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# The Tourist Gaze and the 'Environment'

*John Urry*

## **Introduction**

This paper is concerned with the implications of recent developments in tourism for especially the 'physical' environment. It will be shown that there are some striking changes taking place in how the environment is being 'read', how it is appropriated, and how it is exploited; and that these changes increasingly depend upon the economic, social and geographical organization of contemporary tourism. By the year 2000 this will be the largest industry in the world, in terms of employment and trade, and it is already having profound environmental consequences. These stem first, from the fact that much tourism is concerned with in a sense visually consuming that very environment; second, from the enormous flows of people carried on many different forms of transport which enable tourists to gaze upon often geographically distant environments; and third, from the various transformations of the environment which follow from the widespread construction of tourist attractions and from the incredible concentrations of people into particular places. The emergence of new technologies of transportation and of mass hospitality have transformed the environmental consequences of the world's current population. Because of the enormous scale of tourism, the carrying capacity of the earth and of its relatively finite resources is substantially reduced below what it would have been without that tourism.

To appreciate the scale of developments I will briefly outline some of the global developments in tourism. First, there are 400 million international arrivals a year (in 1989). This compares with merely 60 million in 1960. There are between three and four times that number of domestic tourists worldwide. International tourists are increasing by 4 to 5 percent per annum and will have risen at least 50 percent by the year 2000. International tourists currently spend \$209 billion a year, generate at least 60 million

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jobs and fill 10.5 million hotel beds. Moreover, there will be significant increases in the world's population over the next few decades, something like 93 million a year. Tourism will expand at a much faster rate than this increase in population. It grows with income since there is a high income elasticity of demand and as a result of new forms of publicity through the media. For example, the number of visitors to the Mediterranean, currently the world's most successful destination region, are predicted to rise from 100 million in 1985 to 760 million in 2025. Two obvious environmental effects will be the increased use of fossil fuels to fly people there, as long-haul holidays become widespread, and intense shortages of clean water especially with the probable climatic changes in the region.

Although these are fairly clear environmental effects many others are much more ambiguous. This is in part because what is viewed and criticized as environmentally damaging in one era or one society is not necessarily taken as such in another. For example, the rows of terraced housing thrown up during industrialization are now viewed not as an environmental eyesore but as quaint, traditional and harbouring patterns of human activity well worth preserving. Another example is the steam railway, which in the nineteenth century was seen as an environmental disaster but is now viewed as benign, traditional and particularly attractive as it belches filthy smoke into the atmosphere. 'Reading' nature is therefore something that is learned; and the learning process varies greatly between different societies and between different social groups within any society. Of course, there are environmental disasters but they are relative to a particular configuration of a society and 'its' environment. Configuration here refers both to the relationship between a society and 'its' environment, and to the manner in which this difference is culturally constructed within that environment.

With regard to the former aspect, there are four main ways in which societies have intersected with their respective 'physical environments': *stewardship* of the land so as to provide a better inheritance for future generations living within a given local area; *exploitation* of land or other resources through seeing nature as separate from society and available for its maximum instrumental appropriation; *scientization* through treating the environment as the object of scientific investigation and hence of some degree of intervention and regulation; and *visual consumption* through constructing the physical environment as a 'landscape' (or townscape)

not primarily for production but embellished for aesthetic appropriation.

These are very much ideal types and any particular situation will involve some mixture of two or more. Furthermore, although there is a loose historical ordering in the emergence of these different configurations of society and the environment, all four are to be found in contemporary societies. This paper is concerned to establish that visual consumption is relatively separate and to examine some implications of this for the other three forms of relationship. I have so far used the term 'environment' as though this is fairly clear. It is not of course and this becomes evident as soon as we start to consider its visual consumption. In the following I shall use the term 'environment' to cover either the physical setting alone (whether this is or is not built), or the physical setting and the forms of its cultural appropriation.

An example of the latter can be seen in the development of the Western concept of 'landscape'. This began as a technical term standing for natural inland scenery; then it came to mean a particular tract of land seen from a specific point of view as though it were a picture; and finally it came to mean the whole natural scenery (Barrell, 1972). The concept of landscape is important both for the history of art and for the history of those places which were thought to possess remarkable or distinctive landscapes (see Hefferan, 1985 on the creation of landscape within English romanticism; Pemble, 1987, on the Mediterranean; Green, 1990 on the area surrounding Paris in the early nineteenth century; and Barrell, 1972, 1980).

This is not then a simple question of the physical environment. Zukin argues how 'the material landscape was mediated by a process of cultural appropriation, and the history of its creation was subsumed by visual consumption' (1991: 7). Or as Green argues, that it was in the nineteenth century that nature came to be 'hegemonised by a definition of the external world as scenery, views, perceptual sensation' (1990: 3). Nature as landscape was, then, a historically specific social and cultural construction. In particular, there is the irony that something as apparently important as nature 'has largely to do with leisure and pleasure – tourism, spectacular entertainment, visual refreshment' (Green, 1990: 6).

In the eighteenth century, the aristocracy and gentry possessed exceptional power to determine the character of their landscapes for visual consumption. In particular, the physical environment that they encountered contained the working poor. But in the

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representations of such environments, in the landscape paintings, the poor came to be transformed into part of the landscape itself (see Barrell, 1980). This can be seen even in the case of Constable. The representation of the poor changed over his lifetime in that the figures came to be placed more and more in the distance, becoming an almost invisible element of the distant landscape.

