The Tourism Evolution Cycle – A study of trending destinations

By Joshua Smith

Destinations across the globe increasingly focus on tourism as a means of economic growth within their borders as a recent study in 2017 by the World Travel & Tourism Council concluded, "Travel & Tourism generated US$7.6 trillion (10.2% of global gross domestic product) and 292 million jobs in 2016, equivalent to one in 10 jobs in the global economy."[i] This potential increases significantly in destinations that have limited resources, yet fluctuates throughout the decades, creating a cyclical evolution of tourism dependent upon policies, awareness and consumer interest, specifically noted by Butler (1980) in "The Concept of a Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution: Implications for Management of Resources." [ii] However, tourism can both benefit and be harmed by this type of development, which will be explored.

Pitcairn Islands may well be the most isolated destination in the world. As an overseas territory of the United Kingdom located in the South Pacific Ocean, it's nearly equidistant from the iconic places of Easter Island, Chile and Tahiti, French Polynesia, both relatively developed tourism destinations. With a population of 51 inhabitants, access to the island is limited to only 20 annual departures with 12 beds on each sailing and solely from Mangareva, French Polynesia in which visitors can spend four, 11 or 18 days learning about the culture.[iii] Additionally, 12 cruise lines offer an annual opportunity to spend a few hours on the 18 square mile island.

Because of its limited access, the Pitcairn Islands have remained in the involvement stage of tourism evolution. Some may argue the destination is in the exploration stage as defined by Butler (1980) and while it "welcomes a small number of tourists" (p. 6) and there is "minimal impact to the social life of a permanent resident," (p. 7) the economic impact is great. With "some advertising specifically to attract tourists and some level of organization," (p. 7) Pitcairn displays a mix of characteristics of these two stages.

According to Pitcairn Islands Strategic Development Plan (2016), "tourism is now Pitcairn Island Government's biggest income source. It is hope to continue to develop Pitcairn as a unique tourist destination for the benefit of both the public and private sector" (p. 9). An additional declaration of "Tourism presents Pitcairn's biggest, perhaps only real opportunity of significant growth" (p. 3),[iv] implies the not only the urgency, but dire need in focusing on this sector beyond the stagnant income from honey and stamps.[v]

Ally LaBriola, Pitcairn Islands Tourism North American representative, was hired in January 2017 to increase awareness of the destination and explained "Tourism is embedded into the life of the people on Pitcairn. You only need one grocery store, one postman, so bringing tourists to the island, allows residents to rent out their home stays and lead tours for extra tourism income as well as sell their curio and crafts to visitors. They also benefit with certain luxuries. For instance, the shipping vessel that brings food only comes 4 times a year, but when the cruise ships arrive, they off-load massive containers of food that will otherwise spoil later in their sailing."[vi]

With a price of more than $8,000 per person excluding international airfare for the 11 day on-island visit, the fixed departure program may even be cost-prohibitive for the common Venturer who are 'intellectually curious about and want to explore' and may 'spend discretionary income more readily.'[vii] Labriola shared, "Our ideal visitor is retired people with high net-worth and someone who is content in their own company as a good deal of time on Pitcairn is spent solo."

"The vision for tourism and the government of Pitcairn is to become a 100% sustainable island reliant on solar and wind energy and be a top eco tourism destination. We are in the final stage of becoming the next International Dark Sky Sanctuary as well," Labriola explained.

Sustainability remains a priority for Pitcairn Islands, but the destination's biggest challenge may not be to increase tourism, rather focus on the potential inability to service the current and future demand of this revenue generation. According to NationMaster in 2012, Pitcairn Islands ranked last for all countries with regard to birth rate at -9 births per 1,000 population.[viii]

It is important that the right kind of tourists visit the island, however between the accessibility and the cost, Pitcairn islands will inevitably remain a sustainable destination for many years, providing they maintain its small, but consistent tourism infrastructure.

Evolution from the involvement stage of Butler's model (1980) brings a destination to the development stage, as "local involvement and control of development will decline rapidly." An example of a destination in this stage, Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is located in Southeast Asia just West of Thailand. In July 2012, 7 months after Hillary Clinton became the first U.S. official to visit the country in 50 years as secretary of state[ix], it was announced that Myanmar is open to U.S. investment[x], paving the way for large hotel brands to begin development in key locales throughout the country.

As a primarily Buddhist country, the country was "under the rule of an oppressive military junta"[xi] until 2011 which kept both tourism and investment to a minimum. With great opportunity in a 'newly opened destination,' tourism arrivals increased quickly, but steadily, welcoming 2.044 million visitors in 2013, 3.081 million visitors in 2014, and 4.681 million in 2015.[xii] This new U.S. governmental approval and support, combined with stability created a need to see the destination before the experience changed.

As the visitor type progressed from Venturer to Centric-Venturer according to Plog (2001) in Myanmar in 2015, another trend developed, known as 'last-chance tourism' in which the urgency to visit before the authenticity diminishes and has since been named as the top travel trend of 2018 by Forbes.[xiii]

I consider myself a Venturer (Plog, 2001) and had the opportunity to visit Myanmar in May 2013, recalling its simplicity, yet potential to spiral toward mass tourism unless policies were implemented. When arriving at a pagoda in Bagan, I commented how comforting it was that the pagodas were free of typical touristic activities from locals like begging and selling imported curio items. My guide shared that the locals were just beginning to understand this lucrative opportunity and took me to a more common pagoda, where this occurred. "None of these locals were here six months ago," he commented.

