

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM HARMS NATURE AS WELL



Sustainable tourism is growing in popularity. Walking in the deserted Tierra del Fuego, sneaking through the cold rain forest in the Chiloé island, waiting in a tent at the foot of Mount Fitz Roy for the rain to stop. Travelers rarely get such great experiences of nature - and rarely manage to ruin so much as well.

The flight from Europe to Santiago de Chile alone, and even a domestic trip in one's country will represent a slight jolt at the numbers that the CO₂ calculator will show many years later: seven tons of carbon dioxide blown into the air, far more than the world's annual per capita emissions. Every trip to the natural wonders, even as a part of a sustainable tourism initiative, contributes to their demise.

Impact of Traveling

While air transport is the worst with respect to pollution, cruise ships are not much better. Although the cruise industry has made a lot of positive moves, almost all ships with high-sulfur heavy fuel are still on the waters. Many of them even without a reasonable exhaust technology that could filter out some of the pollutants. Not to mention the waste that cannot be optimally disposed of at the ports.

Even travelling on foot or by bicycle creates harm. Careless hikers disturb wild life. Cyclists damage the plants on the routes not meant as cycling trails. Also, everyone must stay somewhere, eat, and use the bathroom. From the environmental perspective, it would be easiest if they did it all at home, where it can be done in the most environmentally friendly and energy-saving manner. Unfortunately, that is unrealistic.

Sustainable Tourism in a Survey

A German survey made for the Ministry of Environment revealed that while one in four Germans claim to be interested in sustainable tourism and environmentally friendly travel, the travel behavior of these supposedly environmentally conscious holidaymakers hardly differed from that of the others, apart from the fact that they made a few more holiday trips - which probably was also because of the higher income of this group.

Of those who claimed to be interested in sustainable travel, almost three quarters did not want to miss out on flight tickets. And just one percent was prepared to pay at least one voluntary climate compensation. Such certificates, like those offered by Atmosfair, cannot undo the emissions, the money is however invested in climate protection, which is better than nothing.

Wealthy Travelers, More Problems

According to the UNWTO, tourism accounts for five percent of global emissions, with about a quarter tons of CO₂ released on average on each trip. However, in Germany one in three holidaymakers can afford air travel. In this country, the amount of emissions is likely much higher. A flight to Majorca produces more than 500 kg CO₂ per person. You can lose twenty times less in a packed small car from Munich to Lake Garda.

Mountain hiking is also not so pure as it may seem. In the past 14 years the number of members of the German Alpine Club grew from 600 000 to more than one million. In 1994, the association included conservation as a goal in its statutes and declared the tourist development of the Alps was over. Nevertheless, the routes are always safe, the cabins always comfortable, warm showers and WiFi are almost the standard. Mountaineering is a part of summer or winter, a mass sport. It is nice that people go to the mountains, but do we have to make them a comfortable adventure playground for adults?

Honest mass tourism is still preferable. A drinking tour in a student bus to Lloret de Mar, for example, may not be the most sophisticated form of travel, however, judging by the additional damage caused to the environment, surely this is better than some super custom nature-observation stay in the eco-lodge in the middle of the wilderness under the label of sustainable tourism.

Staying at Home Is No Solution

Stopping tourism might seem as a perfect solution. Sure, the planet would be spared of a lot of dirt, noise, waste, water consumption and climate damage. But many national parks in Africa would have to close without the income from tourism or would be at the mercy of poachers. Even in Germany national parks and biosphere reserves would soon be in need of justification when tourists stay away.

People would migrate from remote regions because there would be no more jobs and cultural landscapes would disappear. This is certainly not in the interest of environmental protection.

Presumably, there is no form of travel that can be implemented optimally for seven billion people in every respect. With sustainable tourism, it is more like food: it is all about the right mix. Flying should be a rare exception, nature deserves some respect, restraint is always good.

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