The upper class was, moreover, mobile and this helped them develop the cultural capital necessary for judging and discriminating between such different environments. Barrell argues that such an upper class:

had experience of more landscapes than one, in more geographical regions than one; and even if they did not travel much, they were accustomed, by their culture, to the notion of mobility, and could easily imagine other landscapes. (Barrell, 1972: 63)

By the later nineteenth century the upper middle and middle classes were also becoming increasingly mobile, travelling not just to spa towns, seaside resorts and areas like the Lake District in Britain, but further afield to the Mediterranean, especially to Italy and the French Riviera (see Pemble, 1987). They brought back memories, souvenirs and, increasingly, photographs of landscapes lit by qualities of quite unfamiliar heat and light. In the twentieth century such landscapes have, of course, helped to generate an even more extensive 'Mediterranean passion' among much of the population of western and northern Europe.

Everyone in the 'West' is now entitled to engage in visual consumption, to appropriate landscapes and townscapes more or less anywhere in the world, and to record them to memory photographically. No one should be excluded except for reasons of cost. To be a tourist, to look on landscapes with interest and curiosity (and then to be provided with many other related services), has become a right of citizenship from which few in the 'West' are formally excluded.

There is thus a 'democratization' of the tourist gaze, something well-reflected in the anti-elitist and promiscuous practices of photography (see Sontag, 1979). Such practices give shape to travel. Much tourism becomes in effect a search for the photogenic, it is a strategy for the accumulation of photographs (Urry, 1990: ch. 7). This means that as photographic technologies and practices change and develop so the kinds of sights to be photographed also change.

Thus what people look for in the landscapes and townscapes that they photograph are not given and fixed but alter over time. In particular, new techniques of colour photography have increased the demand to travel to and record landscapes which are free from various kinds of visible pollution, such as machinery, motorways, power stations, workers, polluted water, smog, derelict land and so on (see Williams, 1973; Cosgrove, 1984; Urry, 1990: 97–8). Technical developments have made this possible for many people. So as the means for recording people's memories have been democratized, this has further boosted the development of tourism, particularly the visiting of places where environmentally unpolluted landscapes can be viewed and captured. And yet, of course, such places are increasingly polluted in another sense, through the huge numbers of visitors all seeking to photograph rather similar scenes (often from formal or informal viewing points). So photography has heightened the contradictions involved in the relationship between tourism and the environment. It has increased the attractions of particular kinds of unpolluted landscapes and hence of demands to protect or conserve such environments; and it has in turn done much to worsen such environments through increasing the numbers and concentration of visitors all seeking to capture particularly memorable views.

There is an interesting piece of research conducted on photographing one particular tourist mecca, Durham in north-east England. The research showed that people were in fact rather disappointed by their photographs of the cathedral and castle from Prebends' Bridge (see Pocock, 1982). It was thought that their memories of the view were richer and fuller than their photographs, which had as C. Day Lewis once wrote the quality of 'dead accuracy' (cited in Pocock, 1982: 364). And indeed it may be that such images always disappoint but that, of course, does not stop people continuously seeking new images of place. Indeed it may be that it is because of that disappointment that people continuously seek ever-new images and hence ever-new places to visit and to capture.

However, this raises much more general questions concerning broader changes in economic and social life in contemporary societies. These changes have been characterized by Harvey as involving 'time-space compression' (1989). This refers to the way in which changes in the organization of capitalist labour-time have transformed space, suppressing all sorts of differences between places. Events and processes are increasingly interdependent.

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Simple narratives are implausible. Everything depends upon developments elsewhere as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have brought about a plethora of new technologies of transportation and communication which have subdued and unified space, producing many imagined or metaphorically 'small' worlds (see Lodge, 1983).

Harvey notes five effects of time-space compression. First, there is the accentuation of volatility and the ephemeral in products, fashions, ideas, values, technologies and so on. As Marx and Engels famously wrote, 'all that is solid melts into air' (1952) and this characterizes modern consumerism and its deleterious environmental consequences. Second, there is the emphasizing of instantaneity and disposability, or what Toffler termed the 'throwaway society' (1970). Not only material goods but also values, lifestyles, relationships, attachments to place can all be easily disposed of. Third, short-termism is encouraged or, as Lyotard remarks, the temporary contract is everything (cited in Harvey, 1989: 291). Long-term conservation becomes difficult to contemplate where everything is judged in and by the present. Fourth, it is signs or images which most exemplify time-space compression. A worldwide industry produces and markets images, not only for products, but also for people, governments, places, universities and so on. There is an extraordinary transitoriness, and an extraordinary number, of different images, including in recent years those of nature and the natural. And fifth, certain of these images resulting from time-space compression involve the production of simulacra, replications of originals more real, or hyper-real, than the original (Eco, 1986). Almost everything can now be reproduced, including apparently authentic ancient buildings as in Quinlan Terry's neo-classical Richmond; or 'natural' features of the landscape, such as the pink and white terraces which were located above Lake Rotomahana in New Zealand and are to be recreated elsewhere a century after they were destroyed by a volcano (Urry, 1990: 146). One might also suggest that tourist souvenirs particularly well illustrate these characteristics of time-space compression. It is as though the paradigm case of ephemerality, disposability, temporariness, images and simulacra, is the material culture involved in the consumption of visual tourist signifiers (I am indebted to S. Franklin [pers. comm.] for this).

But such developments in turn produce responses. Harvey argues that the 'collapse of spatial barriers does not mean that the signi-

ficance of space is decreasing' (1989:293). The less salient the spatial barriers the greater the sensitivity of capitalist firms, of governments and of the general public to variations of the environment across space. Harvey says that: 'As spatial barriers diminish so we become much more sensitized to what the world's spaces contain' (1989: 294). The specificity of place, of its workforce, the character of its entrepreneurialism, its administration, its buildings, its history, its environment and so on, become important as spatial barriers collapse. And it is this context that further explains just why places increasingly seek to forge a distinctive image and to create an atmosphere of environment, place and tradition that will prove attractive to capital, to highly skilled prospective employees and especially to visitors (see Harloe et al., 1990). Indeed, the heightened interest in the environment, both physical and built, partly stems from the fact that people, politicians and prospective employers are all concerned both to make places seem different from each other, and to make them consistent with particular contemporary images of environment and place, particularly those of nature.

