

**[Notes & Discussions]**

# **Disaster Tourism**

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## 研究ノート

# Disaster Tourism

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## 1. Background

Direct and near-direct experience of two of the more devastating earthquakes of 2011 went a long way toward convincing me of the need to bring tourists back to these places as soon as possible in order to facilitate recovery. Returning from Christchurch to a Japan that was soon to suffer devastation on a scale it had not experienced for decades, I was already quite shaken, but determined not to let the Christchurch earthquake dissuade me from going back in the future. On the contrary, I was already looking ahead to the day when I could return and see how the resilient people of Canterbury had recovered. What followed in a little over one week brought on feelings of despair and anguish as the Tohoku region of Japan bore the merciless brunt of not only a devastating earthquake and tsunami, but also a nuclear crisis not seen since Chernobyl in 1986. It could hardly be surprising that the events of February 22nd in New Zealand practically vanished from the consciences of Japan's people, despite the fact that a number of Japanese had lost their lives or suffered injury in that earthquake.

Immediately after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, people mobilized to help the stricken areas. Donations poured in from across Japan and the world. International rescue teams arrived and went to work as quickly as they could. Obviously tourist arrivals plummeted across the area immediately affected, but the fact that the entire Tohoku region and beyond also suffered a similar fate rang alarm bells. This was as true for international arrivals to Japan as a whole as it was for domestic arrivals in those areas. That radiation was also involved magnified the impact on international arrivals and foreign tourists to north and

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eastern Japan almost completely vanished overnight. Many areas that rely heavily on tourism were in a near crisis situation.

## 2. Scope and introduction

This study's remit is primarily to consider the potential for sustainable tourism to contribute to the recovery of areas affected by the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. Although at first glance it may seem inappropriate to discuss tourism to an area that has just suffered a major disaster, on the other hand the necessity of providing assistance beyond what is needed in the extreme short term cannot be emphasized strongly enough. There will be serious questions about the infrastructure available to support any kind of tourism, and judgment in that regard is far beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the subject has already been broached to some degree by a form of volunteer tourism that has even been facilitated by major players in the Japanese tourism industry (Terase, 2011; p.10).

In the first instance, these companies understood the extreme delicacy of the issue and, after an initial period of reluctance and trepidation, appear to have gone to great pains to gauge what the reaction might be after they determined that it was worthwhile facilitating the large numbers of people hoping to be able to go directly to affected areas, which were suffering a lack of volunteers, and offer direct assistance in some form or another. Thus was volunteer tourism to the stricken areas initiated.

## 3. Volunteer tourism

Volunteer tourism may well have started with trips organized by Pierre Ceresole to areas devastated during the First World War, where volunteers helped in their rebuilding (McGray, 2004), though it was not really until the late 1950s that international volunteering (in the United States, at least) became mainstream.

Ingram (2008; p.26) points out that although Callanan and Thomas (2005) identify three 'tiers' of volunteer tourists (shallow, intermediate, and deep), it is not always clear where distinctions amongst the tiers may be drawn, nor is it necessarily appropriate to draw such distinctions. The issue may come down more clearly to a case of "whether volunteer tourism can make a difference to the host communities in which it is involved and if it should be taken seriously as an innovative development initiative" (Ingram, 2008; p.32).

Whether there are any clear conclusions to be drawn regarding this question in the case of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami is of great interest.

#### 4. Dark tourism

Any form of tourism that can be placed in the context of an event involving human deaths can be considered a form of dark tourism. Stone (2006) quotes Tarlow (2005) as identifying dark tourism as “visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives” (p.146), and it is easy to see how major disasters can be included in this category.

Use of the word ‘dark’ to describe this form of tourism may engender philosophical debate, which Stone is eager to avoid (Stone, 2006; p.146), so we may consider it to be a generic term that has slightly less subjectiveness than the term ‘morbid tourism’ used by Blom (2000).

Stone (2006) attempts to quantify the supply of dark tourism sites by means of “A Dark Tourism Spectrum” ranging from lightest to darkest and consisting of seven ‘shades’ altogether (p.150). The ‘place’ and ‘time’ of events play a major role in determining their location on the spectrum, with the darkest tending to be those more recent and closer to the actual location of the event. Intuitively, visiting the darkest sites is likely to generate more intense reactions upon the part of visitors and those judging their actions.

#### 5. Disaster tourism

The term ‘disaster tourism’ itself is one to which a large number of people will, almost instinctively, react negatively. The very idea that a location that has experienced - especially recently - a disaster (natural or otherwise) could be deliberately chosen as a destination by tourists seems repulsive at first glance. What motivates someone to visit such a place? Can we sanction the behaviour of a tour company who provides packages, presumably at a profit, which not only include but specifically target such destinations? Is the motivation some sort of macabre, voyeuristic fascination with the misery that has befallen others, or the type of capitalist opportunism that infuriates so many activists? Or is it possible that the motivation is a humanitarian instinct to help those who have suffered a calamity through no fault of their own?

