

TOURISM AND ITS EFFECT ON  
THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

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In today's Bahamas, we have become accustomed to hearing that 70 percent of our gross national product is accounted for by our success in the tourism industry. So much so that we, perhaps, take the tourism goose for granted, being preoccupied maybe by the glitter of its golden egg.

Without a doubt, our number one industry has been good to us. The Bahamas is possibly the only nation of its size in the world to have managed to base its economy so successfully on tertiary level economic activity. Economic activity may be divided into three basic categories: primary, which includes agriculture, fishing, etc.; secondary, which includes construction and manufacturing and tertiary, which includes service - producing industries like insurance, banking and tourism.

Even today, in many industrialised, so-called developed nations the value of services produced is less than 50 percent of the gross national product (G.N.P.). The United States, for example, only passed the 50 percent margin 20 years ago. There are advantages and disadvantages to relying on a service oriented economy. However, in order to stay on track with out topic today, we shall have to forego that sortie in to the realm of economics.

Suffice it to say that in The Bahamas, we almost completely skipped the secondary stage during the course of our economic development, going from primary to tertiary in the course of some 25 years. Banking and tourism were largely responsible for this achievement, with tourism contributing the lion's share in terms of employment.

This pinpoints the most basic and important impact which tourism has upon society - it provides jobs, lots of them. In our country in 1979, 38,700 jobs were generated by tourism. Twenty-three percent of these were in hotels, 53 percent in other commercial establishments and pursuits, and 24 percent in the public sector. All but six percent of those 38,700 jobs were full-time. In addition, we know that the number of jobs indirectly

tourism is even greater.

The actual ratio between jobs and visitors breaks down to one job for every 30 stopover visitors or every 350 cruise visitors.

It is ironic that this job-creating feature of tourism is sometimes identified as one of the features of the industry which has an adverse effect on other sectors. We have just established that our country almost bypassed the secondary level of economic development. It would be taking a narrow view, however, to say that it was tourism's fault that we do not have more factories and industrial enterprises in The Bahamas.

Improved "Life Chances"

On the surface it may seem that the lure of lucrative jobs in tourism and quick profits from tourism-related businesses has pre-empted our industrial development. The truth of the matter lies more in the geographic features of our country, the need to rely on improved oil-generated energy, a limited labour force, limited natural resources and our proximity to a large and influential country which is also the world's greatest producer of manufactured goods. By and large, it is possible for poorly managed growth in tourism to short circuit other areas of economic development. I do not accept that this has been the case in this country: on the contrary, were it not for tourism. I believe it would have been impossible for us to have developed to the stage we have over the course of the past 25 years.

The effect which all this has had on the individual includes the opening up of a range of employment opportunities; the chance to have a crack at leading "the good life"; the ability to send ones children to school and away to university; in short, the overall improvement of the 'Life chances' of the individual. The term 'life chances' was first coined by German Sociologist, Max Weber over 50 years ago. It denotes the probability of an individual achieving an array of goals, benefits and resources during his lifetime. These goals are long life, good health, a desirable job and recognition from fellow

"citizens". The benefits and resources include income, education, housing and social security. Clearly, tourism has had a positive effect upon our life chances.

Society and the individual also benefit from tourism by the fact that the industry provides for us, here in our country, with a market of some two million foreigners. What this means is that it provides huge potential for export activity, while placing products on the consumer.

This export capacity is an important means of generating foreign exchange by which we purchase oil, medicine, food, cars, our own vacations and many goods and services not available in our country. The perfumes, china and cameras we import for sale here are re-exported when sold to tourists, but more important are the items made in The Bahamas for purchase, and export by visitors. Such items do not cost anything in foreign exchange to produce and their entire value in foreign exchange accrues to us.

Viewed from that perspective, tourism is indeed a potent catalyst for individual and social development. It provides a market for creative people to produce items for sale to visitors, thus creating cottage industries which can be very important in societies, such as ours, with a high percentage of female-headed households. Going further, it offers opportunities for trained craftsmen and fine artists.