Two interesting examples from Australia illustrate this point. First, Game (1990) shows how an attempt was made in the mid-1980s to construct Bondi beach as an international tourist attraction based on the famous but run-down Pavilion. It was argued that the 'natural' site of Bondi was not in itself sufficient, but that it had to be produced as memorable and as standing for 'Australia', that it was truly part of an international tourist industry. However, this argument failed for a number of reasons. It was argued by the 'local community', mainly in fact recent in-migrants, that Bondi belongs to 'Australia' and therefore not to any commercial interests, and that since Bondi is 'nature' and that since no-one can own nature so no-one can (or should) own Bondi. The potential developers, by contrast, argued that since Bondi belongs to the world it needs 'international' tourist facilities, but that a strong emphasis should be placed on reinforcing or even constructing the local particularity of Bondi-ness at least for visitors. In other words, the developers sought to combine the global and the local in a site that stands for 'Australia', the nation.

Morris (1990b) provides a similar analysis of Sydney Tower, a cultural symbol in Australia dating from 1981. She argues that what was symbolically different about this tower was that it celebrated tourism as a means of becoming modern rather than as an end in



itself. In particular it interpellated Sydney residents as 'citizen-tourists', becoming at one with 'real' tourists in their gaze on Sydney, and becoming simultaneously the living objects of that gaze (see Urry, 1990 on the tourist gaze). But by the late 1980s much of the tower had changed and it had become not a spectacle of Sydney and its history but merely an indicator of other places that visitors might travel to. Indeed, Morris (1990b: 12) notes that the Sydney skyline is now one of the Pacific Rim, not of Europe and the Eiffel Tower.

In the next section I shall consider the ways in which an apparently heightened interest in protecting the environment has stemmed from the growth of visual consumption through tourism. In the following section I shall show some of the complex ways in which it might be thought that tourism adversely affects the environment. In the final main section I shall consider some of the characteristics which render an environment attractive or unattractive to visual consumption through the tourist gaze. I shall suggest that such a gaze can take a variety of forms which will fall very differently on different places and environments.

### **Tourism and the Environmental Consciousness**

There are a number of ways in which mass tourism has helped to broaden concern for both the physical and the built environment. First, tourism enables a much wider range of environments to be gazed upon. This has been especially marked with the growth of car and air transport, compared with the railway which tended to funnel visitors into particular centres and resorts. People have become able to compare and contrast different landscapes and to develop some of the cultural capital necessary in order to make appropriate judgments of taste. Car transport in particular enables people to be much less channelled in their movements through particular landscapes. They can come across unexpected eyesores or indeed unexpected and unplanned landscapes or townscapes. Of course, all forms of transport necessitate a substantial infrastructure and this may itself be the eyesore!

Second, different environments can be much more effectively compared than was possible in the past. This is because of the 'globalization' of the tourist gaze, at least for those in the 'West' and for some of those living in the Pacific Rim. This globalization is a further demonstration of time-space compression. It occurs through actual travel, often now to much more distant places;

through simulated travel as in shopping centres, world fairs and touristic-historical spectacles such as the Australian Bicentenary (see Morris, 1990a on the last of these); and most spectacularly through armchair travel which permits almost everywhere in the world to be seen and compared with anywhere else (Urry, 1990). Images of appropriate environments can now be much more readily conjured up, evaluated and compared, often through people's own photographs or through programmes seen on the TV/VCR.

Third, both the interest in environment and the growth of tourism stem from the increased importance of visual consumption, or more generally of an 'aesthetic' judgment rather than one based on reason and discourse (Lash, 1990). This in turn is related to the shift in the predominant economic structure in Western societies, from the relations of production to those of consumption (see Abercrombie, 1990; Morris, 1990a). Central to people's experience of such societies are the dynamics of consumption, and such consumption is based on aesthetic judgments, especially in relationship to the consumption of the environment. This is in turn related to the widespread development of what elsewhere I call the 'romantic tourist gaze'. Larger numbers of people seek in their visual consumption, solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with their environment, whether this is physical or built. For example, Stourhead Park in Wiltshire illustrates:

the romantic notion that the self is found not in society but in solitudinous contemplation of nature. Stourhead's garden is the perfect romantic landscape, with narrow paths winding among the trees and rhododendrons, grottoes, temples, a gothic cottage, all this around a much indented lake . . . The garden is designed to be walked around in wonderment at Nature and the presence of other people immediately begins to impair this. (Walter, 1982: 298)

The romantic tourist gaze thus feeds into and supports attempts to protect the environment.

