TOURISM, A SMOKESTACK INDUSTRY?

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I regret that Gordon Taylor had to cancel sharing the platform with me. I have respected his expertise in tourism for many years. He is feeling a bit better and wishes he could be here. At the last meeting we were together--in Toronto-- we were labeled "the old curmudgeons!"

I want to express my appreciation to TTRA and the many tourism colleagues I have met since the 1970s. I am glad to see this great organization continue to function as a forum among representatives of government, education, and the private sector for the betterment of tourism. I was surprised to be named a "Star"--certainly, at my age the glow is down to a glimmer.

It has been my good fortune to have watched the tremendous growth of tourism for over six decades.

It is clear that this growth has had many **positive impacts**--economic, employment, tax returns, and many personal rewards from both domestic and international travel. This is not news to you.

But, if you want me to be frank about my observations and work with tourism for these many decades, **I must give you something to worry about.**

My comments today are not mere prattlings of an old man. These are facts that we must admit if we truly want tourism to provide the goals we all seek for the future. I'm not saying that tourism is doomed to destroy itself but unless we make some changes, it might do just that.

Today, I would call tourism a **smokestack industry.**

I am reminded of my college days in the 1930s when I did some freelance art work to help pay my way. The *Grand Rapids Press* in Michigan asked me to do the cover design for their INDUSTRIAL PROGRESS ISSUE. For this, I drew a skyline of factories belching out black smoke. The editor loved it and ran it as symbolic of progress. This narrow approach ignored all the negative spinoffs from factory production.

In my opinion, this is exactly where we are today in tourism--**progress means more and more, regardless of the impacts on the environment and society.**

For the next few minutes, I would like to focus on **just three points: First,** some **major concerns about today's tourism; Second,** some worthwhile examples of **new hope;** and finally, some **challlenges before the tourism establishment** to reverse the negative trends.

Recently, I just completed a manuscript on the future of tourism in America's West. I based it on the past history in that region ever since the explosion of tourism by autocampers in the 1920s. What was my main conclusion? Tourism cannot continue at its present pace! **The**

West, once a Paradise, has been oversold, overdeveloped, and has become environmentally threatening. If there is a future here for tourism, developers and planners of tourism face several very important **challenges.** I would like to name just **three.**

First, Traffic has Become Unbearable.

We have done such a good job of expanding air and land travelways that millions more people are coming to this remarkable region. Highway planners and engineers have been very successful in creating freeways for greater volumes of traffic by dividing the highway, straightening out curves, and leveling hills. Airlines and airports have expanded manyfold.

The **consequence**? Many more millions of travelers are dumped on cities and attractions, way beyond their capacity to handle them. Travel, once a pleasant adventure passing through the countryside is now plagued with traffic frustrations, long delays, danger of accidents, and increased stress. The places we want to visit have become so overrun by tourists that their appeal and satisfaction are severely eroded. Destinations are no longer fun and relaxing places to visit.

Second, Tourism Does Cost--It is not Free

For over fifty years I have heard Chambers of Commerce and tourist marketers repeat the litany of how tourism is such a free good, a godsend with no negative impact. It is time that we learn what a **baldface lie** this is. Tourism is not free and is headed toward a deadend if businesspeople and promoters continue to believe in this falsehood.

The clarion call has been **more and more business** because it brings in new dollars. However, Tourism does cost, and often a great deal.

For example, today in many communities residents are complaining that their **quality of life has been compromised** by too many tourists. Tourists have taken over local shopping areas, forcing them to drive many miles to major shopping complexes beyond the suburbs. They often resent the social behavior of these outsiders. They resent new business types such as casinos that change the quality of their amenities. There is no question--**social costs of tourism are real.**

