobs and opportunities to people all over the world including Norway, including the Polar regions,” said Helen Bjornoy, the Norwegian environment minister. “But tourism, especially the large-scale global tourism, is also producing growing pressures on resources, nature areas and ecosystems.”

So as tourists disgorge in record numbers at ports like Athens, Monaco, Dubrovnik, Venice, and Valencia, those cities get all the headaches and pollution but relatively little money, given their business model of eating and sleeping on board.

Venice has suffered the most and is protesting the loudest.

³² “Flying three times greener than cruising,” by Charles Starmer-Smith, *Daily Telegraph*, London, March 27, 2008

³³ United Nations Environment Program, Report on Pollution from Land Based Sources and the Wider Caribbean Region. Mexico City, Mexico 22-26 August 2005

Since 2002, the number of cruise ship passengers visiting the city has doubled. The number of tourists staying in the city has also increased dramatically and city officials have allowed the number of properties offering tourist accommodation to rise by 350 percent. This has been a disaster for native Venetians who are being pushed out of their city by the rising cost of housing driven up by the tourist trade. In the past decade the city's population has been cut in half to 60,000 inhabitants.

Fed up, Venetians took to the street this spring and protested.

"Venezia non é un albergo," or "Venice is not a hotel," they wrote on banners hoisted at a rally in April. They want the city to ban any more hotels and to stop catering to tourists over residents.

"Tourism has its positive side, but can become a cancer. Anyway, who wants to visit a city without inhabitants?"³⁴ said Michela Scibilia, one of the organizers.

Venice already has the feel of a museum rather than a living city, in part because its economy reached that tipping point where it is now heavily dependent on tourism. This is what economists call the "Dutch disease," the condition where an economy becomes so dependent on selling natural resources (in the case of Venice it is the beauty of the city; in the Caribbean it is the sun and beaches) and the foreign currency it brings that a country faces collapse if the "natural resource" is no longer attractive or is depleted.

Among the others problems caused by modern mass tourism is the abominable practice of sex tourism that is threatening the lives of countless children and women.

The practice began in the 1990s with the opening of once closed borders, the liberalization of trade and finance, and the clumsy, chaotic transformation of communist

³⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, April 18, 2008 "Is tourism ruining Venice?" by Rachel Spence
And *Buzzle.com*, August 25, 2006 "Population Decline Set to Turn Venice into Italy's Disneyland"

nations to capitalist ones. Rogue gangs and organized crime got a foothold in many industries, including tourism and prostitution, when governments were at their weakest. Sex tourism flourished from the former communist nations of Eastern Europe, where underground syndicates took over prostitution in Czechoslovakia along the “Highway of Shame” originally patronized by German truck drivers,³⁵ to the former communist nations of Indochina where Americans and Western Europeans patronized brothels with ever-younger girls and boys.

Much of that tourism is based on forcible trafficking of women and children and keeping control over them with brutal abuse. It is the modern equivalent of slavery.

“Before the dust from the Berlin Wall had even settled, gangsters and chancers were laying the cables of a huge network of trafficking in women,” wrote Misha Glenny in *McMafia: A Journey Through the Global Criminal Underworld*.

Fueled by these global trafficking networks, sex tourism has thrived in Asia, the Caribbean and Mexico, South America, and Africa. The customers are European and North American and they often find their prey on barely-disguised internet sites for sex tourism. “Pimps R Us” first began promoting prostitution tours from the U.S. to the Dominican Republic in 1995.

A dozen years later the number of sex tourists is in the millions. Some 2.5 million tourists from the U.S. and Western Europe travel for sex every year just to Thailand³⁶ where the sight of white-haired men strolling crowded Bangkok sidewalks with girls or boys young enough to be their grandchildren is all too common.

³⁵ Misha Glenny, *McMafia: A Journey Through the Global Criminal Underworld*. (New York, Knopf, 2008) p.16

³⁶ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6360603.stm>

World wide, more than one million children are forced into the sex industry, according to the U.S. State Department, and many of those working in sex tourism are under 10 years old.

