

# Unbalanced Tourism Development: Concepts, Causes, Cures

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The logo for KU Leuven, featuring the text "KU LEUVEN" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters inside a dark blue rectangle with a light blue border.

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# Four Big Questions for Today:

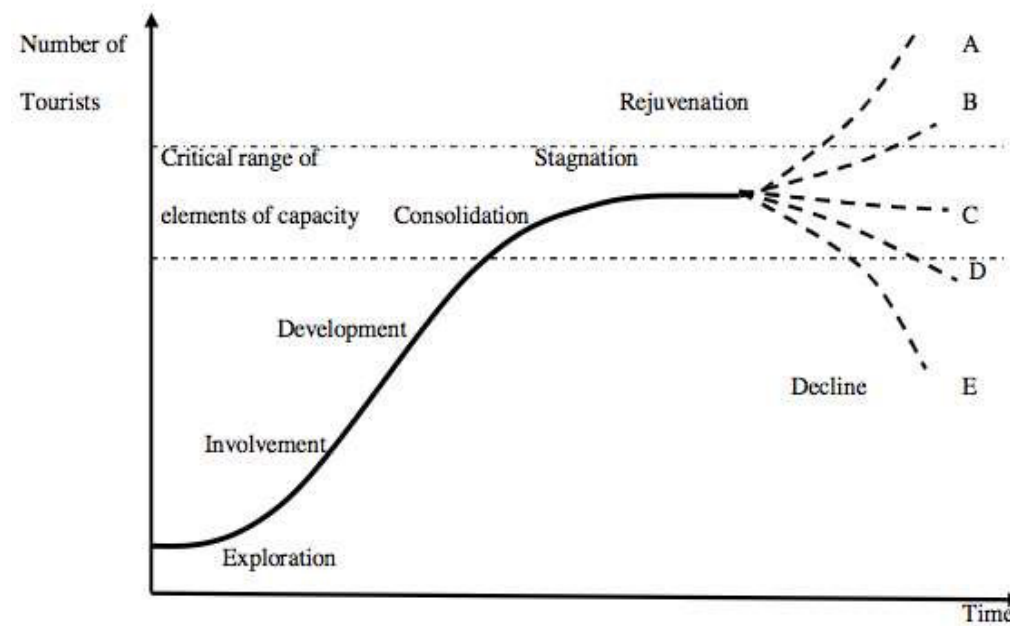
- ▶ Is tourism a “blessing or a blight” (Young 1973)?
- ▶ What the heck is unsustainable or unbalanced tourism anyway?
- ▶ Unbalanced tourism development. Who is to blame?
- ▶ How Can Tourism Development Become or Remain Balanced?

# Tourism. Blessing or Blight?

- ▶ The tourism market has grown almost continuously after WWII. The growth of tourism demand structurally exceeds that of the global economy.
- ▶ The positive economic effects of this growth are huge and are making the tourism industry one of the global economy's cornerstones.
- ▶ However, we now know that this growth has not only generated (collective) benefits, but also (collective) costs.
- ▶ Consequently, the awareness that there are limits to the growth of tourism, especially at the destination level, and that the mass tourism business model has become obsolete, has spread very quickly.
- ▶ *Sustainable or Balanced Tourism Development* as an alternative paradigm to unlimited mass tourism.



The Concept of Balanced Tourism Development.  
Specific Stages in the TALC (Butler 1980) or  
Doughnut Destinations (Van der Borg 2023)?



## Unbalanced Tourism Development Who is to Blame?

- ▶ Ignorant and uneducated visitors? Greedy and ruthless tourism firms? Incapable policymakers? Sometimes, yes, but unsustainability is almost a 'natural' feature of tourism development.
- ▶ In fact, a destination is a hodgepodge of some private and many *public* natural and cultural goods, *public* spaces, *public* services and *public* facilities, also called *commons*, that are very difficult to allocate effectively by just relying on the market or on improvisation.
- ▶ On one hand, there is tourism capital that is left to just perish.
- ▶ On the other hand, the *Tragedy of the Commons* prevails: an almost unavoidable drive of individuals to use these commons free of charge and, hence, excessively.
- ▶ *Under-* and *Overtourism* are **both** socially and economically undesirable.

## Persuing Balanced Tourism Development?

- ▶ Hence, the quest to an optimal use of tourism capital is of the utmost importance. No miracle cure, but a cruise ship that slowly changes direction.
- ▶ Towards an innovative tourism development where inhabitants and *local* entrepreneurs always come first and where quality always come before quantity. The UNWTO definition of sustainable tourism needs a revision which is more than just symbolic.
- ▶ Towards destinations where ALL collective benefits and costs are considered and constantly monitored and form the foundations of all policies, including a tourism development policy that is firmly anchored in all other policies.
- ▶ Towards a business model in which added value and long-term competitiveness based on quality rather than on price are more important than short term successes.

## What else can be done to assure that tourism development becomes or stays a blessing for a destination?

**Undertourism** requires an almost classical package of intervention: product development, positioning of the product, promotion, and so forth. But be aware of the limitations of tourism development right from the start.

Fighting **Overtourism** is one of our principal challenges today. More concretely:

- ▶ Create a *monitoring system* or *observatory* that produces indicators, presents thresholds, and formulates protocols for tourism policy.
- ▶ Determine the tourism carrying capacity of the destination, not as some magical number, but as an important input for tourism development strategies.
- ▶ Visitor management and selective marketing policies, that may include reservation system, ICT that make destinations smarter, optimal tourism taxes.

Bottom line: tourism is way too important to be left to improvisation or the market, as is now often the case. And European tourism deserves something similar to an Industrial Policy.