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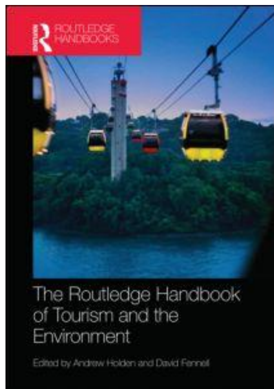

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14

'Tourism into the wild'

The limits of tourism in wilderness

Jarkko Saarinen

> Wilderness areas are arguably the most sensitive physical resources for tourism.
>
> *Higham (1998: 27)*

Introduction

Wilderness conjures up meanings and images referring to wild, remote, rough, free, empty and untrammelled natural areas. These kinds of landscapes are often considered to represent the last parts of 'true' nature, untouched by the modern world. In many respects, however, this is no longer true: wilderness areas have been explored and converted into administrative (conservation) management units. They are also often promoted as products or as sites of consumption, which is most clearly in evidence in connection with the tourism industry.

Wilderness and natural attractions, however, have not always been attraction elements for tourism. According to Short (1991: 6) 'fear of the wilderness was one of the strongest elements in European attitudes to wilderness up to the Nineteenth Century'. Thus, the history of wilderness as a tourist attraction is relatively short. In spite of this, wilderness environments presently attract millions of international and domestic tourists per year. The growing demand for tourists to experience 'the wild' is based on changed positive attitudes towards the environment in general, and the development of accessibility to remote wilderness environments has integrated peripheral areas more closely to global tourism markets (Hall and Page 2002: 273).

The increased attractiveness and numbers of visitors, along with diminishing wilderness areas, have caused challenges for the carrying capacity and management of these areas. The issue of carrying capacity has formed a particularly problematic task in wilderness management: wilderness areas are supposed to provide outstanding opportunities for solitude but, owing to the increased numbers of visitors, the possibilities for this are diminishing (Hendee *et al.* 1990: 401; Roggenbuck *et al.* 1993). Thus, there is a need for setting a limit to growth in wilderness tourism if the visitor numbers exceed an acceptable level. However, determining the maximum use levels is not a simple task (Lindberg *et al.* 1997) and this identification of the limits of acceptable change (LAC) is one of the main issues in recreation and tourism studies in wilderness settings (see Stankey *et al.* 1985). The LAC model originates from carrying capacity

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thinking and early debates in the 1960s and 1970s aiming to evaluate how much and what kind of recreation or tourism use would be too much in wilderness contexts (Lucas 1964; Wagar 1964, 1974). These kinds of questions are still valid and increasingly relevant. The solution models and frameworks, such as sustainable tourism, have changed (Saarinen 2006). However, the new frameworks have also turned out to be, and remained, problematic in determining the limits to growth in tourism in wilderness settings (Butler 1996, 2010).

This chapter discusses the relation of tourism and wilderness, and the challenges increasing and constantly changing tourism may create for wilderness environments. The purpose is not to describe the impacts of tourism in detail, covering ecological, social or managerial issues systematically, for example, but to focus on the increasing role of tourism in wilderness and the ideas aiming to limit the impacts of tourism in wilderness areas in the future.

Wilderness – a contested idea

In traditional societies the role and uses of wilderness may have not been problematic for people (Nash 1967), but, due to modernisation, increasing cultural contacts and the recent scale of globalisation, the meanings and uses of wilderness have turned into contested ideas and objects of various interests. As a result, different kinds of objectives, values and attitudes, often mutually contradictory ones, are connected with the meanings and uses of wilderness. Therefore, it is challenging to find a common ground for the idea of wilderness: what represents a wilderness for a Central European person may be a crowded space for a Canadian or Australian person, for example. However, several attempts have been made. The first wilderness legislation was prescribed in the USA in 1964. According to the US Wilderness Act (Public Law 1964: 1), wilderness is placed outside the organised society and culture: ‘A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognised as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.’

The idea of the Act – man himself is a visitor, that is a tourist, who does not remain – is based on the historically constructed Anglo-American view on wild nature; Western (and masculine) frontier thinking, and preservation and conservation of natural areas (Short 1991). For example, the world’s first large-scale wilderness preservation, the designation of the Yellowstone National Park in 1872, was based on the premise that the region was ‘reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale’ (Nash 1967: 108), with a further emphasis on public use in tourism and recreation. This so-called Yellowstone or fortress model has dominated global conservation thinking and debate, but not without conflicts (see Spinage 1998). In the early days of legal conservation of wilderness environments, local views challenged the uninhabited wilderness and also the concept of wilderness as opposite to culture and organised society (Hall 1992; Hallikainen 1998; Saarinen 2005).

