The global compact: The conservative politics of international tourism

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1. The political quandary of tourism

Tourism has enormous growth potential; almost every country desires an expansion in this sector. It is the world's largest export, yet it is ephemeral, produced within an encounter, usually fleeting, between host and guest. Whether and how to grow is not nearly as straightforward as one might hope. Because each tourist and each native brings along a unique jumble of expectations, knowledge, power, and aspirations, tourist encounters can transform both the tourist and the native, permanently altering the social and political contexts in which they live. When these personal encounters increase in number, they have extensive and complicated consequences for cultures, natural environments, and politics as well as local and international economies. International tourism is complex, full of contradictions and depths as characterized by the set of paradoxes shown in Table 1 [1]. This paper touches on all of these issues, but focuses on the last, that tourism pretends to be apolitical, but encapsulates problems of power and worth on a grand and global scale. We begin by pointing out international tourism's potential political effects, then describe the current state of international tourism, and the infrastructure, national and international, that support and guide it, emphasizing the ideas and practices that keep politics out and fashion it into a benign, politically unthreatening transaction.
Table 1
Quandaries of international tourism.

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<td><strong>Only through artifice can locals meet the tourist demand for authenticity:</strong> Tourists travel to different places for myriad reasons. Some seek the familiar, others more exotic, ‘authentic’ different ways of being, unfamiliar traditions, practices, foods and costumes. In this globalizing world, elaborate staging allows tourists to see “the actual thing” with humans and the natural world as whole and inseparable.</td>
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<td><strong>To capitalize on what you already have, you must borrow:</strong> Tourism can provide a major source of revenue for developing countries which may avoid debt by capitalizing on what they already have. When capital is lacking, financing from foreign lenders, placing the country in debt, or tax revenues with local people paying for major infrastructure and services used largely by outsiders.</td>
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<td><strong>What is environmentally sustainable is often unprofitable and insulting:</strong> Environmental degradation results from tourism, as well as other human activity. Although ecotourism may not conflict with environmental preservation, its sustainability relies on eco-tourists being few in number with unprofitable economies of scale, and not necessarily interested in the communities they visit.</td>
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<td><strong>The commodification of culture simultaneously preserves, transforms, and destroys it:</strong> Tourism places a premium on the parts of a culture that are visible and can be concretized such as handicrafts, costume, architecture, and glosses over those that are not, like the rules governing ‘proper’ behavior, bases for legitimate authority, or gender roles and relationships.</td>
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<td><strong>Money tourists spend to vacation in the south never reaches the south:</strong> Tourists of every stripe give most of their money to corporations headquartered in and owned by the wealthy countries. When tourists buy all-inclusive package holidays (meals, rental car, airfare, hotel), their local spending is contained within the corporate fortress, whose goal is to contain “leakage.”</td>
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<td><strong>Governments pursue tourism to benefit the local people, but in the process become oriented toward outsiders and away from their citizens:</strong> Tourism promotes an external orientation since, like other exports, the tourism experience is produced by local people, and consumed by foreigners. This “natural” external quality combines with international lending conditions to orient the government to foreign, rather than domestic, interests.</td>
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<td><strong>Attempts to present living nature or culture to tourists, or those to protect them from tourists, dilute them:</strong> Cultural idiosyncrasies and natural spectacles change over time. Tourists cannot be attracted, however, to an unstable and ambiguous culture, or to a natural site that is in the process of transforming itself. As a consequence, efforts are made to fix and standardize, and hide cultural change, much of which, ironically, comes from tourism itself.</td>
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<td><strong>Tourism is both the best possible development sector and the most treacherous:</strong> Visitors to and employees of hotels and museums, corporate shareholders and state officials, can all benefit. Many more benefit indirectly as dollars multiply through the regional economy, but whoever owns and runs the main tourist industries profits. Moreover, tourism is a risky investment, and even successful, countries and localities are faced with a dilemma: allow it to remain an enclave sector, limited in benefits, or force it to grow roots, extending benefits but also deepening dependence on a single, fickle industry.</td>
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<td><strong>International terrorists piggyback on tourist norms, taking advantage of the ambiguity.</strong> Terrorist violence can be made possible by tourism, and can aim to undermine tourism and have huge direct and indirect consequences. Countries really want tourists, and they really do not want terrorists. Both arrive in vulnerable places, so governments have little choice but ascertain their intent, diminishing the tourist experience.</td>
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<td><strong>Tourism pretends to be apolitical, but it encapsulates problems of power and worth on a grand and global scale.</strong> When tourists encounter local people, they bring the weight of their expectations, their leisure and their power. Locals see this, and respond: they react against it, make a counter offer, or adapt to expectations. This seemingly trivial exchange can have profound economic, environmental, cultural and political effects, not only on individuals but on the global political economy.</td>
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Source: Shanks, based on Nine quandaries of tourism: artificial authenticity and beyond.