Fourth, the increase in the proportion of people with higher levels of education, with professional/managerial jobs, and who are older, are all leading to increases in concern for the environment and in certain kinds of tourism. In particular these factors are heightening the attraction of both visiting and protecting the countryside. In the UK there have been huge increases in the membership of various countryside conservation organizations: between 1971 and 1987 that of the National Trust increased by 505 percent, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds by

539 percent, the Royal Society for Nature Conservation by 281 percent, and Friends of the Earth by 2850 percent (Urry, 1990: 96). The countryside is attractive to such groups and this reflects the anti-urbanism of the environmental movement. The countryside appears to be 'closer' to nature; there is a relative absence of people; there is a non-mechanical environment; and the environment is unplanned, complex and labyrinthine. And yet, of course, there is little that is natural about Westernized forms of agriculture in the countryside; in order to achieve solitude it is necessary to travel long distances to by-pass congested sights; the environment is highly mechanized and one only avoids such mechanical sights through the construction of very selective 'landscapes'; and little in the environment is unplanned since in some respects agriculture is one of the most rationalized of industries and subject to extensive external regulation. Moreover, the effects of environmental conservation in the countryside has by no means unambiguous consequences for other social groups. As Flynn, Lowe and Cox point out:

Most towns and villages have an amenity or preservation group, concerned with safeguarding the character and physical appearance of the locality from any unpleasant developments. By the 1970s, twenty-five years of rural planning had thus succeeded in recasting protected dormitory villages and middle-class enclaves whose residents' demands were often at odds with those of the indigenous population (Flynn et al., 1990: 10).

Further, there are important changes taking place in contemporary tourism which both reflect an increased environmental consciousness and further develop such a consciousness. The mass-production, mass-consumption packaged holiday to Mediterranean resorts seems to be declining in popularity as peoples' tastes are becoming more differentiated and selective. Instead there are expansions in long-haul holidays, and in rural, urban, industrial and even green tourisms. Increasingly, people seem to be attracted by a much wider range of objects upon which to gaze. This has mixed environmental effects. On the one hand, it reduces, at least relatively, some of the problems of congestion that I will discuss further below. On the other hand, the broadening of people's tastes means that the effects of tourism, both good and bad, are spread across a much wider range of places. In the UK there is hardly a village, town or city which does not now have the promotion of tourism as one of its key objectives. And this is increasingly true worldwide.

The case of Spain is one of the most interesting here since, on the face of it, there could hardly be a clearer case of somewhere where tourism has been an unmitigated environmental disaster (see Hooper, 1990; Hopkins, 1990, on the following). There are, however, some rather contradictory points to note about its pattern of development: (1) it did not experience the long period of industrialization found in all of its northern neighbours – there were therefore relatively few areas which were environmentally damaged in the way experienced by the industrial regions of northern Europe; (2) the country has jumped from a mostly pre-industrial to a post-industrial society in about three decades in the post-war period; (3) the industry which brought about this striking transformation has been tourism which generated the foreign exchange to cover the trade gap as the economy took off – in 1988 tourism was responsible for about 10 percent of economic activity and employment; (4) the development of tourism has, moreover, had a significant redistributive effect as it has mainly been those from the richer countries of northern Europe who have travelled to the Mediterranean basin and, apart from the British, spent quite a lot while there; (5) the environmental effects on the Spanish Mediterranean coast and the Balearic islands have been devastating, and to some extent this is also true on the Atlantic coast which is more popular with the Spanish themselves; (6) however, this environmental effect has been confined to the relatively narrow coastal strip and most of Spain has remained relatively untouched (with, for example, more rare species than in any other European country); (7) there are now major efforts being made to develop tourism in the rest of Spain because of the declining attractiveness of its standard product, the cheap mass-produced beachside holiday (in part resulting from the visually unattractive nature of the Mediterranean coastline); (8) this will, though, result in new forms of environmental decline inland, especially with the kind of large-scale developments favoured by Spanish entrepreneurs that, paradoxically, may not be particularly attractive to potential visitors from northern Europe where there is more sensitivity about the environment; and (9) the Spanish government is attempting to move the Mediterranean area upmarket through the ecologically draconian 1988 Shores Act which bans construction near the shoreline and enables the demolition of any buildings which do not have proper planning permission.

Thus the environmental implications are more complex than

they might otherwise seem. It certainly does not follow that encouraging tourists to travel into inland Spain is necessarily going to benefit either the environment or the Spanish people. One might argue the reverse, that minimum damage would be exerted by keeping the visitors to the Mediterranean coast and by actually preventing them from moving inland. However, that would have had socially selective consequences since it would then only have been the richer visitors who were able to buy property inland so enabling them to escape the coast.

One of the common criticisms made of many tourist developments such as those on the Spanish coast is that they are 'artificial' and have involved the production of an entirely constructed environment (often with buildings of the direst architectural quality). However, the Spanish example should make us wary of jumping to the conclusion that such artificial developments are necessarily undesirable. An interesting example cited by Jill Tweedie is that of Portmeirion, a beautiful fantasy village built on a north Wales peninsula which is designed only for tourists (Tweedie, 1990). It has two particular virtues: first, it is very attractive and works as a set of buildings in a striking physical location, although it is entirely 'artificial' and is 'postmodern' before its time; and, second, visitors to the area are concentrated into this 'honeypot' and do not bother people living in the surrounding villages. Tweedie (1990) summarizes:

tourists may wander, gawp, shop and relax without elbowing a single local off his rocker . . . The locals, 80 of them, just work there and retire of an evening to the peace of their own real villages.

However, many tourists would in fact also like to visit those 'real villages'. Recent research on rural Wales revealed that what people claimed to like best was 'ordinary' relatively well-preserved countryside rather than specific themed attractions (Jones, 1987). Such views reflect the growth of so-called 'green tourism' which began in Switzerland, West Germany and France, and is found in Britain in Dorset, Northumberland, Herefordshire and Cumbria. Its task is to ensure the conservation of areas and their associated wildlife. Its emphases are small scaleness, local control, modest developments using local labour, buildings in 'traditional' style, the emphasis on personal contact with visitors, the eating of local

produce, encouraging the understanding of the area's ecology and heritage, and the setting of limits to the growth of such developments so as to avoid a tourist mono-industry.