There are few reliable figures about this shadowy world. Estimates from individual countries suggest that the criminal syndicates earn in the hundreds of billions of dollars every year. Sex tourism provides anywhere between two and 14 percent of the gross domestic products of Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, which monitors this criminal behavior.

And it is a crime, punishable with long prison terms in the home countries of most of these foreign men but acceptable in poor countries where the police, politicians and courts are easily bribed by the mafia who control the brothels.³⁷ The tourists who exploit these children and women are the linchpins of the system.

In the past few years, the United States and other wealthy countries have begun prosecuting their own citizens for sex tourism crimes committed abroad. The number of convictions is negligible but the growing campaign against sex tourism is making inroads.

The most insidious effect of tourism is erasing national culture. By catering to a mass tourism need for uniformity, the industry can undermine national character and replace it with a “Stepford Wives” version.

Anthropologists and sociologists have created a new field of study investigating how tourism affects native culture, language, handicrafts, and art as well as the country itself. The *Journals of Sustainable Tourism* publishes studies such as “Crete: Endowed by Nature, Privileged by Geography, Threatened by Tourism?” by Helen Briassoulis.

³⁷ Ruchira Gupta, filmmaker of “The Selling of Innocents,” speaking at the Asia Society, New York, April 9, 2002

Tourism is a more deceptive version of 18th and 19th century colonialism that exploited natural resources and forced subject peoples to buy foreign manufactured products. In today's age of hyper-tourism, the culture itself is for sale.

At a basic level, tourism threatens the loss of local identity and traditional culture simply by replacing native handicrafts such as woodworking or weaving with inexpensive manufactured souvenirs. Or artisans are encouraged to alter their creations to fit the tastes of the high-end tourists.

Then there is the overwhelming presence of resorts and the tourist life that promotes a superficial foreign life of sunbathing and shopping that has little connection to or undermines a country's culture. With their land gobbled up by resorts, farmers become bus boys. With their beaches usurped by sunbathers, fishermen become tour guides.

“Trying to quantify the loss of authenticity is like defining pornography—you know it when you see it,” said Jonathan Tourtellot of the Center for Sustainable Destinations.

When centuries old churches and village squares are surrounded by modern chain hotels and restaurants, authenticity has disappeared.

Mr. Tourtellot asked how one measures the effect of tourists flooding the central square in Dubrovnik, when cruise ships disgorge thousands of tourists every summer and paralyze local life.

“Something has surely changed and changed utterly,” he said. “The people have lost their city.”

Erika Harms is the executive director for sustainable development at the United Nations Foundation in Washington. A native of Costa Rica, where eco-tourism was born, Ms. Harms believes that the loss of authenticity in tourism is hard for Americans to understand since protecting heritage is not a top priority for the United States.

“Look at what you’ve done to your country,” she said. “You can take a photo of any road or highway in the U.S. and they all look the same—the same Loews, the same Wal-Mart. You tear down your heritage and throw up chain stores.”

She said she believes that if Americans changed their attitude, tourism would be more of a help than a hindrance to the world: “If people in the United States practiced sustainable tourism, then the world would too. It is that simple.”

When Tourism Works

The office of the French deputy minister of Agriculture for rural affairs is on the fashionable rue de Varenne. Covering the wall behind the minister’s desk are three large maps of France. One traces the passenger train lines that spread across France like overlapping spider webs. The second is sprinkled with symbols representing the annual cultural events in every region of France. The third was the topographical map of France showing arable land.

Those maps told the story of agriculture supporting tourism and vice versa. Tourism brings in three times more money than agriculture but the appeal of France is rooted in its landscape and cuisine. For tourism to thrive, agriculture policy has to be tailored to preserve the countryside—what the French call “la France profonde” or the deepest expression of the French culture— since the countryside is credited with attracting more foreign tourists to France than any other country.