and shape. As with oil and automobiles, tourism affects the distribution of power and wealth within, and among, countries and peoples. For decades, critics have pointed to those (and other) industries as sources of power, and to the private interests that control them as central to geopolitics: “no blood for oil.” The politics of tourism, however, remain unspecified, unanalyzed, and we never hear “no blood for Petra.”

The contradictions of tourism listed in Table 1 help to explain why the politics of international tourism remain invisible. These most prominently include scale, elasticity, external orientation, unidentifiability of opportunity costs, and indeterminacy of lessons taught. Tourism’s politics are the politics of the status quo. Tourism, at the broadest and most general level, relativizes and depoliticizes difference. Its payoff is uncertain month to month. International tourism provides an external source of revenue that would otherwise need to come from taxation or structural economic changes. To a lesser or greater extent, tourist promotion is rent-seeking, in that it begins by revaluing through policy what is already there. Finally, outsiders take center stage as constituents, orienting policymakers and firms at all levels away from locals and toward the outside. From a global standpoint, the tourism industry’s salient features combine structurally to depoliticize its main dimensions. Tourism’s politics are barely visible because they reinforce, and reenact, the politics of the status quo.

If tourism were a more traditional industry, emphasizing production or finance, one could project future gains or losses as the main engines of supply and demand grind on. But tourism is a distinct enterprise, uniquely combining elasticity of demand alongside inelasticity of production, on a vast scale. From the point of view of any country that desires revenue with minimal investment, international tourism’s scale, along with its status as an elastic service export, creates vulnerability and unpredictability. Demand can plummet following a shift in travel fads, economic downturns, or political disasters. As with other services, tourism cannot be produced during lean times, to be stockpiled until times improve. It tempts every country wanting to raise funds without political cost or to improve its balance of trade (that is, every country): instead of raising taxes or reducing local consumption of foreign goods, a government in the red can gain revenue directly from foreigners. In sum, to any sovereign government, foreign tourists represent a domestic windfall, the international equivalent of the Powerball lottery.

From a more distant and critical view, that of the international system as a whole, political and cultural consequences become salient. General promoters of international tourism hope that it will produce, stabilize or assure a prosperous peace. Peace, of course, benefits the system as it is, and specifically benefits those who gain most from the system as it is. A series of mechanisms, none empirically verified, are thought to contribute to tourism’s help in peace-creation. First, cultural exchange is valued for its own sake, on the assumption that international understanding will reduce the misjudgments and mistakes that, people fear, lead to armed conflict [2]. In this scenario, conflicts arise from ignorance, and tourism provides more accurate knowledge leading to compassion. Second, the exchange of travelers, when it is ongoing, can produce international economic interdependence. Functionalist theory in international relations scholarship holds that trade integrates people
sufficiently that they cannot afford war [3]. Specialization and the division of labor across countries create structural dependencies. These opportunity costs add to war’s direct costs, enough to tip the scales against conflict. In academic theory, a third, less direct, mechanism might link tourism to peace: prosperity leads to democracy, and democracy leads to peace [4]. From this standpoint, tourism might have a diffuse yet pervasive effect on international politics, pacifying, stabilizing, and depoliticizing a process that, uninterpreted, constitutes massive foreign invasion. International tourism could be so undermining of the international system’s status quo, so potentially explosive, that we might consider its benign and even trivial aspect to be a useful, deliberate construction. Countries and international organizations then would be seen actively to depoliticize international tourism.