Visiting the scene of natural disasters carries with it the danger of being interpreted as *schadenfreude*, which may even play a part in some tourists’ decision to visit any dark tourism site. The timing of a visit can also contribute to the likelihood of its being considered so, with tour bus-style visits to areas immediately post-disaster or during preliminary recovery phases almost certain to be perceived negatively by a majority of observers.

Discussion of an entry related to disaster tourism on the ‘Sociological Images’ website (Sociological Images, 2011) echoed this assumption, with most commenters expressing

extreme distaste at the behaviour of tourists who were portrayed as “taking photographs of . . . trauma, effort, and fear” of survivors cleaning up after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005. The commentary was inspired by a photograph of a sign upon which was written:

TOURIST  
Shame On You  
Driving By Without Stopping  
Paying To See My Pain  
1,600+ DIED HERE

(Sociological Images, 2011)

The intensity of feeling conveyed by this message is likely to be mirrored at any location where a disaster has taken place, and highlights the delicacy with which the situation needs to be approached.

Assuming that their motivations are altruistic, potential travellers need to make efforts to ensure their visit is as beneficial as possible. According to the website ‘Natural disasters: to visit or not’, ways in which this may be done include: understanding local sentiment towards such visits, using knowledgeable and responsible tour operators and guides, consuming in ways directly beneficial to local residents, and possibly donating time to help with projects at the destination. There are certainly questions about those doing this as to whether “this is a glorified holiday or are they genuinely making a difference” (“Natural disasters: to visit or not,” n.d.). This relates also to the concept of ‘volunteer tourism’ discussed above.

Even assuming that issues of timing and infrastructure on the ground can be satisfactorily addressed in most of Tohoku, the situation with regard to the nuclear component of the disaster may be even more complicated, due to a general sense of wariness with regard to radiation held by many, if not most, people. Much of this sense of wariness can be traced to the 1986 incident at Chernobyl, Ukraine (then Soviet Union) and its aftermath.

Almost 20 years after the accident at Chernobyl, the United Nations published a document that was interpreted to be calling upon tourists to visit the site as a form of ‘ecological tourism’ or ecotourism (UNDP, 2002; p.7). Some bloggers picked up on this (Ecotourism: Taking Pictures and Leaving Footprints, 2009), understandably questioning the connection between ecotourism and Chernobyl. One blogger even went so far as to actually visit the site and record his experiences both photographically and in writing on his blog (The Velvet Rocket, 2009). Most reactions tended to regard the U.N. call with some degree of cynicism.

## 6. Ecotourism/Sustainable Tourism and Conclusions

Although the document exhorting ecological tourism to Chernobyl was produced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2002), the way in which the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) defines ecotourism may give insight into how the organization justifies its position. The points outlined below may also be considered as a foundation for charting policy toward a type of tourism that will best contribute to recovery in the stricken regions of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami (and possibly even areas affected by the Fukushima-1 leak). UNEP highlights how ecotourism follows sustainable tourism, but may also be distinguished from the latter's broader definition because it "contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage" (UNEP, n.d.), and can provide benefits to local and indigenous communities through their inclusion in the stages of planning, development and operation. Thus, and in the context of the 'Convention on Biological Diversity', ecotourism entails "sharing the benefits of ecotourism developments equitably with local communities and indigenous people, by obtaining their informed consent and full participation in planning and management of ecotourism businesses" (UNEP, n.d.).

The document goes on to emphasize the commitment towards stakeholders inherent in ecotourism, by categorizing ecotourism as sustainable tourism following a set of clear processes that:

Ensures prior informed participation of all stakeholders,

Ensures equal, effective and active participation of all stakeholders,

Acknowledges Indigenous Peoples communities' rights to say "no" to tourism development - and to be fully informed, effective and active participants in the development of tourism activities within the communities, lands, and territories, and

Promotes processes for Indigenous Peoples and local communities to control and maintain their resources.

(UNEP, n.d.).

The role for local stakeholders is strongly emphasized in all forms of sustainable tourism and given the fact that the main wish of altruistic tourists hoping to visit Tohoku, and Christchurch, is to help the people who have suffered most, its concepts and principles match these aspirations most closely.

## 7. Further Study

Tasks for future research in this vein include evaluating the reality of local stakeholders' sentiments towards tourism and their expectations of its benefits. The efficacy of the volunteer tourism that took place can also have a role in evaluating strategies for how to best allocate

the resources and skills such tourists bring with them when they journey to an area in need of assistance.

The ethical ramifications of the types of tourism highlighted here also merit further investigation and clarification.

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