Presently, the polarisation of nature and culture is under increasing pressure. This is the case especially in developing countries aiming to use their remaining natural areas to attract tourism and create formal employment and foreign revenue through tourism development. In order to resolve tensions between the traditional uses and local benefits of wilderness and evolving tourism requiring an untouched ‘pristine’ wilderness, community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) models have been created (Nelson 2010; also Case study below). On its behalf in the developing countries contexts, the CBNRM also aims to answer to the increasing need of local involvement, which has been a relatively problematic issue in the traditional wilderness management processes (Hendee *et al.* 1990).

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Case study

CBNRM: aiming to meet community needs in wilderness management in developing countries

CBNRM has become a popular policy tool that highlights the role of local communities and people in natural resource management. It represents a contrast to traditional wilderness conservation strategy that aims to separate human activities and impacts from nature by 'fencing out people' (Adams and Hulme 2001). As a strategy, CBNRM involves local communities in natural resource management by stating that communities are able to manage the resources on which they are dependent (Ostrom 1990) and they must have direct control over the uses and benefits of them (Nelson 2010). Many CBNRM programmes have a strong emphasis on tourism, as tourism activities are seen as providing economic relevance and a reason for both conservation and deeper community involvement in wilderness management. However, there are many challenges to involve the local communities both in natural resource management and tourism operations.

For example, Botswana adopted the CBNRM programme in 1989 when the Government and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) embarked on a joint Natural Resource Management Programme (NRMP) (Gujadhar 2000). A formal institutional CBNRM policy was adopted in 2007 (Government of Botswana 2007). At present, Botswana's tourism policies and CBNRM programmes for the promotion of tourism are seen as a good strategy that can be used to attract visitors and capital to the country by utilising wilderness and wildlife in tourism: according to the revised National Tourism Policy's (UNWTO 2008) vision for 2020, Botswana should be globally renowned as the most authentic and exciting wilderness tourism destination in the world.

Botswana's current CBNRM programme sets a good example, but the success rate has been observed to differ greatly from one area and community to another (Arntzen *et al.* 2003). In general, CBNRM has promoted ecotourism development in the country and local communities have come together to form trusts that oversee such activities as photographic safaris from which they are able to realise benefits (employment and revenue) attributable to tourism (Chipfuva and Saarinen 2011; Mbaiwa 2004).

Based on the country's CBNRM programme, community conservation and tourism development activities are jointly carried out in Controlled Hunting Areas (CHAs), which are community concession areas, where communities collectively participate in tourism development and conservation (Mbaiwa 2004). Thus, in order to be effective, the CBNRM should be characterised by devolution of power from governmental institutions to local communities. However, local control can only follow the devolution if local institutions, which have a vested interest in natural resource conservation, are created (Chipfuva and Saarinen 2011). Devolution and decentralisation include a transfer of regulatory and executive powers, responsibility and authority in decision-making, institutional infrastructure and resources to the local communities (Ribot 1999). Also, Botswana's National Ecotourism strategy (DOT 2002) places emphasis on the involvement of the local people in wilderness-based ecotourism and further states the need to train local people to enable them to benefit from existing tourism opportunities and to create new possibilities in tourism.

However, this capacity building, which should also involve knowledge concerning the wilderness conservation goals, has been seen to be problematic in many cases and there is a growing concern over the relatively common situation that communities are not directly and actively

involved in tourism operations (Chipfuva and Saarinen 2011). Instead they are passively participating in wilderness tourism through a leasing agreement of their wildlife (i.e. hunting) quota to a private tourism operator, who either uses it for non-consumptive or consumptive wildlife tourism (Mbaiwa 2004). In some countries, this kind of participation can also be based on land-leasing agreements without any further local involvement (Nelson 2010). However, for the community to fully benefit from tourism they should be actively involved with wilderness tourism operations. This would empower, benefit and build a capacity and an ownership to manage, guide and develop the operations, and also assist them to realise the value of wilderness conservation and management through tourism.