2. The tourism jackpot

Global tourism represents a multibillion dollar jackpot. The World Tourism Organization calculates that “international tourism receipts totaled US $733 billion, or US $2 billion a day, in 2006” [5]. Its growth varies by year and region but averaged about 5% annually over the past decades. From 25 million in the 1950s, the number of international travelers grew to over 800 million in 2005. Tourism creates new types of jobs, e.g. swan boat captain, and adds to the business seen by existing operations, e.g. airlines and museums. Incredible sums of money are at stake. The US Census Bureau tabulates receipts from international travelers to the US. In FY 2000, international visitors spent $59.4 billion on travel to (and more within) the United States. After taking a severe hit following the September 11, 2001 attacks, international tourism revenue fell by more than 8%, recovering to US $63.9 in 2005 [6]. The scale is such that all the top sending and receiving countries host more tourists than they have citizens. Per 100 population, Saudi Arabia sees 2007 visitors per annum. Even without a Mecca, a great many countries receive more people than live there: Russia, Hong Kong, and Croatia currently round out the top set. Even France, Hungary, Greece and Spain host about 120 international tourists for every 100 population. That number can translate into a great boon or a devastating source of trouble.

In destination countries, tourism revenue features on national accounts as a service export, even though the tourists import rather than export themselves, and the bulk of the money they spend goes not to the government directly, but to localities, individuals and corporations. Tourism has constituents at every level. Although gains and losses are reported in the aggregate, they are unique to specific destinations. The United Nations’ World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) states that “international tourism receipts represented in 2003 approximately 6 per cent of worldwide exports of goods and services (as expressed in US$). When considering service exports exclusively, the share of tourism exports increases to nearly 30 per cent” [7].

Unfortunately, tourism reflects, and reinforces, global inequalities. International tourism is worldwide in scope – every country, even those under martial law, receives tourists – but is weighted heavily toward the advanced industrial countries both as sources of tourists and as destinations for them. Most tourists travel from one OECD country to another. Europe and the Americas, the main tourist-receiving regions between 1950 and 2000, represented a joint market share of “over 95 per cent in 1950, 82% forty years later and 76% in 2000” [8]. The remainder travel from an industrial country to a developing or nonindustrial one, e.g. Japan to Palau. Third world people rarely get to be tourists. Tourism reinforces inequality by benefiting most the countries that already have the most. It does this by expanding the pie, so that absolute gains in revenue accrue even to those who lose in relative terms.

Tourism also benefits most the individuals who have the most. Those with wealth and leisure, the ability to leave, have the most reason to see poverty or exploitation in relative terms, as cultural variety. To attract tourists, an impoverished destination has the incentive to agree [9]. Relatively wealthy countries maintain their position through trade. They have extensive communications and transportation infrastructure; tourists can join business travelers with no extra investment. From an international point of view, tourism represents rich countries and rich people using their wealth, and the infrastructures associated with that wealth, to comprehend and reinforce some aspect of the status quo.

Destinations are complicit in this reinforcement. Tourism can serve such a range of purposes that every place can be a destination. Those with wealth and leisure want to see places that everyone has seen; they want to see places that no one has seen. People travel to escape modernity; they travel to confront it [10]. Tropical beaches and ski slopes, cities and villages, museums and open-air markets all attract tourists. Destinations capitalize on what they already have and already are—again, the status quo. Tourism, is to a considerable degree, about elites justifying, or mystifying, the status quo, and destinations playing into those expectations.

Ideally, tourists would be culturally invisible as well as politically weightless, having a strong, positive economic effect only. Visible tourism challenges local culture and the distribution of power that a government depends upon. Strictly controlling where tourists can go and what they can see—and who can see them—would be necessary to limit the tourists’ effects on local people. However, that would be self-defeating.

3. Promoting tourism

Local and national governments, regional and global international organizations, promote tourism. They do not regulate it, nor try to solve coordination problems within it, nor redistribute technical knowledge, as they do in other areas. Formal political institutions at every level uncritically promote tourism. That is all they do.