Many city councils, especially smaller towns with exploding tourism, are faced with **new demands on their infrastructure.** They did not plan on tourism's growth demand for expanding water supply and waste systems, police, fire protection, new streets, lighting, and signage. New motels, restaurants, and shops place a new drain on these functions requiring new investment in expansions that can be very costly and often beyond the capacity of existing city budgets. Typical room taxes on lodging are applied only to advertising, not to the support of the city's infrastructure. And, frequently, as an area becomes more popular, new invasions of tourism development often escalate local property taxes, forcing long-time residents to move elsewhere. There is no doubt that **tourism has economic costs.**

Now we are beginning to recognize that **tourism exacts serious environmental costs.** Increased millions of automobiles, RVs, and tour buses are polluting the air as never before. The thousands of scenic flights over Grand Canyon shatter the silence, once enjoyed by a significant market segment of visitors. Vacation homes and resorts are polluting streams and lakes with untreated sewage. The new trend toward adventure travel and ecotourism place new stress on

the wild land environments--destroying vegetation, eroding slopes, and threatening wildlife.

A major environmental issue in the West is the tremendous demand on **limited water supply** by new population and tourism growth. Reservoirs, once thought to be ample sources, have already reached their capacity. Predictions are that instead of guaranteeing ample water, they are silting up, actually reducing their capability in the future. These and many other items are proving that **tourism is causing environmental stress on the environment--another real cost. No, tourism is not free.**

A Third Major Finding from my study of the West is the **erosion of place qualities.** What do I mean by this?

The major reason one travels is to experience a different location because of its unique qualities. Seventy years ago, at the onset of autocamping, **places were distinctive.** You really saw the difference between a mining town, such as Placerville, and a coastal shipping town, such as Eureka.

Unfortunately, over the past several decades, tourism development has eroded distinctive qualities and **made many destinations all alike.** Tourist business strips with their McDonalds, Comfort Inns, and Burger Kings are the same in the West as the East. Today, urban sprawl looks the same wherever you travel. And, especially in small cities, suburban development has sapped the strength and integrity of the old downtown.

I could relate many more ways in which tourism faces many issues in the future, such as **continuing antagonism toward Native American tourism development, and too much federalism in the West that denies local communities control of their own destinies.**

However, as we look to the future of tourism in this region, it is encouraging to discover a **bright as well as a dark side to tourism.**

So, for my **SECOND POINT** I would like to cite a few cases that are demonstrating a new trend toward **environmental sustainability.**

* Tourist businesses around **Lake Tahoe** have fostered the installation of three major transit systems to avoid much of their traffic congestion.

* **Jackson Hole**, Wyoming has initiated new planning control of adjacent hinterland, preventing further encroachment of nearby scenic beauty, the lifeblood of their tourism.

* The city of **Newport**, Oregon, is restoring old "cannery row", an area of five by six blocks, with its Historic Nye Beach Overlay. Restoring its heritage will sustain even more tourism in the future.

* A corridor of over 80 miles along the **Columbia River Gorge** is now planned so that resource protection is balanced with development. Signed by law in 1986, this revolutionary plan is called the ***Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area,*** encompassing 13 cities, parts of six counties, and both Washington and Oregon states. Resource values, important to tourism, are being protected at the same time that travel businesses are being enhanced.

* In northern Arizona, the Historic Route Association is stimulating preservation of many segments of **old Route 66** in spite of being bypassed **by Interstate 40.** This old "Mother Road" that I traveled with my parents on a camping trip in 1929, is now becoming more popular.

* A badly eroded corridor of the **Lower Colorado River** in Arizona is now redeveloped into a beautiful area. This new sustainable project is due to the initiative of the Lower Colorado Indians and planning by landscape architect Fred Phillips. Included is a new visitor center, picnic tables, interpretive center, and the 'Ahakhav Native Plant Nursery that is restoring the area with native plants.

* In **northern California,** the 130-mile Feather River Scenic Byway was dedicated in 1998 and offers tourists a beautiful and enriching experience.

* Many small towns, such as **Healdsburg**, have made great strides in restoring their central town plazas into interesting and commercially viable places that also add to the amenities for local citizens.