One example of where green tourism would have had a significant impact is in the case of reforestation. Tourists have shown particular hostility to the 'modernistic' planting of coniferous forests which are believed to have deleterious environmental and social consequences: the loss of 'indigenous' wildlife including birds of prey, reduced employment levels and the elimination of wild, open and 'romantic' moors (see Shoard 1987: 223–5). This example suggests that if tourists were able to exert greater pressure to protect the environment then this would have more effectively preserved open moorlands and deciduous forests rather than allowing the modernized planting of rows and rows of conifers. So one effect of more tourists may be to improve the campaigning for an improved environment, especially to the extent to which a kind of 'green tourism' consciousness becomes more common. It is because of tourism that many national parks have been created and without them many animal and plant species would have disappeared (see Hamilton, 1990).

Finally, it is worth considering briefly why many people want to gaze upon such a wide range of environments, that is, why are people willing to take greater risks with regard to foreign food, language, air transport, foreign customs, pollution and so on? Does the development of tourism in the past two decades suggest greater personal risk-taking and hence a re-skilling of everyday life? Is there some paradoxical connection here between disempowerment in relationship to nuclear radiation and other forms of chemical pollution and a re-skilling in various other aspects of everyday life? As Beck (1987) argues, our senses have become inadequate to assess certain forms of risk, there has been a 'disempowerment of our senses', so that people have been reduced to 'media products' and need to accept 'the dictation of centralized information' (Beck, 1987: 156). So it is argued that as the atomic danger (war and power) has made everyday life 'headless', so people have instead become risk-takers in other contexts (crime, fast driving, drugs, exotic food, foreign travel, etc.). Certainly these are new ways of using one's senses which according to Beck had been disempowered. He talks of 'the end of perceptiveness and the beginning of a social construction of risk realities' (Beck, 1987: 156).

In conclusion then, part of the process by which tourism is

spreading worldwide is the very growth of an environmental consciousness. People, it seems, increasingly search out and compare different places, particularly in terms of the perceived character of the physical and built environment. Places that have been subject to modernization, of their agriculture or forestry, industry or leisure, are normally unsought after by visitors, except in the case of major cities. And one element of that tourism is to help heighten an environmental consciousness and, indeed, in some cases to improve aspects of the physical environment (even arguably in the case of Spain). In the next section I shall consider the obverse side of many of these points. The growth of the romantic gaze, which celebrates 'nature', is helping to spread tourism worldwide and is therefore contributing to widespread environmental deterioration (see Romeril, 1990 on the following).

### **Tourism and Environmental Damage**

In the 1970s the Greek Orthodox Church recommended a new prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on the cities, the islands and the villages of this Orthodox Fatherland, as well as the holy monasteries which are scourged by the worldly touristic wave. (quoted in Crick, 1988: 64)

Thus tourists are increasingly seen as major polluters of the environment, by comparison with the locals who are taken as signifiers of authentic forms of life. This comparison is not, of course, fully justified because of the enormous impact of the different farming practices of 'locals' upon environmental quality (see Lowe et al., 1990, in the case of the UK). Nevertheless, tourists have increased the risks for those already living in particular places. The heightened sensitivity to the environment, with 52 percent of those in the UK considering it to constitute a serious problem facing the country, has the effect that tourism is also increasingly viewed as a major environmental issue (Phillips, 1990). The deleterious environmental consequences of tourism take a number of different forms:

(1) *Congestion and infrastructural strain*. In Venice the intense problems of transportation and basic services have recently been even further aggravated by a huge influx of East European visitors, particularly on day-trips. There has been a successful campaign waged by residents to prevent EXPO 2000 being located in the city because it is already viewed as completely full. In the Lake

District the National Park Officer argues that the area cannot take any more than the current 16–18 million visitors a year. He has suggested that a tourist tax should be levied on visitors (see Tighe, 1990, for a rejoinder from William Davis, Chairman of ETB). Similarly, in Malta the lack of any public regulation, combined with a desire to expand the number of tourists, has resulted in intense problems of congestion. The number of tourists has risen 30 percent in one year (see Kelly, 1990).

One reason why the environmental consequences are likely to be intense is because of the geographical concentration of tourists. For example, 86 percent of tourists visiting Yugoslavia stay in the coastal resorts. This not only intensifies the problems of ensuring good infrastructural services, such as the provision of clean water, but produces further problems: damage to the natural habitat of coastal marine life; the building of inappropriate and unsightly high-rise hotels (as currently in Turkey); the distorting of the local patterns of employment, especially because of the seasonal nature of many tourist flows; and social strains because of the cultural differences between 'hosts' and 'guests' (see Turner and Ash, 1975; Smith, 1978).

(2) *Changes in farming patterns and in the resulting appearance of the landscape.* In Chianti in Tuscany, there has been a growing dispute over what British visitors call 'Chiantishire'. Recently, the Chianti Foundation has been founded with the aims of preventing further foreign investment in the area and the 'purging' of 'contaminating elements'. Foreign smallholders, in particular, have been criticized since they do not know how to run vineyards properly. The result has been that local culture, farming practices and the appearance of the countryside are in danger of being seriously altered (see Johnston, 1990). In the Lake District the reduction in EC subsidies is threatening the viability of upland sheep farmers and hence of the landscape that flocks of Herdwick sheep have produced over some centuries.

(3) *The siting of large tourism developments in environmentally sensitive areas.* Examples here include the development of skiing complexes such as that at Aviemore in Scotland or the extraordinary development of 'industrial skiing' in the Alps (see Kettle, 1990). These mountains extend into seven countries but now support a permanent population of only 12 million. However, the temporary population is ten times as large and rising fast. The Alps have been reconstructed as 'a single-commodity colony of lowland Europe.'