In other issue-areas, international governmental organizations, like the United Nations or World Trade Organization, help to solve coordination problems in international affairs, to set the standards on which countries can depend in a given issue-
area [11]. The United Nations, for example, serves as the seat of both international normative statements, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and international deals, like the London Ocean-dumping convention. Various specialized agencies provide a forum for states to coordinate policy, e.g. by managing currency exchange rates or setting the standard for the kilogram. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) provides a forum, and guidance, for the conflictual politics of global environmental conservation.

The World Tourism Organization, now affiliated with the United Nations, would be the place for such statements and agreements about international tourism, were there any. In fact, none exist; countries do not see this as an area of conflict, even conflict at the level of misunderstandings or coordination problems, let alone of distributive justice. The UNWTO tracks data on international tourists, where they go, and what they spend. It issues press releases and statistical compendia, informative at some level but offering no policy guidance. Sovereigns apparently see no problems of interest or values that need to be jointly worked out. There are treaties about Egyptian archaeological treasures and treaties about the Moon, but no treaties involving tourism. Twice, the United Nations has declared an “International Year,” promoting tourism generally in 1967, and ecotourism specifically, in 2002.

Regional IGOs and nongovernmental organizations also promote rather than regulate or criticize international tourism. Tellingly, organizations refer to it as cultural exchange. Service groups like Rotary International sponsor individuals and help with logistics. Universities sponsor abroad programs. Regional international governmental organizations often act to provide economies of scale in advertising to make travel to their region likelier. In fact, regions whose boundaries and members are otherwise defined by political conflict, such as the Middle East, unite to promote joint tourism [12].

World Heritage sites epitomize international governmental attitudes toward tourism. UNESCO, the UN agency devoted to preserving and promoting global cultures, has responsibility for administering the World Heritage Convention. Through this 1972 agreement, countries promise to protect natural, cultural and historical sites that have universal value and that constitute the “common heritage of mankind.” Hundreds of sites constitute what the World Heritage Commission calls “the List” ensuring that no one is left out. Listing, it is hoped, will make it easier to attract funding for preservation (though UNESCO provides almost nothing), through government and foundation grants and, mainly, through tourism. The World Heritage Commission has created a “passport” for sites as a way to promote awareness and spending. World Heritage Sites exemplify the relationship between international politics of tourism and the tourism market: governments all promote, but only promote; the private sector spends, and the invisible hand creates good.

The United Nations Development Program also supports tourism. For example, Albania has a Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports, which includes the National Tourism Organization. It received a 2-year grant from the UNDP because “Too little is known outside of Albania about the country’s rich history, its people’s hospitality, progress made towards the consolidation of democratic institutions let alone the country’s tourism potential. Albania suffers from a negative image in the world and much of the negativity often derives from misconceptions and clichés associated with the country’s previous isolation from the world and the fact that Albania remains one of the poorest countries in Europe” [13].

Revenue is the bottom line. Tanzania flirts with being the world’s poorest country. It has become home to refugees from every one of its eight neighboring countries and more besides. It hosts an international war crimes tribunal as well as national parks, like Mount Kilimanjaro and the Serengeti, and iconic visible cultures, like that of the Masai. Its near neighbor, Uganda markets itself as “gifted by nature.” Because Tanzanian officials fear that tourism would erode its natural and cultural sites – which are all the capital it has – the country’s policy is to accept as few tourists as possible, but charge them as much as possible [14]. Regulated tours can charge, for one week, one hundred times the local per capita income per annum. Tanzania does not want change; it wants revenue.

4. The political threat

States achieve sovereign status by securing legal jurisdiction over a territory and its population. Sovereigns divide territory, and the populations that live there, into mutually exclusive and exhaustive parcels. This system, in place first in Europe and then globally for hundreds of years, replaced the feudal practice of determining authority by issue. Sovereignty allocates authority by space. For this reason, control over who enters a given territory is central to sovereignty [15]. Immigration – migration not only into the territory but also into the political community – stands alongside territorial defense as the sine qua non defining the state.