The Inertia Syndrome

It is something of a paradox, therefore, to find that these opportunities are not always grasped. I believe this to be one of the manifestations of what may be described as the inertia syndrome - the tendency to become so accustomed to the features of ones environment and culture to the point of regarding them as common, blase and lacking in interest. The inertia syndrome affects the attitude we have to old-time Bahamian architecture, handicrafts, rake and scrape music and artefacts which may relate to life in our country in times gone by.

Another factor which affects the ability of a society to fully benefit from the opportunities offered by tourism for art and craft development, as well as development in other artistic discipline is the ease with which it is possible, indeed often profitable, to compromise. We can find evidence of this in everything from trite wooden carvings which tourists bring from Africa in the hundreds of thousands to the dinner-time voodoo ceremonies which many Haitian hotels offer.

By thus compromising itself for quick profit from its visitors, the host country only

impoverishes itself in the long run. Craftsmen, artists and others eventually exert just sufficient creative energy to get the item sold and, in the long run come themselves to regard the artefact as typical and representative of the culture. Of course other factors outside the craftsman's control may impinge on his decision in this area. For example, if the country is going after mass tourism in a big way, he is less likely to sell exquisitely made originals than in an upscale market, with more affluent and discerning visitors, albeit in fewer numbers.

Many of you will, by now, be familiar with my views on the potential for small craft industry development offered by our tourism industry. In broader terms. I am equally enthused by the potential held out for the development of our Junkanoo culture. A study sponsored by my Ministry some years ago indicated that \$50 million is spent each year on straw goods by visitors. A high percentage of these items are actually imported to The Bahamas and simply sold at a mark up. This is no more an indictment of us than it is of other countries which do the same thing, but it underlines the huge potential earnings which awaits us in handicraft manufacture.

Cultural Awareness

As for Junkanoo, the potential seems even greater. Too often in the past, we have created and performed in a fashion that we assumed would be pleasing to visitors. We played calypso in our clubs and said it was "typical island music", our floor shows would often be as appropriate in Las Vegas as The Bahamas and the only Bahamian images one could buy were gaudy sunsets printed on plastic or cheap paper in Florida or Hong Kong.

Happily, ten years after political independence was achieved, we find today a huge wave of popular interest in what may be the deepest rooted aspect of our culture - Junkanoo. The significant fact here is that, while all Bahamians are happy to see visitors enthused by Junkanoo, it remains something in which we involve ourselves for our own fulfillment.

The significance of this is that, over the years, we have gone from tailoring our culture to suit the tourists' perceived tastes and interests; to a situation where the tourists are invited to broaden their experience by involvement in our culture, our "true true Bahamian culture". It has taken a while for us to become sufficiently at ease with our own identity. Having done so, we are beginning to demand that the image of The

Bahamas projected abroad reflect a nation with a rich heritage and not just a sun and sea playground.

Tourism, by bringing people together as it does, can be beneficial to small nations by providing cosmopolitan contact for their populations. In doing so however, there remains the risk that the local culture is not sufficiently resilient to survive the contact intact, with the resulting eventual disappearance of the indigenous culture in favour of metropolitan standards and tastes. We see many examples of this in our country.

#### Controlled Growth

Related to this is the tendency to permit tourism infrastructure to grow beyond desirable limits and in a manner not in the best interest of the nation. Manifestations of this are found in fast-food outlet franchises, high-rise hotels, overt and excessive touristic gimmickery, all of which eventually becomes unpleasant and unappealing to the very tourist whom we set out to impress in the first place.

The need to remain sharply conscious of the value of our natural environment and cultural heritage can hardly be overstated. The exploitation of these assets by the tourism industry has always to be carefully assessed and monitored. Pursuit of the tourism dollar can cause us to lose sight of the charm of our architectural heritage and the fragile balance on our sea bed gardens and reefs.