That commodity is . . . “industrial skiing” (Kettle, 1990: 7). There are now an extraordinary 40,000 ski-runs in the Alps, produced by the ripping up of forests, the obliteration of pastures, the diverting of rivers and the concreting over of valleys. A rather different example concerns the plan to build a large American-financed film theme park on the Rainham Marshes in Essex (Sharrock, 1990). If this development goes ahead it will constitute the largest loss of ‘protected’ land since 1945. In April 1990 the Secretary of State for the Environment turned down a call from six major conservation groups for a public enquiry. The minister decided against this, declaring that this was merely a local issue. The local authority involved then decided in its favour. The marshes contain both areas of special scientific interest as well large amounts of toxic waste and some low-level radioactive waste.

In Malta large areas of farming land have been turned over to tourist developments. On the island of Gozo, Malta’s only remaining area of ‘wilderness’ has been sold to a Swiss company which is going to build 600 holiday villas there (see Kelly, 1990). Interestingly, the Maltese government has just appointed their first Secretary for the Environment, and he has made a modest reduction in the scale of this proposed development. There is little doubt that mass tourism in relatively small areas like Malta (now receiving 1 million overseas visitors a year) results in serious environmental damage in countries without a strong and environmentally conscious state. And this will in turn result in an area’s declining attractiveness to more prosperous visitors. However, arguments against mass tourism are commonly socially selective and imply that such visitors are unable to appreciate the more subtle features about a place. Kelly writing on Malta talks of the mass English visitors not being ‘particular about tasteful surroundings or holidays that reflect the country’s character’ (1990). Selbourne likewise inveighs against ‘Club Yob’ in Corfu which has been devastated by the arrival of large numbers of young working-class men from Britain who, it is claimed, sometimes do not even appreciate which island they are visiting (1990). Selbourne (1990) notes that:

Prices are too low [sic] and development has been too rapid, with greed the spur and profit the all-consuming aim, at whatever the cost to the ancient spirit of the place and its ravishing, ravaged beauty . . . It is a vicious circle that has left Corfu at the mercy of the more brutish of British tourists.

There are two points to note about criticisms of mass tourism on environmental grounds. First, such a critique involves an expression of social taste which may well connote social superiority over the mass tourists who are thought to be causing environmental deterioration. It is therefore a form of class and generational politics (as in the Selbourne example above), or of racial/national politics (as in the opposition to Japanese mass tourism developments in Australia: see Morris, 1990a). Such a viewpoint rests on what I term the romantic tourist gaze, the solitudinous contemplation of an undisturbed nature, which has been fostered by a particular social class. Walter argues that:

professional opinion-formers (brochure writers, teachers, Countryside Commission staff, etc.) are largely middle class and it is within the middle class that the romantic desire for positional goods is largely based. Romantic solitude thus has influential sponsors and gets good advertising. By contrast, the largely working class [and we may add young people's] enjoyment of conviviality, sociability and being part of a crowd is often looked down upon by those concerned to conserve the environment. This is unfortunate, because it . . . exalts an activity that is available only to the privileged. (Walter, 1982: 303)

And, second, to advocate that areas should be conserved from the ravages of tourist development suggests that it is clear what is meant by 'conservation'. But of course all environments are in part 'person-made' and thus one cannot simply employ the concept of the 'natural' to demarcate that which should be conserved. Conservation is not an unambiguous notion with precise environmental implications. There are at least three kinds of conservation. One of these can be called aesthetic conservation — to conserve an environment in accordance with pre-given conceptions of beauty and the sublime, conceptions which often depend upon what is being contrasted with the environment in question (see Green, 1990). A second conception is that of scientific conservation — to conserve in accordance with current scientific thinking on which elements of the physical environment are worth preserving and with how such elements should be so protected. A third conception is that of cultural conservation — to conserve the particular patterns of life of those living in a given area and to prevent outside interventions. The problem is that these different notions may well stand in stark contrast with one another, and this is especially so in the face of greatly increased demands to visit particularly attractive environments. For example, change is a crucial part of all

apparently 'natural' processes so that attempts at literal 'conservation' on aesthetic or cultural grounds will contradict what is understood as scientific conservation.

Furthermore, aesthetic notions of the environment themselves change and recently have come to depend upon particular developments in the nature of the mass media. For example, with regard to the countryside, Daniels and Cosgrove point out that the rural landscape is like a 'flickering text . . . whose meaning can be created, extended, altered, elaborated and finally obliterated by the touch of a button' (1988: 8). Such aesthetic notions of conservation have also been important in the construction of various rural 'themed' environments consisting of a pastiche of artefacts, sounds, textures, photographic images and so on. These may appeal to visitors to the countryside but they obviously involve a highly constructed nature and almost certainly will produce environmental damage, especially from the viewpoint of scientific conservation. This damage, relative to a particular construction of nature, will result both from a contrived construction of rural themes, and from marked increases in the number of visitors which will, for example, affect the indigenous flora and fauna.

And yet, even scientific conservation is not a fixed notion since what is supposedly 'indigenous' is not an absolute. The species found within any given area change, depending upon climate, atmosphere, migration, land use and so on. There is no absolute nature – it is historically and geographically relative. And yet relative to that particular nature, certain sorts of changes, such as those produced through tourist developments, *are* environmentally damaging. There is, therefore, not absolute damage but damage relative to a specific historically and geographically given nature.

### **Tourism and the Visual Consumption of the Environment**

In the final section I shall set out a number of different ways in which an environment is seen as inappropriate for visual consumption through the tourist gaze. This will then reveal some of the characteristics that render an environment suitable for that gaze, as well as some of the different forms taken by that gaze.