The CBNRM model is not an easy path to success in wilderness conservation with a tourism component. Local participation, empowerment and benefit sharing can be problematic (Adams and Hulme 2001; Ribot 1999), and have often caused drawbacks in the forms of resource overutilisation and poaching, for example. In addition, local communities do not necessarily have an intrinsic, that is traditional, knowledge of the impacts of the growing tourism activities they support or new technologies and tools they utilise on the environment. It is also important to note that even small natural resource-dependent communities may consist of different groups with different preferences with regard to the utilisation of wilderness and the role of tourism in wilderness. These challenges have turned some commentators against community-based conservation, which they see as neo-populist and misrepresentative of the success of the classical fortress model in wilderness conservation (Spinage 1998).

Despite different legal definitions and conservation models, the present wilderness uses, values and images are increasingly defined in seemingly distant global-scale processes such as the mass media. In these processes wilderness accommodates new meanings and values, and some previous ones may become relics, traces of the past with thinning connotations for new generations (Saarinen 2005). The tourism industry plays an important part in this transformation process.

Tourism in wilderness

The link between protected areas and tourism can be seen to be as old as the history of protected areas (Frost and Hall 2010; Hall 1992; Hall and Boyd 2005). Still, tourism represents perhaps the latest significant form of economy and mode of consumption using the wilderness areas, and several authors have emphasised the increasing attractiveness of wilderness in tourism (Hall and Page 2006; Saarinen 2005). Nowadays wild natural environments are 'universally regarded as a source of pleasure' (Wang 2000: 80) and in many peripheral destinations wilderness areas have turned into key attraction elements in tourism. As a result, the tourism industry has become a significant user, stakeholder and element of change in wilderness environments. Nowadays, many designated wilderness areas and national parks can face hundreds of thousands or even millions of visitors per year. For example the Grand Canyon National Park (USA) receives approximately five million visitors and Kruger National Park (South Africa) about 400,000 overnight visits per year (Grand Canyon National Park & Northern Arizona Tourism Study 2010; South African National Parks 2010).

These kinds of visitation levels are based mainly on packaged, that is organised tourism, but the growing trends of adventure tourism, ecotourism and other forms of alternative nature-based tourism are also important and influence socio-economic, cultural and ecological issues in wilderness areas (Buckley 1999; Saethorsdottir 2004). This is an essential perspective for the future of the wilderness areas and their tourism uses, as nature-based tourism and ecotourism in

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general are considered to be some of the fastest growing sectors of international tourism (Fennell 1999). Since the mid-1990s, new kinds of products of adventure tourism and activities such as snowmobile trekking, husky safaris and four-wheel drives have also become more visible forms of the new tourism activities in the wilderness environments, which may cause future conflicts and changes in wilderness experiences (Buckley 2006; Hall *et al.* 2009; Vail and Heldt 2004).

Wilderness tourism experiences

Tourism and its related consumption needs and attitudes construct and maintain new kinds of images of nature, which may affect the practices and uses related to distant wildernesses. This touristic wilderness is based on consumption, marketing and visualising natural environments, and staging wilderness settings for the purposes of the tourism industry. In advertising, positive images, such as the experience of freedom and naturalness are connected to the product to be marketed, and eventually become part of the identity of the consumer: the tourist. As such, touristic wilderness, with its related meanings, is a commodity and product based on the active production, reproduction and recycling of the images of wild, free, harsh and rugged nature (Saarinen 2005). Good examples of this are found in many Nordic countries, such as Iceland with its tourism marketing. According to Saethorsdottir (2010: 28), the Icelandic tourism industry uses marketing slogans referring to the wilderness characteristics of the country: for example 'Iceland naturally', 'Nature the Way Nature Made It' and 'Pure, Natural, Unspoiled'. These slogans are supported by the images of natural attractions and landscapes of the country. Based on this, it is not a surprise that a clear majority (76 per cent) of international tourists visit the country to experience nature, and about one-third of the tourists visit the Highlands, a large inland wilderness area in Iceland (Thorhallsdottir 2007).