#### A Case History

There are any number of case histories which demonstrate the pitfalls of lack of vigilance in these areas. A good example is the case of a small town in Utah called St. George. Carved from the American midwestern wilderness by Mormon settlers in the 1850s and 1860s, the town is blessed with a superb natural setting, its weather pleasant and wild, its history fascinating and it enjoys easy access by road and air and is nearby other major tourist attractions like national parks and recreation areas.

The main physical features of St. George which appeared to tourists were its architectural heritage and wooded parklands. The post World War II tourism boom created a demand for facilities and services which resulted in the razing of many stately old pioneer homes to make room for gas stations or motels. Grassy footpaths were concreted, shade trees

cut down to make way for wider highways, older streetlamps were replaced with modern mercury vapor lights and businesses competed for tourists' attention with bigger and more garish neon signs.

Oblivious to the value of their heritage the people of St. George looked to the vacation areas they had visited for tourism development models. The result was a transplantation of Californian architecture and motifs: palm trees where there had been none before, steel and glass restaurants and neon signs, Astroturf (artificial grass) appeared around motels and restaurants. Even the agricultural field was affected by the spread of development onto land previously used for orchards.

Thus in little over two decades, just about the time it took us to develop our modern tourism industry, a town with charm, culture and unique appeal disappeared off the map and was replaced by a community just like any of ten thousand in the U.S.A.

That case history is quite different to that of Bermuda, a highly successful destination which has earned a reputation for cleanliness and architectural charm. The people of Bermuda, aware of the charm of their community and the value of their heritage have taken care to pass regulations which protect these features. In The Bahamas our reefs, sea gardens, communities and natural sanctuaries attest to value of vigilance in areas in which there is no room for error.

#### Future Developments in The Bahamas

We are just completing a Ten-Year Development Programme for tourism in The Bahamas. The programme outlines recommendations for 7,000 new hotel rooms in The Bahamas with the necessary superstructure and infrastructure facilities. During the 1980s, the cost of such development will be in excess of \$680 million. The Government will have to commit some \$15 million per year in infrastructure and superstructure and some \$524 million or more will have to come from private investment.

Much of this development will affect the quality of life and business in these areas. Airports, roads, water supplies, electricity, telephones, clinics, schools and housing are benefits which will accrue to Eleuthera, Andros, the Exumas, the Abacos and Cat Island and Bimini. Bahamasair's fleet will be upgraded and expanded.

Those developments will certainly improve

the quality of life in those rural communities and reduce the rural push-urban pull effect which has eaten away at those islands for generations. We would be remiss however, to ignore the fact that the 800 rooms projected for Abaco, the 1,000 projected for Eleuthera, the 500 rooms and 500 marina slips projected for Exuma or the 700 rooms projected for Cat Island will change the face of those islands forever.

That is not to say that the change will be a negative one. It is important to recognize however, that it will be irreversible. Every care must therefore be taken to ensure that the new buildings will harmonise with the environment; that the influx of tourists is not too sudden or disruptive and that local values and traditions are preserved. Failure to meet these obligations will off-set any advantages gained by the increased tourism capacity of the communities involved.

#### Summary of Pros and Cons

Possibly the best summary in the circumstances is to describe tourism as a good and

useful servant and a harsh and insensitive master. When working in the interest of society and its members it provides better paying jobs, cosmopolitan contacts, cultural exchange, encourages infrastructural development, improves living standards, earns foreign exchanges, provides lucrative markets for art and craft, encourages business, heightens awareness of local cultural and generate activity in areas such as agriculture and construction.

If properly planned and allowed to grow unchecked, tourism can suffocate indigenous culture, destroy traditional values - aesthetic, moral and social, ruin architectural traditions, upset or even ruin the environment, encroach on areas which would best be used for other industrial activity, create imbalances in terms of foreign and local business ownership, divert workers from other important employment areas and contribute to an increase in crime.

In The Bahamas, we have not been able to avoid all the pitfalls in all areas. We have done well in most, however, and where we have gone awry, it has seldom been irreparably so.