First, there is the environment which is visually contaminated because matter is out of place, there is 'technological landscape guilt' (see Thayer, 1990: 2). Material objects are present which can be interpreted as 'inappropriate'. Examples would include the

viewing of a nuclear power station on an attractive coastline (such as Heysham nuclear power station on Morecambe Bay), or factory buildings in an otherwise charming river valley (as in much of the Basque country), or farm buildings next to a high technology science park and so on. In response to this problem many owners of tourist-related services have developed techniques of 'visual resource management', to disorganize, hide or screen out inappropriate technologies (see Thayer, 1990).

However, it should be noted that there are some environments which are enjoyed by people almost because they contain interesting juxtapositions of landscape and building (as in much city tourism). Cultures vary as to the degree to which pastoral landscapes devoid of 'modern' technologies are appreciated (see Thayer, 1990: 5). Also, as buildings age, some become viewed as metaphorically 'part of the landscape', such as the Ribblehead viaduct on the Settle-Carlisle railway or the Albert Dock on the waterfront at Liverpool.

Second, there are environments which are seen as dangerous, as unnecessarily risky, because they are believed to be polluted. This pollution can take either or both of two forms. On the one hand, there is physical pollution, in particular of air or water, which makes it seem dangerous to be present in a particular location. However, the judgment of what is 'risky' here is very much dependent on context. Being a tourist seems to involve some striking changes in what is perceived to be risky. For example, visitors to an area may be willing to risk illness, through eating contaminated foods (such as local shellfish) or having sexual relations with strangers, because of the forms of exotic visual consumption that place such activities in a different context from what is normal and everyday. It is claimed that tourism is a liminal state in which conventional calculations of safety and risk are disrupted. Other kinds of physical pollution though, such as breathing in the relatively harmless steam produced by coal-fired power stations, will almost certainly render an area as inappropriate for the gaze of tourists.

And on the other hand, there is social pollution. There are believed to be individuals or social groups in a particular location whose beliefs or actions are seen as 'polluting'. Some examples include alcoholics, the homeless, prostitutes, drug users, pick-pockets, dangerous drivers, teenage gangs and even other tourists. The result is to make certain places seem contaminated and unsuitable for visual consumption. However, quite striking changes can occur in the perception of such 'pollutants', even sometimes with

such groups becoming part of the exotic or 'traditional' attractions of a place. This seems to be occurring with regard to the Aboriginal peoples in Australia. On the occasion of the Bicentenary, the Australian government found it necessary to initiate some hasty measures to compensate the Aborigines for years of neglect (see Morris, 1990a). This was apparently because tourists and journalists were increasingly finding that Aboriginal culture and practices are no longer 'polluting' but are part (or even the most important part) of the exotic attractions of Australia. In New Zealand, of course, there has been a longer process of transforming the Maoris into an object of visual consumption.

Third, the environment is viewed as commonplace, as too much like everywhere else. There is nothing that potential visitors find remarkable, which sets off that place from many others and especially from the views and scenes that people experience in their everyday life. A crucial aspect of the tourist gaze is that there is a dichotomy drawn between the ordinary and extraordinary (see Urry, 1990). Obviously all sorts of sites/sights can be extraordinary, including places that are merely famous for being famous. But environments which are not visually distinct in some way or other are very unlikely to be consumed. But it does not follow from this that only physical phenomena possess such an aura of distinctiveness. Both physical and person-made phenomena can generate awe, that moment that takes the breath away (such as seeing Glencoe in the Scottish Highlands or the Clifton suspension bridge in Bristol for the first time). However, it should be noted that this perception historically changes from period to period (as with the current attraction of old railway stations and sidings); and that sometimes it is the very unchanging nature of a particular environment which makes it paradoxically remarkable (as with an apparently unending desert).

It should also be noted that attempts to conserve a particular area because of its special environmental quality may end up with the area being made so distinctive for visitors that it becomes over-run. This is currently a matter for debate in the Cairngorms in Scotland, the most significant area of wild land and woodland over 3000 feet in the UK. It has been proposed that the Cairngorms should be protected through being designated as a National Park (see Clover, 1990). However, it has been argued against this that such a proposal would create a tourist 'honeypot', much like the Lake District in north-west England. To designate somewhere as a

National Park is to generate a kind of magnet, sucking in potential visitors who otherwise might visit many different places in the Scottish Highlands. It is also worth noting that one of the current environmental problems in the Cairngorms is that the native pine forests are not regenerating satisfactorily because of the large deer population. Yet visitors to the area might in fact prefer to see large herds of deer. However, the herds are only there because of deer-stalking by the landowners and their friends. More pine forests and fewer deer would appear to be a more environmentally sound policy but it is not necessarily the one that environmentalists might pursue.

Finally, there are those environments which are in some sense historically inappropriate. The reference here to history may seem strange but it is important to understand that landscapes are not only visible in space but are also narratively visible in time (see Folch-Serra, 1990). Or as Lynch asks, 'what time is this place?', or rather, 'what time is this environment?' (Lynch, 1973). Environments will be visibly consumed if they appear consistent with that 'time'. This is what people mean by authenticity, that there is a consistent relationship between the physical and built environment and a given historical period. An example of where a rural landscape does not seem authentic is where it seems too 'modern', too planned, lacking hedgerows, winding paths, mixed tree and plant vegetation, and an element of surprise. The 1950s holiday camp, by contrast, was based upon looking modern, often being built in a functionalist manner devoid of ornamentation and anything traditional (see Ward and Hardy, 1986: ch. 5 on the design of Prestatyn holiday camp for example). However, it should not be concluded from this that people's sense of what is and is not authentic about an environment is in fact historically accurate. This is very well shown by Sharratt in the case of the apparently authentic mediaeval environment of Canterbury Cathedral (1989: 36–8). But in fact almost all the windows in the Cathedral have been reconstructed much more recently, such as the south window (in 1792) and much of the north (in 1774), and the first miracle window is made up of scraps of old and new glass. Likewise Christ Church Gate dates from a restoration begun in 1931 and the twin turrets were replicas from 1937. Sharratt notes that: 'the videos and snapshots . . . are recording images of replicas, constructed appearances' which are hardly more authentic than those taken of the wholly simulated environment of the neighbouring Pilgrim's Way centre, something that is part of the much maligned heritage industry (1989: 38; see Hewison, 1987).