With meticulous planning in consultation with the Ministere delegue du Tourisme, small farmers are subsidized to stay on the land. They receive free health care, retirement pay as well as agricultural stipends. Farmers are paid to rebuild their barns, outbuildings and fences in the architectural tradition of their areas. Barns and outbuildings constructed in the

local architectural style are subsidized. Country inns and bed-and-breakfasts to lodge tourists are subsidized with strict rules about cooking with local ingredients. Old buildings and churches are preserved. Villages are wired for internet.

Without those picturesque farms raising food for out-of-the-way two-star restaurants, French cuisine would suffer mightily. And without those picturesque small villages and farms, huge agribusinesses or developers would take over and change the landscape forever.

Alain Moulinier, who was the deputy minister for rural affairs in 2003 under Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, said the philosophy was simple. Tourism should underwrite all the regions—hence the insistence that music and art festivals, photography and painting exhibits be held in every part of the country. And tourists should be able to travel anywhere by train.

Above all tourism should enrich the traditions throughout the country, not destroy them. “And we guard our traditions first of all by taking care of our people,” said Mr. Moulinier.

It works. France, which is little more than twice the size of the state of Colorado, captured nearly ten percent of the world tourism market, earning it \$57.4 billion and making it the most popular destination ahead of the United States.³⁸

It is an expensive operation. The government spent \$134 million last year just on promotion and insuring the quality of tourist establishments.³⁹ But by making stewardship of the land and culture an intricate part of tourism planning, the French are realizing double value through sustainable tourism.

This is what Ms. Harms learned first hand in Costa Rica, where sustainable tourism is known as “eco-tourism.”

³⁸“Tourism in OECD Countries, 2008, Trends and Policies” p. 130-132

³⁹ Ibid

“I grew up with it when it was in its nascent state, when the country was asking how do we preserve these pristine places. The answer was low impact tourism, pitched to back packers. There were Spartan, small cottages, with plumbing and electricity but not a lot of comfort. The resort would provide family meals but not restaurants per se,” she said.

As Costa Rica became renowned for these beautifully preserved beaches and forests, eco-tourism grew to include high-end luxury resorts that respect the land, use renewable energy, carefully use of water and recycle waste. But they cost a tremendous amount of money. And in parts of the country, mass tourism has made inroads.

“You end up with two very different poles for our ecotourism because our environment could not tolerate unregulated inexpensive mainstream tourism,” she said.

The answer is education, she said, to convince people to see tourism in a different light. Her group is part of the World Heritage Alliance organization that enlists private enterprise, public institutions, and governments to enforce sustainable tourism.

“We’re not saying that people are bad travelers. Instead, we’re saying they should go, see and help preserve through regulated, low impact tourism,” she said.

No where has such planning had more dramatic effect than in Africa.

Much like the Ottoman rulers who bribed Bedouins not to kill the Haj pilgrims, countries are now creating community-based systems that employ local people in the game parks rather than leave them in rural poverty, where their next meal was an endangered species. Now these parks are some of the last preserves for Africa’s great animals, its biodiversity, and way of life.

Namibia has won awards for its conservancies that promote tourism to preserve the land. Registered with the Ministry of Environment and Tourism and supported by the World Wildlife Fund, these conservancies manage 25.9 million acres of land that was once the

scene of conflict over scarce resources with routine illegal hunting and destruction of natural habitat. Today the conservancies provide 3,000 jobs caring for the parks that attract tourists and generate \$2.73 million.⁴⁰

All of these examples—from a wealthy nation, a developing nation and a nation still home to wildlife—required thoughtful planning, regulated tourism and a vision that incorporated tourism into the national strategy just as energy and transportation plans are part of a national program. In all these cases, tourism is regulated to reduce the stress of visitors on a country and the earnings from tourism are invested in stewardship programs that protect the country's resources, environment and culture which attracted the tourists in the first place.