There is a diverse scale of tourist experiences and motivations linked to visits in wilderness environments. Solitude is an acknowledged desirable state among wilderness visitors and a motive in many places (Hendee *et al.* 1990), and it is perhaps one of the most studied issues in research focusing on the wilderness experience (see Hammitt 1982; Roggenbuck *et al.* 1993). This is especially the case in the USA, where the Wilderness Act (Public Law 1964: 1) clearly emphasised that wilderness areas offer 'outstanding opportunities for solitude'. For public land managers that definition raised an obvious question: how many people and visitor encounters can a wilderness accommodate without jeopardising the opportunity to experience solitude by the visitors? This dilemma created a research programme focusing on crowding, encounter norms, visitor satisfaction and social carrying capacity that continues with changing emphases today (Lucas 1964; Williams *et al.* 1991; Roggenbuck *et al.* 1993; McCool and Lime 2001). However, these solitude-related motivational issues are complex in wilderness contexts as they are not created simply by the factual number of visitors or contacts between visitors. The encounter norms, that is standards individuals and groups use when evaluating contacts and activities as acceptable or unacceptable, vary depending on the contact numbers but also on group size, behaviour, activities, ethnicity and environmental and many other situational factors (Vaske *et al.* 1986; Patterson and Hammitt 1990).

In addition to solitude, primitive and unconfined recreational opportunities and remoteness, peace, challenges, escapism and being outside the modern organised society are characteristics of the wilderness experience (Hendee *et al.* 1990; Higham 1998). Many of these experiences clearly conflict with the increasing visitor numbers in wilderness and new kinds of visitor groups with different sets of motivations and understanding of what wilderness represents. In addition to the mentioned differences in group sizes, activities and behaviour, perceived differences in motives, attitudes and values among different types of visitors have also been reported to cause

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conflict in wilderness-user research (Vaske *et al.* 1986). Some tourist groups may value the provided structures, services and security backup by the area management, other groups may prefer the perceived solitude, freedom and unregulated settings, whereas some visitors actually expect relatively strict use limitations in order to feel that the touristic use of the wilderness environment is ethical and safeguarded for future visitors and generations. Thus, all wilderness tourists are not the same, and studies on different wilderness visitor groups and their experiences and motivations relate strongly to the management objectives and practices in those areas.

Although establishment and management of wilderness areas have created better possibilities for visiting them, the increasing use may also pose a threat to biological values of the wild, which can result in diminishing wilderness character of an area (Hendee *et al.* 1990). This, along with the increased and changed use, can conflict with wilderness experiences focusing on solitude and an unconfined type of recreation (Higham 1998). This resembles Hardin's (1968) tragedy of commons in which situations of unrestricted public access to a common resource will ultimately deplete the shared limited resource such as wilderness (experience). This situation has created a double dilemma for the management of tourism in and/of wilderness. As indicated by Nash (1967) and Hendee *et al.* (1990), wilderness management is a contradiction in terms as, in the dominating Anglo-American sense, wilderness refers to an environment that is not influenced or controlled by humans. Tourism as an activity is not usually linked with wilderness kinds of environments that provide solitude and have primitive levels of facilities.

Although, historically, tourism has clearly benefitted the conservation of many natural areas (Butler and Boyd 2000; Frost and Hall 2010), much of the currently increasing and changing tourism targets wilderness areas that are already conserved. Whether establishment of these areas was supported by tourism development or not, may not be a relevant point of departure, as the growing and transforming nature of tourism activities is currently changing the historically created and often relatively widely accepted balance between conservation and tourism in wilderness. This change can question the co-existence and future symbiosis of wilderness and tourism, but it definitely calls for greater sustainability and a revival of the limits to growth thinking in tourism in wilderness.

Wilderness tourism: an oxymoron?

The scale and nature of tourism in wilderness has changed dramatically in the past two decades. As Buckley (1999: 191) stated, there is an increase in the proportion of visitors as commercial rather than independent tourists, often labelled as hikers and trekkers. Buckley continues that this trend to commercial tourism is important for current and future wilderness management, because tourism is a large and politically influential activity, often representing the only viable industry in peripheral regions, where most of the remaining wilderness environments are located. This, along with the increasing physical and ecological impacts of tourism to wilderness, has created concerns about the capacity of managers to steer protected areas for conservation 'if management for tourism were given a higher priority' (Buckley 1999: 191).

