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Tourism and the Corona crises: Some ATLAS reflections

The Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research (ATLAS) was established in 1991 to develop transnational educational initiatives in tourism and leisure. ATLAS provides a forum to promote staff and student exchange, transnational research and to facilitate curriculum and professional development. ATLAS currently has members in about 60 countries. More information about ATLAS can be found at <http://www.atlas-euro.org/>.

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Ecotourism and Conservation under COVID-19 and Beyond¹

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Introduction

Among the many sweeping consequences of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is its dramatic impact on the global tourism industry. Depending on how one defines it, tourism can be considered the largest industry in the world. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) claims, indeed, that tourism accounts for 10% of global GDP and hence 1 out of every 10 jobs worldwide.¹ At the time of writing (June 2020), every tourist destination in the world has implemented significant travel restrictions and many have shut down completely. While some places are already beginning or planning to reopen, tourism arrivals – and hence revenue – are likely to remain severely restricted for the near future; hence the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that global visitations in 2020 may drop 60-80% overall due to the lockdown.² Ultimately, the COVID-19 crisis could thus potentially eliminate 50 million tourism jobs worldwide,³ resulting in losses of hundreds of billions of euros to tourism operators and workers.⁴

Among the various subsectors affected by this situation is ecotourism – travel to experience “natural” spaces that is intended to support both environmental protection and community development (see Honey, 2008). Ecotourism was, until the crisis, one of the fastest growing segments of the global tourism industry (Fletcher 2014) and an important source of financing for biodiversity conservation in many places. Consequently, the COVID-19 tourism contraction has important implications for the future of the global effort to preserve endangered species and ecosystems throughout the world.

In this short article we explore these implications for the future of ecotourism and its function as a key conservation (financing) strategy. We begin by outlining the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for conservation and its relation to ecotourism. We then focus on how the crisis has impacted ecotourism specifically and how policymakers have proposed to address these impacts. We finish by outlining our own proposal for “convivial conservation” as a hopeful way through and out of the current crisis.

¹ A previous but different version was previously published as:
Fletcher, R., B. Büscher, K. Massarella and S. Koot. 2020. “Close the Tap! COVID-19 and the Need for Convivial Conservation.” *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 85: 200-211.

² <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284421152>

³ <https://www.unwto.org/news/covid-19-international-tourist-numbers-could-fall-60-80-in-2020>

⁴ <https://wtcc.org/About/About-Us/media-centre/press-releases/press-releases/2020/coronavirus-puts-up-to-50-million-travel-and-tourism-jobs-at-risk-says-wtcc>

⁴ <https://www.unwto.org/news/covid-19-international-tourist-numbers-could-fall-60-80-in-2020>

Ecotourism, Conservation, and COVID-19

When 2020 was declared a “super year” for biodiversity conservation, no one suspected that a particular form of this biodiversity would proliferate to such an extent as to bring all of the anticipated activity to a screeching halt.⁵ With current species and ecosystems in dangerous decline the world over (IPBES, 2019), there is growing recognition that such previous conservation strategies focused on the market have been largely inadequate to tackle the challenges they face, and hence that something radically different is needed (Kareiva et al. 2012; Wuerthner et al., 2015). A series of global meetings to address this deficiency were scheduled to take place throughout 2020, including the IUCN’s quadrennial World Conservation Congress,⁶ the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention of Biological Diversity,⁷ (OECD, 2019) and the 26th COP of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to plan for the future of climate change intervention,⁸ upon which biodiversity conservation crucially depends (Harvey, 2020).

These global meetings have all now been postponed, cancelled or pared back due to the pandemic. This means that the future of global biodiversity conservation has been left even more uncertain than before. This uncertainty is compounded by COVID-19’s impacts on the ecotourism industry, as over the past decade ecotourism has become one of the main sources of support and revenue for conservation worldwide (Hockings et al, 2020).

In some situations, the ecotourism contraction is impacting wildlife directly. For instance, animals inhabiting conservation areas who have come to depend on tourists for food have been threatened by the sudden withdrawal of this sustenance (Roth, 2020). Fears that endangered mountain gorillas might contract the virus from human visitors, meanwhile, has resulted in a suspension of highly lucrative tourism activities in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁹

On the other hand, the global lockdown has also provoked massive human withdrawal from many spaces that have now largely been left to nonhuman species.¹⁰ The result has been a widely documented proliferation of wildlife in national parks and other conservation areas.¹¹

In some places with less stringent restrictions, by contrast, people have been flocking to conservation areas, as well as to nearby rural communities, as a potential refuge from the virus and to escape the drudgery of home-bound lockdowns (McGivney, 2020; Petersen, 2020). In a variant of this trend, some indigenous groups, in Brazil, Canada and elsewhere, are also retreating to remote

⁵ <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/news/2020-super-year-nature-and-biodiversity>

⁶ <https://www.iucncongress2020.org/>

⁷ <https://www.greengrowthknowledge.org/event/2020-un-biodiversity-conference>

⁸ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/conferences/glasgow-climate-change-conference-to-be-postponed>

⁹ <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/virus-which-causes-covid-19-threatens-great-ape-conservation>

¹⁰ <https://dailyhive.com/mapped/yosemite-national-park-animals-video>

¹¹ <http://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20200330-wild-animals-wander-through-deserted-cities-under-covid-19-lockdown-ducks-paris-puma-santiago-civet-kerala>

areas to protect themselves from infection and access alternate food supplies (Fellet, 2020; Morin, 2020).