Nothing could be further from the current American *laissez-faire* attitude towards tourism.

But, as is often the case, the states are ahead of the federal government and are promoting their own tourism stewardship programs. From Rhode Island to Arizona, states are pioneering tourism that protects the environment and the sense of place. The industry is not always happy. In Florida and other states, the tourism industry has lobbied against any attempt to re-invest hotel occupancy and rental cars taxes into environmental funds or anything else but tourist promotion.

Rhode Island and Arizona signed the Geotourism Charter with the National Geographic Society, which commits the states to preserve and protect their assets through the Center for Sustainable Destinations, an organization that includes research to create best practices.

⁴⁰ www.wwf.org.uk/researcher/places/000000029.asp

“We need to promote recreation ecology, a relatively new discipline that could figure out how many people it takes to trash a stream in a national park; or the number of all-terrain vehicles to tear up a landscape,” said Mr. Tourtellot.

Other nations are posing those questions whether they call their approach geo-tourism, eco-tourism, heritage tourism or civic tourism. It requires careful coordination, enforceable standards and full government support for stewardship of tourism.

Conclusion: New Approaches for the Travel Section

If nothing else, the travel sections—in newsprint and on the web—could use a dose of realism in their pages, perhaps best accomplished by reporting the missing story of the tourism industry.

This does not mean transforming the section of dreams into a section of turgid expositions on all the damage being done in the name of pleasure travel. But it would require enlarging articles to include a view that does not treat tourists as innocent voyeurs but as people who have a serious impact on the places they visit. Such travel stories about tourism's effects, written from various locales, would add depth to the sections and authority.

Moreover, the tourism industry is easily one of the more fascinating, underreported stories. It is highly likely that governments will further regulate tourism often in concert with officials charged with the environment, transportation, immigration, agriculture, and, of course, security. Few reporters have delved into the unexpected consequences of border screeners have had on tourism to the United States.

With the turmoil in journalism today, this is the ideal time to experiment with the travel section.

Readers already look to the travel pages for ideas for their next trip and a guide to the best value for their money. Stories could also include best practices with links to any number of websites with guidelines, codes of conduct and ethics, principles, checklists, labeling, accreditation programs, seals, standards and certification programs, and evaluations. The United Nations World Tourism Organization and other U.N. agencies are good places to start.

Travel pages could also up their game by routinely including the worst as well as the best value at destinations. Food critics pan restaurants; tourist writers can be honest about

the locales they visit. Already readers are turning to the web for consumer critiques—the picks and pans of strangers—that are absent from travel sections. Why not fill the vacuum with reasoned judgments?

It would help if sections also returned to the tradition of commissioning pieces from experts who could offer an actual sense of the history and culture of a place. After reading pages of stories of eating here and sleeping there, looking at this and that, an old Baedeker tour guide with articles by historians and archeologists is a welcome tonic.

Above all, travel writers should report and write more like a foreign correspondent and not well-heeled consumer. Why not report the story and interview the locals who wait on tables, the ministers of tourism, the civic activists, and chambers of commerce and ask them what tourism means to their community? Until recently most Americans were happy to believe that tourists benefitted a location simply by spending money there.

The pendulum has swung too far in the direction of the travel brochure. There are plenty of glossy travel magazines like “Departures,” published by American Express, that perform the duty of whetting appetites for travel.

It is also time to put an end to publishing travel stories written by freelancers who are subsidized by the industry. Those articles can be published by the industry that commissioned them.

Sometime in the future the United States will treat tourism as the serious industry it is. The travel pages could be ahead of that story and all the other efforts—by the United Nations, non-profit groups, and the states—to coordinate and regulate tourism. And from their comments posted throughout the web, it seems obvious that tourists themselves want that larger view.

Other sections will write about the global tourism industry. But why would the travel pages give up the global tourism beat, one of the most dynamic stories on the planet?