States know this abstract fact and implement it through careful and sometimes complicated, precise, legislation. As the US Citizenship and Immigration Service states, “Citizenship is one of the most coveted gifts that the U.S. government can bestow, and the most important immigration benefit that USCIS can grant” [16]. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights allows all persons to choose whether to leave their countries of origin [17]. But there is no commensurate right to enter another. Were states to allow people to move freely, people rather than states would control a sovereign’s identity and resources. States do not allow free movement and they will not, as long as membership is associated with presence on a territory, and sovereignty serves as the defining principle of international politics.

Migration is in this way inherently, existentially, political and constitutive. It is also political and consequential in practice. If the incomers are like the current inhabitants, they compete with them. If they are unlike the inhabitants, they dilute their way of life. Incomers can carry contagious disease, practice customs that violate prevailing social principles, or seek to overthrow the government. In-migrants can by choice and by definition undermine a sovereign order.
What is true of those immigrating with the intention to stay is also true of those traveling temporarily. What distinguishes tourists from other categories of traveler is not behavior but purpose. Immigrants, business travelers, diplomats, missionaries, students, and refugees want something different from the destination country than tourists do. There are, however, no decisive, observable behavioral differences among them. In Paris, someone gets off an international flight from Malaysia. Tourist? Expatriate? Asylum-seeker? It is impossible to tell by examining behavior. The distinction is interpretive, hence, political.

This brings us to the latest quandary of international tourism. International terrorists piggyback on tourist norms, taking advantage of the ambiguous status of the traveler. The way to differentiate them is to attain a truthful answer as to intent. This is the only means available to governments, so they have little choice but to pose the question. The consequences create a dilemma. Countries really want tourists, really do not want terrorists, and cannot tell them apart. To be safe and poor or rich and vulnerable? Countries try to strike some balance. The US State Department says, “International visitors add greatly to our nation’s cultural, education and economic life. We continue the proud tradition of welcoming visitors to the United States, with secure borders and open doors” [18]. European Union countries’ citizens circulate within the community without visas, and the United States has established a “visa waiver” program that extends free entry to those who carry passports from its allies: Canada, Europe and Japan [19].

Terrorists can pose as tourists; terrorists can also use the tourism infrastructure as a platform for attack or, finally, attack tourists and tourism infrastructure deliberately. Terrorist violence can be made possible by tourism, and can aim to undermine tourism. The damage can be huge. When terrorists attack tourists and tourist sites directly, as in Egypt, or use resources that tourists rely on to perpetrate terror, e.g. bombing buses or sending commercial aircraft into buildings, tourists know that they are at risk and vanish traveling. Billions of dollars in revenue stop. The 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon had a dual impact on tourism to the United States. On the demand side, tourist bookings fell off sharply. On the supply side, tightened security inspections increased the cost of travel. The indirect effects were also numerous, as oil prices, new passport requirements, federal and local spending on transportation security and new restrictions at tourist sites, e.g. the Metropolitan Museum of Art, went into effect. Tourism became riskier, more expensive, and less convenient. As a result, tourism revenues fell, not only in the United States but globally, and did not recover for several years.

5. Tourism for peace and profit?

Based on what IGOS, NGOs and government agencies say, tourism could have one international political effect: to foster world peace through awareness of cultural difference. Government and organizational officers mention this possibility, which proves uncontroversial: empirical proof is not asked for. A few entities, politically marginal, dedicate themselves to this outcome. One, the International Institute for Peace through Tourism (IIPT) provides a forum for hotel CEOs and national tourism ministers to exchange ideas and to work out cooperative plans. Comprising representatives from the Middle East and Africa, the Institute understands itself to be “Dedicated to making Travel and Tourism the world’s first Global Peace Industry Promoting the belief that Every Traveler is potentially an ‘Ambassador for Peace’ Mobilizing the Travel and Tourism industry to be a Leading Force for Poverty Reduction” [20].

