

## Mission Programs

Center for Sustainable Destinations

### Harvard Paper Takes Aim at Mass Tourism

A new Harvard paper takes an often acerbic look at travel journalism and its failure to report on the serious impact of mass tourism on local cultures and the environment.

"Some 898 million international tourists are invading beaches, historic monuments, great cities and even greater wilderness areas, doing irreversible damage," writes Elizabeth Becker, fellow at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and former New York Times reporter. Her paper, "[Lost in the Travel Pages: The Global Industry Hiding Inside the Sunday Newspaper](#)," was published by the school's Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy.

The paper includes quotes by Jonathan Tourtellot, director of the National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Development (CSD). Speaking of protected areas such as national parks, Tourtellot called for "recreation ecology" studies on mass tourism's impact, saying that destinations need to "figure out how many people it takes to trash a stream in a national park; or the number of all-terrain vehicles to tear up a landscape."

The paper describes how tourism has spoiled many destinations with pollution, waste, and overconsumption of water and electricity. "Local cultures and local economies are reeling from the onslaughts," she writes.

**Disappearing landscapes.** A big loser is authenticity, an essential pillar in the principles of geotourism advocated by the CSD. "When centuries-old churches and village squares are surrounded by modern chain hotels and restaurants, authenticity has disappeared," writes Becker.

But despite its importance as an industry and its impact, Becker writes, "Tourism . . . gets a pass from the media. . . It is largely ignored by news reporters even though tourism ranks at the very top of global industry and provides one out of every twelve jobs in the world, more than any other single industry."

**Some good news.** Becker points to some bright spots in the tourism landscape, including destination stewardship programs carried out with CSD support. "From Rhode Island to Arizona, states are pioneering tourism that protects the environment and the sense of place," she writes.

Rhode Island and Arizona signed the Geotourism Charter with the National Geographic Society, which commits the states to preserve and protect their assets. The Geographic's Center for Sustainable Destinations helps in various ways, such as providing research on best practices.

Unfortunately, industry does not necessarily support such progressive moves, she writes, and cites instances where tourism interests have lobbied against proposals to re-invest hotel occupancy and rental-car taxes into environmental funds.

In an August 31, 2008, Washington Post Outlook section article, Becker again quotes CSD's Tourtellot on the impact of mass tourism on tropical coastal environments. "Essentially every tropical island is in danger," the center's director said.