

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

As international borders reopen, some say tourism should be more sustainable post-COVID

Simon Leo Brown and Victoria Pengilley (Nov. 2, 2021)

With domestic and international borders gradually reopening, many tourism operators will be hoping for a swift return to pre-pandemic business conditions.

But Emma Whittlesea, senior research fellow at the Griffith University Institute for Tourism, says there is a better option than simply getting back to normal.

“There's a great opportunity to do tourism differently,” Dr Whittlesea tells ABC RN's Sunday Extra.

She says the break in business-as-usual provides a chance “to rethink how tourism can benefit community and environment and culture as well as the economy”.

Pre-pandemic, concerns about the impact of mass tourism on local environments saw some destinations closed entirely.

Thailand's Maya Bay, for example, featured in the Leonardo DiCaprio film *The Beach*, was closed to tourism in 2018 because of the damage to its ecosystem caused by thousands of people visiting each day.

Meanwhile, residents of popular destinations such as Venice and Barcelona protested at the detrimental effect tourism was having on their lives.

Dr Whittlesea says the pandemic has seen life in many of these places return a more “normal” state, with communities no longer being inundated by travellers.

“There's an opportunity to address those sustainability challenges, whether it be around waste, or emissions or impacts on communities that are negatively impacted by numbers of tourists,” she says.

She believes tourism can be harnessed as a force for positive change, one that helps ensure communities are “viable and resilient into the future”.

“It's about a shift from growth, and profit at all costs, to a more regenerative way of thinking.”

But, she says, government support will be needed for there to be anything more than gradual change.

Tourists want to be part of the solution

One place where many people are looking forward to a return of tourism is Fiji, which will welcome back international tourist flights from December 1.

Tourism Fiji CEO Brent Hill says, so far, bookings from that date have exceeded their most optimistic expectations.

“There definitely is that pent up demand to come and travel to Fiji,” he says.

For many, the reopening can't come soon enough. Tourism makes up around 40 per cent of Fiji's GDP.

Prior to the pandemic, Mr Hill says, about 150,000 people were directly employed by the country's tourism industry.

Post-pandemic, he says, that number was more like 20–30,000.

“Unfortunately ... we don't have the sort of level of government support that Australia does,” he says.

“A lot of people just had to go back to their villages and try and work things out from there.”

But sustainability is a pressing concern for the island nation.

Fiji's attorney-general Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum has described climate change as an “existential threat”, with 70 per cent of the country's population living within 5 kilometres of the shoreline.

Mr Hill says many of Fiji's resorts are working to reduce their carbon footprint, with some going entirely off-grid.

“Tourists are increasingly asking more questions of operators and wanting to find out, you know, what their credentials are in that space,” he says.

Mr Hill says tourists don't only want to know that they're not contributing to the problem — they want to feel like they're a part of the solution.

“One of the things I think is fantastic with tourism is that you can absolutely involve tourists in that sustainability push,” he says.

He says the local tourism sector is undertaking programs in coral farming and marine life conservation.

“People coming to Fiji can participate in those kinds of activities and just help leave it a better place for generations to come, which I think is a really critical thing.”

Dr Whittlesea says there are many other examples of tourism operators doing “exceptional things”.

“[There's] a lot of great work happening, for example, in protected ecosystems such as the Great Barrier Reef where they're engaging tourists in looking after those systems and also raising awareness at the same time,” she says.

“A lot of industry in those locations are becoming a lot more aware and making efforts to get eco-accreditation and to try and bring down their [carbon] footprint.”

Using tourism to drive wider change

Dr Whittlesea says there is already plenty of information on how to do tourism sustainably and many good examples of sustainable tourism.

She says it's time to "rethink how tourism can benefit community, environment and culture as well as the economy".

"I think there's a really big opportunity for the sector and the industry to really embrace some of the other emerging challenges and existing challenges that we have — such as climate — and actually start to embed those in plans and policies and really maximize the benefits of tourism," she says.

She says the pandemic is not only an opportunity to transform tourism, but also a chance to "think about how we can really utilise tourism as a vehicle to make changes in lots of other parts of our society".

But at the moment, while she is hopeful for such a transformation, she's not seeing much evidence of it.

"At the moment, the focus seems to be just getting back on track," she says.

"It would be good to see us getting back on track differently — and better."

Brown, Simon L., and Victoria Pengilley. 2021. "As international borders reopen, some say tourism should be more sustainable post-COVID."

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-03/time-for-sustainable-travel-covid-tourism-borders-reopen/100576474>
(accessed on November 11, 2021).