Within countries, local revenue is more immediately consequential than is world peace. The second place that tourism politics surface is in national ministries’ justifications for being. In Canada, for example, responsibility for tourism promotion goes to the provinces, each of which has a secretary devoted to tourism promotion. The Ontario “Ministry of Tourism supports delivery of high quality tourism and recreation experiences to Ontarians and visitors to Ontario. Promoting a sustainable, customer-focused tourism industry and an active population helps improve our quality of life, increase pride in our communities, and increase economic growth. The Tourism program seeks to increase investment in Ontario’s tourism industry by developing appropriate tools to foster an attractive climate in which to invest…. the program markets Ontario as a year-round world-class travel destination … to stimulate economic growth, job creation and stronger communities” [21]. Post-division Germany seeks to attract visitors to the headquarters of the notorious secret police as well as to major cultural sites like Leipzig; post-apartheid South Africa seeks to attract visitors to Robben Island as well as to the national parks. Thailand promotes post-tsunami tourism as a way to help coastal towns recover [22]. Everything and anything one has, or has experienced, can be tourism capital.

In the absence of a central coordinating body, tourism policy and its political meanings fall to governments to interpret and implement. Tourism’s bureaucratic location reveals its political salience, its status and formal position. Ministries of Tourism, cabinet-level bureaus, abound. All ministries are high profile and promotional rather than political. Most countries have a Minister of Tourism, an executive on an official (if not political) par with counterparts in agriculture, defense, foreign affairs, and so forth. With the exception of France, which has a cabinet-level minister devoted to tourism, the OECD and

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1 In the United States, for example, customs and naturalization ask “have you ever been a member of or in any way associated (either directly or indirectly) with (a) the Communist Party? (b) any other totalitarian party? (c) a terrorist organization?” (N-400 application for naturalization) Or INA 212a “relating to espionage or sabotage” and “control or overthrow of the government of the United States” [10].

2 Algeria, for example, has a Ministry of Tourism. Most of those without a ministry dedicated solely to tourism are those in which tourism shares a place with enterprises or concerns with which it is locally related: Andorra’s “Ministry of Tourism and the Environment” or Antigua’s “Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation.” Tourism is linked administratively with Antiquities, Culture, Foreign Affairs, Handicrafts, Information, Recreation, Sports, and Wildlife; Grenada, for example, has a Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation and Women’s Affairs and Social Security.
eastern European countries generally do not maintain independent tourism ministries or even bureaus within other ministries. Germany houses its tourism affairs officers within the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labor. The United States too has no centralized office for tourism.3

Like others in a similar position, Jake Obetsebi-Lamptey, Ghana’s Minister of Tourism and Modernisation of the Capital City, sees promotion rather than supervision or regulation as central to his mission. In a 2005 press conference to announce a 4-year strategic tourism plan, Obetsebi-Lamptey described his main projects as including (a) information provision and awareness, (b) encouraging cooperative land purchases which could combine into a single large resort, and (c) starting a tourism training school [23]. In other words, the country was going to try to use tourism to enhance its capital, and labor, and information. (Interestingly, although at the global level tourism is supposed to generate peace by way of cultural understanding, no country markets a visit to itself as doing this. “Understand Ghana to Stop Wars?”)

Countries have to take into account the consequences their policies and actions might have on tourism. Governments understand that going to war, hosting violent attacks, or suffering an environmental or humanitarian disaster will halt tourism. The Middle East has long been the least visited of the world’s regions; otherwise hostile countries get together to brainstorm how to maintain tourism in spite of violence. Trivializing events can also matter politically. Walt Disney’s plan to film the sequel to “Pirates of the Caribbean” in Dominica put that country in a bind. The script referred to Caribe Indians as cannibals, a historically inaccurate and potentially destructive label. Outcry against this, however, would jeopardize filming and the revenue it would bring. Dominica’s tourism minister Charles Savarin, responding to criticism, said that the film was not intended to be historically accurate, and filming could go ahead [25].

Our conclusion must be that international tourism is not only about the status quo, but it is importantly about the status quo. Most tourist travel is undertaken by the affluent; most revenue is reaped by the affluent. Governments and the tourism” link, and provides grants to localities, e.g. New Paltz and Niagara Falls, to upgrade tourism infrastructure. The “Empire passport,” a local analogue to the World Heritage passport, has nothing to do with control, but is a promotional gimmick [24].

References