Such centres are in part maligned because they are thought to produce passive consumption, with visitors having little real understanding of the exhibits or the forms of life being represented.

This is connected to what Sharratt goes on to discuss, namely, the development of ‘the present image economy’, where past objects and images are ‘now seen, looked at, predominantly if not exclusively, as potential mental souvenirs, as camera material, as memorable “sights” (1989: 38). There is thus the development of a widespread and colonizing tourist gaze. This has the effect of transforming environments, many of which are reconstructed for visual consumption. However, Sharratt further distinguishes between a number of different elements or types of such a gaze. Putting these together with the distinction I have drawn elsewhere between the romantic and collective tourist gaze, generates the following forms (Urry, 1990).

**Table 1**  
**Forms of the Tourist Gaze**

<i>Romantic</i>	Solitary Sustained immersion Gaze involving vision, awe, aura
<i>Collective</i>	Communal activity Series of shared encounters Gazing at the familiar
<i>Spectatorial</i>	Communal activity Series of brief encounters Glancing and collecting different signs
<i>Environmental</i>	Collective organization Sustained and didactic Scanning to survey and inspect
<i>Anthropological</i>	Solitary Sustained immersion Scanning and active interpretation

These are to be seen as ideal types and many tourist situations will involve complex combinations of these different tourist gazes. It is also necessary to note that these forms do not exhaust the different types of tourism. In particular, different tourist practices vary along three further dimensions: the spatial, that is, the diverse types of travel and mobility involved; the temporal, that is, the length of time and the prospective/retrospective dimensions; and the institutional, that is, the overlap between tourism and other

related forms of activity, such as shopping, sport, culture, hobbies, education and partial residence in an area. On the last of these I have elsewhere argued that there is a process of dedifferentiation taking place between tourism per se and these various other social practices, so much so that there is what one might describe as a colonizing tourist gaze which has considerable implications for the quality of the environment within which these other services are provided (see Urry, 1990).

The last point above is also particularly relevant to the environment. It is likely that people who live for part of the year in a tourist area, through possession of a 'second' home, will be particularly concerned about the environmental conservation of that area. They will tend to see themselves, perhaps over more than one generation, as being especially concerned for the careful stewardship of an area. Shurmer-Smith (1990) shows how wealthy summer tourists with second homes in the Ile de Moine are more 'local' in their orientation than are the apparently 'real' locals. And yet, of course, the phenomenon of the second home causes particularly severe environmental problems of a different sort, especially for those who are year-long residents, often on very modest incomes, who, for example, cannot ensure that their children can continue living in the area in question.

What now needs to be undertaken is further research to demonstrate just how the social organization of these different gazes impact upon various physical and built environments. This is a very complex issue in part because many of the existing environments are themselves experiencing rapid but not always very perceptible environmental change (see Lowe, et al., 1990 on British agriculture and the environment). But in relationship to such environments and the diverse modes of their visual consumption, complexities derive from three crucial aspects of tourism.

First, it is fundamentally concerned with visually consuming the physical and built environment and in many cases the permanent residents who are its inhabitants. This has the consequence that environments, places and people are being regularly made and remade as tourist objects, a process which often involves active participation by the state (see Morris [1990a] on how many Australians went from being 'tourists' to being 'toured'). Tourism is thus inseparable from the environment, although that environment has many other uses, including especially agriculture.

Second, to talk of visual consumption is to suggest that tourists



use up or devour the very places and environments that they seek to gaze upon. Many people want to visit relatively undamaged environments and yet that is more or less impossible. As Wheatcroft says: 'We are all caught without escape in the tourist trap' (1990). It is very difficult to implement policies that would induce large numbers of people not to travel to places because of the undesirable environmental consequences. They know just how many other people are already on their way to any particular environment. And they also know that if they wait longer then the environment in question may have been totally destroyed, either directly or more indirectly through the construction of apparently contrived sites of 'staged authenticity'. In the absence of the kind of draconian solution favoured by the economist Mishan (1969), to abolish all international air travel, it is hard to see how the individual choices of millions of different consumers are going to be appropriately constrained. This is further reinforced by the very widespread involvement of local and national states who view the encouragement of tourism as a major component of economic strategy (see Leong, 1989 on national tourism as an element of post-war nation-building).

Third, as tourist practices spread even more widely throughout populations that had not previously been active participants, so the demand for new forms of visual consumption and their environmental costs are going to increase markedly. It is very hard to see how it is going to be possible to regulate access *and* to maintain certain of those environments in ways which neither entail socially divisive forms of restricted access nor cause other environmentally undesirable consequences. Geoffrey Wheatcroft, for example, suggests that: 'a policy of moderate Nimbyism is the only hope of preserving our healing contact with Nature' (1990). So far neither private enterprise nor competing states have been able to develop collective solutions which would mitigate the profound effects of millions of individual tourist decisions. And that is partly because of the exceptional environmental dilemmas involved in tourism, as are strikingly revealed in the Spanish example discussed above. It is not entirely fanciful to suggest that tourism produces some of the *most* difficult of contemporary environmental issues.

## Notes

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