With the continued anticipation of tourism, even the government focused on infrastructure to accommodate the forecasted demand. However, plans for a new Yangon international airport to welcome the expected 7.5 million annual visitors in 2020 have been delayed with financing challenges.[xiv]

The private sector also began the investment with brands such as Accor and Hilton quickly acquiring properties. Accor confirmed a deal for three properties within 18 months following its return to the country in 2013.[xv] More recently, Hilton continued its growth strategy, announcing in 2018 a third property in Mandalay,[xvi] the second largest international gateway in the country.

Unfortunately this rapid development has not been sustainable and clearly follows the model Butler (1980) identified for the development stage with "some locally provided facilities will have disappeared, being superseded by larger, more elaborate and more up-to-date facilities provided by external organizations, particularly for visitor accommodation" (p.8).

"Yangon has more than 180 public buildings that have been listed as 'heritage' sites by the Yangon City Development Committee, but that doesn't stop developers acquiring them and knocking them back to a stone or concrete shells and rebuilding them into flashy hotels, office blocks and even retail outlets,"[xvii] Don Ross with TTR Weekly reported in August 2018.

The government has, however, begun to identify tourism strategies with regard to preserving the country's assets. In early 2018, the Bagan Archaeological Management Committee banned visitors from climbing on ancient pagodas and temples in an effort to be considered a UNESCO World Heritage site, which requires sufficient measures to protect the monument.[xviii] However, within 24 hours, the ban was lifted on five temples as result of backlash from locals who feared their income would suffer.[xix] Myanmar may be a difficult example to assess the tourism impact with residents, as they fluctuate throughout the four stages of Doxey's Irridex of Reactions (1975), [xx] as it is very much dependent upon government policies, some of which limit the tourism potential.

Political uncertainty has severely impacted tourist arrivals as indicated in the Myanmar Tourism Statistics report (2017) with a decline of 37.8% between 2015 and 2016 with 2.907 million visitors in 2016, then rebounding to 3.443 million visitors in 2017. An August 2018 report from the Centre for Aviation (CAPA) stated, "Myanmar has not lived up to expectations despite rapid growth in passenger traffic since the country opened up six years ago. Given the recent growth rates Myanmar will not even reach 2 million visitors in 2020."[xxi] This is the most important time in Myanmar's tourism development so as to not move directly into the decline stage (Butler, 1975) and with the anticipated foreign direct investment of $5.8 billion into the country this current fiscal year,[xxii] there are many people, companies and countries hoping for its success.

Continuing toward tourism success and the consolidation of Butler's model (1980), Dubai has been known as one of the fastest developing cities in the world, ranked as the 5th worldwide according to a report by the Brookings Institution in 2014 (p.10).[xxiii] As the seventh most visited city in the world, welcoming 16.7 million visitors in 2018,[xxiv] Dubai, like other Middle Eastern destinations is trying to diversify its reliance on oil for its gross domestic product (GDP), with "visitor numbers exceeding the number of permanent residents" (Butler, 1980) numbering 3.19 million.[xxv]

In May 2013, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai, approved the vision to double the number of visitors from 2012 by 2020 and attract 20 million annual visitors.[xxvi] "While an aggressive strategy, the destination is very much on the right track," as explained by [redacted][xxvii] In order to meet this goal, the destination focused on diversifying its product offering, beyond the luxury sector as "Dubai's existing hotel supply still leans towards the five-star luxury sector as the initial destination marketing efforts were targeted towards the upper-class spectrum of the market in order to achieve higher tourism spends" according to a 2016 PwC report (p. 3).[xxviii]

"Home-grown hotel groups like Jumeriah and Emaar, who are known for the luxury properties have both added 3-star and 4-star," [redacted] shared. With dramatic infrastructure development, the workforce needs to simultaneously increase and may be causing frustration amongst the residents in a city "whose population has grown 1,000% in the last 40 years."[xxix] As a local resident, however, [redacted] explained, "The culture and citizens of Dubai have grown tremendously and simultaneously with Dubai, where we are given so much opportunity; opportunities that were not given to our older generations."

The addition of a value add tax in the United Arab Emirates of five percent introduced January 1, 2018, has also impacted the local residents as the "government wants to increase revenue in the face of lower oil prices."[xxx] With multiple significant changes in the lifestyle of its residents, it's not surprising that "nearly half of UAE residents are concerned about cost of living increases,"[xxxi] however, this negative reaction should not solely fall on tourism development, especially when "land prices are 50% cheaper than they were in 2008."[xxxii]

Dubai will soon be on the world stage at the 2020 World Expo, setting the stage for the centric traveler (Plog, 2001) to see what the destination can offer. From the currently-in-development high speed rail between Dubai and Abu Dhabi that is designed to reach speeds of over 620 miles per hour[xxxiii] to flying taxis,[xxxiv] Dubai's opportunity for growth, especially in the tourism sector is limitless as it continually experiences rejuvenation through the "bigger, better, faster" approach.

While the tourism area cycle of evolution generally follows a natural progression of development (Butler, 1980), there are many contributing factors that may force stagnation or regression including financial stability, political situations and accessibility. The hope is that each of the destinations are able to create a sustainable model that benefits both the visitor as well as the local residents with jeopardizing the integrity of either group.

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