These cases are clues to a new interest in **environmentally sustainable tourism development.**

Now, for my **THIRD POINT,**

What are the **main lessons** from this review of tourism development in the West? There are many, but I would like to **highlight just six. These,** I would argue, are primarily responsibilities of the private commercial sector of tourism, including marketers.

1. New Solutions to Traffic

No community nor attraction can any longer ignore the traffic problem. It must be solved. If tourism leaders cooperate with traffic planners, new mechanisms can be installed that at least alleviate the major problems at peak times of visitor use. These mechanisms include perimeter parking and shuttle bus and, whether we like it or not, we may have to ration use by lottery or some other scheme.

It is predicted that higher admission fees and visitor quotas will have to be applied to major attractions such as national parks and forests. Whatever system is used, it is long overdue for **the tourism sector** to take the lead and not sit back for someone else to resolve.

2. New Visitor Interpretive Centers

Much of the complaint of visitors ruining national parks and resources can be avoided by installing new visitor interpretive centers, especialy at entrance points to major resource areas, such as gateway cities. Here people can be given a vicarious experience of the special natural and cultural resource features of the area without their trampling these resources to death.

A well-planned site would include ample parking for personal cars, RVs, and tour buses. The grounds and buildings would then include interesting exhibits, videos, displays, and demonstrations. By means of joint venture with public resource managers, the private sector could provide commercial food service, sales of books and videos, and even admissions to pageants. The several interpretive visitors centers on the theme of the Lewis and Clark Expedition are now proving the success of this approach.

3. New Environmentalism.

Instead of the present antagonism with environmental advocates, the private sector of tourism itself has everything to gain by becoming proactive environmentalists. This is not altruism, it is self-protection. In spite of the success of the man-made attractions such as Las Vegas, Disneyland, and elsewhere, the dominant foundation of tourism in the West remains the

natural and cultural resources. The lakes, mountains, forests, wildlife areas, rivers, waterfalls, fishing, and historic sites continue to draw tourists by the millions. Services for these tourists can be, **and must be,** located and designed to protect, not destroy, these basic assets.

4. New Resource Agency Cooperation.

It seems traditional for the tourism sector to maintain conflict with resource agencies such as the National Park Service, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and many state agencies. Both public agencies and the private sector seem to be more concerned over turf protection than the good of the local publics they impact and the travelers they serve. Called for is a new management mechanism that bridges both sectors. Both sides need each other and if the future of tourism is to succeed, new cooperation must take place.

5. New Business Contribution.

My next point will meet with strong objection from the business sector of tourism because it believes it already is paying more taxes than necessary, especially by hotels and motels through the room tax. Because these moneys usually go toward local area promotion, I believe they have a better purpose.

Particularly in gateway communities to national parks and forests, these moneys might better be spent on fostering the success of the public and nonprofit agencies that manage the main tourist attraction nearby. Tourist businesses next to a national park in reality are parasitic--living off the public treasury. To me, this is not fair. Support of environmental protection of the natural and cultural resources that draw visitors is part of tourist business success nearby and should be part of their financial obligation.

6. Finally, New Recognition of Tourism as a System.

Needed today is for the private sector to recognize that the tourism supply side is a huge agglomeration of separate parts that depend on each other and yet seldom talk to each other.

Hotel success depends on the success of transportation, attractions, information, and promotion. Attraction success depends on the success of tourist services, transportation, information, and promotion. The success of transporation depends upon the success of attractions, services, and information.

Clear as these simple truths may be, they are not practiced today. Private sector tourist organizations have the opportunity today of breaking this horse-and-buggy and smokestack industry approach and working together for the good of all.

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My final conclusion, especially for western tourism, is that **there is hope, not doom, but only when lessons from the past are learned and applied for new action.**

The problems can be overcome but not until tourism leaders want them to be.

We cannot continue to market tourism products that are deteriorating.

The smokestack approach to tourism is obsolete and must be changed if tourism is to succeed in the future.

This is this octogenarian's message to his colleagues in TTRA at the beginning of this new millenium.