Ecotourism and Conservation Finance

One of the most significant and potentially damaging implications of the COVID-19 - ecotourism contraction concerns the loss of revenue to communities living in or near conservation-critical areas. Generation of income through participation in ecotourism has become one of the main strategies to enrol local people within conservation programming over the past several decades. This campaign is grounded in what Martha Honey calls the 'stakeholder theory' asserting that 'people will protect what they receive value from' (2008: 14). Such 'stakeholder' enrolment is one manifestation of an increasingly popular strategy for championing conservation more generally, consistent with paradigmatically neoliberal understandings of human reasoning and motivation, that aims to harness "market-based instruments" like ecotourism to offer economic incentives sufficient to make conservation more lucrative than other more destructive land use options (Fletcher, 2010).

This stakeholder strategy has always been a dangerous gamble, since basing conservation support on such 'extrinsic' motivation (rather than an 'intrinsic' sense of care for biodiversity) could obviate this support were the revenue fuelling this motivation to disappear (Serhadli 2020). And considering the instability of the tourism industry due to its dependence on an inherently volatile global economy, it was never really a question *if* this would happen, but *when*. As Dickson Kaelo, CEO of the Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association, thus worries:

Members of these communities may lose faith in wildlife conservation if there is no money forthcoming. In addition, people who live around these wildlife havens and looked forward to selling artefacts to tourists may resort to other income-generating activities such as farming, fuelling the never-ending human-wildlife conflicts as animals invade and destroy their new farms. (in Greenfield, 2020)

This is precisely what seems to be occurring right now, with instances of poaching and encroachment on the rise within many conservation spaces worldwide (Greenfield, 2020). Yet is this ostensive connection really so clear-cut? Some question the assertion that conservation depends so heavily on tourism revenue, pointing out that implicit in this stance is the assumption that (usually foreign) tourists and conservationists are the main actors valuing and nurturing biodiversity. Kenyan conservationist Mordecai Ogada thus asserts, "Let's not pretend at any point that tourists are the ones that look after our wildlife. Our wildlife is looked after by our people, our wildlife rangers, and those mandated by government to care for them."¹²

What next?

Given all of this, what is likely to happen next? There is much uncertainty at the moment and different possibilities exist. In the short term, it is probable that forms

¹² <https://www.theelephant.info/videos/2020/04/20/dr-mordecai-ogada-conservation-in-the-age-of-coronavirus/#.Xp29Azncfw0.facebook>

of coercive conservation enforcement will intensify – as they already have in certain places – as ‘softer’ options, such as the inclusion of local communities in conservation through ecotourism, dry up. Yet others assert that the precarity of ecotourism finance exposed by the COVID-19 crisis signals the need for a deeper rethinking of how conservation is funded more generally (Greenfield, 2020; Robinson, 2020). This is compounded by acknowledgment that even before the current crisis global conservation efforts already experienced a substantial financial shortfall estimated at 200-300 billion euros per annum (Credit Suisse and McKinsey, 2016).

Thus *Johan Robinson, Chief of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Biodiversity and Land Degradation Unit at the UN Environment Programme (UNEP)*, contends, “If the international community is serious about conserving biodiversity as part of a just and sustainable world, we must get serious about funding conservation” (Robinson, 2020). To achieve this, Robinson calls for development of “a new class of financial asset, ripe for sustainable investment. Success would depend on investments that simultaneously reinforce the impact of conservation; providing capital preservation and/or returns on investments and generating cashflows through sustainable use of nature by local communities.”

Creation of a financial asset class for conservation has been a widespread aspiration of many for some time now. Several years ago, for instance, Credit Suisse and McKinsey (2016) advanced a similar call in a widely circulated report entitled *Conservation Finance From Niche to Mainstream: The Building of an Institutional Asset Class*. This report helped to inspire creation of a Coalition for Private Investment in Conservation, organized by IUCN and including Credit Suisse as well as bankers JP Morgan Chase along with UNEP, GEF, Conservation International and the World Bank, among many others, to put this plan into action.¹³ However, Dempsey and Suarez (2016: 654) demonstrate that efforts to tap economic markets for conservation finance globally to date have fallen far short of intended aims, producing only “slivers of slivers of slivers” of envisioned funding. Meanwhile, global programmes like payment for ecosystem services (PES) and the reduced emissions from avoided deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) mechanism have largely morphed from their original design as “market-based instruments” (MBIs) for conservation finance into dependence on state-based taxation and other forms of redistributive funding (Fletcher et al., 2016; Fletcher and Büscher, 2017).

There is little to suggest that this situation will reverse in the future. On the contrary, there are serious questions whether it is possible for MBIs to ever achieve their aim to reconcile conservation and sustainable local livelihoods with profitable return on investment at a significant scale (Fletcher et al., 2016). In fact, it is apparent that most MBIs paradoxically depend on expansion of destructive extractive industries as the basis of their economic model (ibid.).