There are active policies to steer tourism practices in an environmentally more sustainable direction. In this work, the idea of sustainable tourism has become hegemonic. UNWTO (2004) defined the concept as tourism that is ecologically sound, economically viable and socially acceptable by local communities in the long term. The idea of sustainable tourism has aroused criticism, which is widely discussed in existing tourism literature (see Butler 1999; Liu 2003; Sharpley 2000). As a result, there is an increasing need to understand the limits of growth and ethics in tourism (Fennell 2006; Holden 2003). In this respect, recent calls for the revival of carrying capacity approaches in tourism (Butler 2010; Cocossis and Mexa 2004) offer interesting

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and challenging, but also problematic, views on the discussion. The carrying capacity has been generally defined as the maximum number of people who can use a site without any unacceptable alteration in the physical environment and without any unacceptable decline in the quality of the experience gained by tourists (Getz 1983; Mathieson and Wall 1982: 21). Unlike sustainable tourism, the concept of carrying capacity does not rhetorically imply global intra-generational and inter-generational solutions (Saarinen 2006). Instead, it aims to offer more time-/space-specific answers at the local level. However, as a local-scale solution, carrying capacity could still have wide theoretical and practical dimensions in its relation to sustainable tourism development, planning and policies in wilderness settings (Butler 2010).

Carrying capacity has been occasionally interpreted as an application of sustainable tourism (Butler 1999: 9), implying that the two can co-exist and may both be useful frameworks for setting the limits for tourism development (Butler 1996; Cocossis and Mexa 2004). Indeed, there are similarities between the concepts and the idea of carrying capacity encountered some of the same problems in the past as the idea of sustainable tourism faces nowadays, for example providing unrealistic expectations of clear solutions and being conceptually vague (Lindberg *et al.* 1997; McCool and Lime 2001; Wall 1982).

In addition to practical and conceptual challenges, one of the major problems of using the carrying capacity model with the aim to set a strict limit on growth in tourism, is public acceptance of such decisions (Butler 2010: 58). As noted, tourism is an important and growing field of economy in many regions, which makes it difficult for natural resource managers, politicians and other decision-makers to support and agree on decisions aiming to limit the growth of tourism (Ryan 2002). Naturally, this would be extremely difficult for the industry. All this makes the usability of the carrying capacity concept challenging, but perhaps without setting clear and context-specific limits to growth, the wilderness character of a given area and the wilderness experiences may be lost due to the increasing flows of tourists and new activities. In that respect, tourism in wilderness is an unsolvable dilemma, and, rather than a win-win scenario, it represents a zero-sum game.

Conclusions and discussion

Modern tourism and increasingly diversified forms of nature-based tourism activities have been successful in using and commodifying the wilderness. Along with the general growth of global tourism, it is clear that tourism, especially nature-based tourism and its new forms, will increase in wilderness areas. At the same time, use patterns of wilderness-related tourism are likely to become more international and diversified. Increased tourism can make a positive contribution to environment, conservation and local communities that are dependent on natural resources and/or tourism, but it can also have negative connotations. Therefore, the need to search for alternative and more environment-friendly practices in tourism development and management is crucial. Unfortunately, as many authors have critically expressed, the widespread acceptance of sustainable tourism has not provided a sufficient ethical backbone for protection of the environment in tourism development (Fennell 2006; Holden 2003). This has led some commentators to call for the revitalisation of the carrying capacity concept in tourism (Bramwell 2007; Butler 1996, 2010; Cocossis and Mexa 2004; Hunter 1995).

Whether or not the carrying capacity approach is still viable in tourism development and planning remains an open case. However, it is clear that present conceptualisations and practices of sustainable tourism may not save wilderness areas if the present scale of growth in tourism continues. Thus, instead of the current, popular and rather industry-oriented idea of sustainable tourism implying that all tourism and scales of tourism can be regarded as sustainable by

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appealing to certain codes of conduct (Clarke 1997), the relatively unfashionable carrying capacity thinking with strict limits to tourism growth in natural areas, if major problems occur, may be needed in future. However, as Butler (2010: 61) indicated, this requires academics to focus again on the concept and wilderness managers to implement carrying capacity thinking more effectively than previously. It is difficult to foresee if a revival of the carrying capacity model is realistic, but it is clear that, in order for wilderness and tourism to co-exist, further studies and strong management and planning models are needed to limit the growth of tourism if the ecological and socio-cultural elements of wilderness are endangered and the aim is for them to be conserved for the future.

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