A growth-dependent economic model is also the foundation for ecotourism’s role in funding conservation efforts. Current calls to *recover* the overarching tourism industry post-crisis often deny the industry’s dependence on this economic model demanding ever-increasing resource consumption as the basis for tourism

¹³ <http://cpicfinance.com/>

expansion.¹⁴ The UNWTO's programme for post-COVID-19 tourism recovery (released in May 2020 when many countries were still in full lockdown), for instance, is focused entirely on restimulating maximum tourism growth. This programme builds on three pillars - "**economic recovery**, marketing and **promotion** and institutional strengthening and **resilience building**" – none of which aim to substantially reform the sector or to decrease its dependency on the current unsustainable economic model.¹⁵ A variety of other tourism organizations and professionals also emphasize the importance of increasing tourism flows again, scarcely acknowledging the industry's contribution to climate change and other environmental problems (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2020).

Rather than presenting opportunities for increased conservation finance through market expansion, or to simply regrow the tourism industry to its former unsustainable state, the current crisis will likely intensify pressures on already vulnerable conservation areas as governments and capitalists look to previously restricted natural resources as new sources of accumulation in a by-now familiar disaster capitalism playbook.¹⁶ The global economy is already in deep recession and will likely sink further in the months to come (Elliot, 2020). After the 2008 recession, capitalists turned to intensified resource extraction to recapture lost growth (Arsel et al., 2016), at great expense to ongoing conservation efforts. It is likely that this same pattern will be repeated. At the same time, the growing recession will certainly further impoverish countless residents of rural communities close to biodiversity hotspots (Elliot, 2020) who may be forced to turn to exploitation of conserved resources if other survival options dry up. In the realm of tourism, meanwhile, disaster capitalism entails pushing through further privatization and corporate consolidation of the type that occurred, for instance, in tourism reconstruction throughout Asia following the 2004 tsunami (Swamy, 2011). We are already seeing signs of this in the rush by airline, hotel and restaurant operators to capture the bulk of proposed state bailout packages in the US and elsewhere.¹⁷

Conclusion: Towards convivial ecotourism

All of this suggests the need for a more profound rethinking of conservation finance, and ecotourism's role within this, than either Robinson or the UNWTO propose. As Serhadli (2020) asserts, "If we promote conditions where local people are completely dependent on external market forces, and the motivation behind conservation is money-based, then conservation will always be dependent on a stable global economy, which is highly uncertain as we are witnessing right now."¹⁸ Rather than doubling down on efforts to fund conservation through economic markets that have proven quite miserly thus far, we may instead need to double-step in the opposite direction. That is, we may need to "begin taking the market out of conservation altogether" and "instead experiment with providing subsidies (state supported or otherwise) to resource-dependent communities based on direct taxation of extractive activities of the type that are already in some cases covertly

¹⁴ See e.g. <https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/05/04/the-war-on-tourism/>

¹⁵ <https://www.unwto.org/news/unwto-releases-a-covid-19-technical-assistance-package-for-tourism-recovery>

¹⁶ <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/16/coronavirus-capitalism/>

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/20/coronavirus-washington-lobbyists-bailout>

¹⁸ <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/05/market-based-solutions-cannot-solely-fund-community-level-conservation-commentary/>

supplied through MBIs” (Fletcher et al. 2016: 675). This makes it crucial that post-COVID-19 tourism recovery in particular remains focused on social and ecological justice rather than falling for conventional ‘responsible’ tourism solutions (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

All of this, finally, must be embedded within a different approach to pursuing conservation more generally. One that allows humans and nonhumans to live side-by-side in meaningful coexistence rather than shallow commodified encounter. And one that supports and subsidizes the livelihoods of people living intimately with wildlife beyond providing precarious tourism employment – for instance, through redistributive mechanisms like a conservation basic income (Fletcher and Büscher, 2020). Such an approach, termed “convivial conservation (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020), is currently being debated and tested in a number of places by various actors. Aspects of it are already being practiced in many indigenous and community conservation projects worldwide,¹⁹ while measures to redirect tourism development specifically in a more sustainable direction have also been proposed²⁰ and in some cases implemented.²¹

The time is now ripe to expand and scale up such initiatives. Calls for radical or “transformational” change in conservation and other arenas have been gaining momentum over the last decade (e.g. IPBES, 201; Adams, 2017; Lorimer, 2015) and the COVID-19 crisis has added urgency to these calls. If transformational change is indeed most likely to happen at ‘times of crisis, when enough stakeholders agree that the current system is dysfunctional’ (Olsson et al., 2010, 280), then the current conjuncture may present an opportunity to find a new way forward that may not have seemed possible before.

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¹⁹ <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/>

²⁰ <https://politicalecologynetwork.org/2020/03/24/tourism-degrowth-and-the-covid-19-crisis/>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/28/khonoma-indias-first-green-village-adapts-to-coronavirus-life-without-tourists-aoe#maincontent>

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