

Academic Article

## THE DISCERNING TRAVELER AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN ASEAN – A CRITIQUE

Leonard Barnett<sup>1\*</sup> and Edward Carter<sup>2</sup>

Bangkok University International College, Bangkok University, Bangkok, Thailand

lenbarnett@yahoo.com.au<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This academic paper examines current opportunities and challenges for tourism in the ASEAN region and discusses the need for sustainable approaches. After elaborating the ASEAN context, it investigates etiological linkages between the so-called ‘discerning’ traveler and sustainable approaches to tourism and provides a robust critique of these. In examining current trends in tourism theory and practice and while acknowledging serious criticisms of theoretical development in the area, the study explores the conceptual linkages between postmodernism, sustainability and development. Having explained the positive and negative impacts of tourism, this paper introduces the notion of the postmodern ‘discerning traveler’ and positions this within sustainable tourism and current theoretical developments. It introduces a typology of discerning travelers and highlights the implications of each for tourism generally and in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), tourism authorities and companies. Finally, the study provides a critique of the notion of the ‘discerning’ traveler and examples of future research projects which examine how to embody sustainability and attract the high-end, low-impact discerning visitor.

**Keywords:** sustainability, discerning traveler, tourism, ASEAN, development

## INTRODUCTION

This timely and topical study is important because it explains and questions the current fashionable pursuit of the “discerning traveler” by some governments and agencies in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and elsewhere. After describing the ASEAN context, the paper responds to the denigrations of academic Hospitality and Tourism as lacking scholastic depth, intellectual weight and theoretical critique. As this is an academic investigation, drawing on literature, documents and discussions with industry figures, as noted in this paper, it does not purport to be a narrowly-focused scientific research study, with traditional methodology, etc. However, this important paper will be provide a conceptual basis for the design and implementation of future research studies, as indicated in the conclusion.

### Structure

This study begins with a specification of its purposes and objectives, a clear explanation of the type of investigation it is and its importance firstly, in providing an analysis of its subject matter and secondly, in responding to the scholastic criticisms of Hospitality and Tourism as lacking academic critique.

### Analysis

After describing the ASEAN context, the paper positions the investigation theoretically, and describes the positive and negative effects of tourism and the emergence of sustainable tourism. The relationship between sustainability and tourism is then examined and typologies of tourists, including the discerning traveler, and their linkages to sustainability discussed. Then, the paper investigates the high-end discerning traveler and sustainability and proceeds to question and critique this much prized tourist. The paper concludes with a summary and potential research areas, while questioning the authenticity and commitment of the high-end discerning traveler, their economic and sustainable importance to the tourism industry is acknowledged.

## FRAMEWORK ANALYSIS

The overall purpose of this paper is twofold: firstly, to provide an understanding of the conceptual and etiological linkages arising from dissatisfaction with certain types of tourism and tourists, the ascent of sustainability as the dominant discourse in hospitality and tourism and the pursuit of of the postmodern high-end discerning or discriminating traveler and secondly, to critique the efficacy and credibility of this type of tourist in regard to sustainability.

The investigation's objectives are:

1. To describe the advantages and disadvantages of tourism and the consequent emergence of sustainable tourism.
2. To identify the different types of tourists and their effects on sustainability
3. To position and describe the high end discerning traveler within tourist categorizations.
4. To examine the relationship between sustainability, postmodernism and the high-end discerning traveler.
5. To explain and critique the relationship between sustainability and the high-end discerning traveler.
6. To indicate future research projects in this area

## CONTENT

As this is an academic investigation, drawing on literature, documents and some discussions with industry figures, it is not a narrowly-focused scientific research study, using traditional research methodologies, etc. Of course, the paper will be used to design and implement future research studies. However, this study is very important in itself, not only because it explains and questions the current fashionable pursuit of the high-end tourist, but also because it provides some response to the denigrations of Hospitality

and Tourism as lacking scholastic depth, intellectual weight and theoretical critique. These criticisms are dealt with in the next section.

## Context

### The ASEAN Context

The formation of a single ASEAN market (AEC) in 2015 provoked great excitement among those involved in the regional tourism industry. ASEAN and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) have a long history in tourism and hospitality with many attempts at joint and cooperative approaches, e.g. the ASEAN Tourism Forum (1969), Visit ASEAN (1991). Despite later developments, the blueprint for regional approaches remains the ASEAN Tourism Agreement (2002) which emphasises the single destination theme and the economic development accompanying tourism. Interestingly, it gives very little attention to sustainability (Wong, Keyuan & Zeng, 2006)

The GMS includes tourism as one of the eleven flagship programs in its ten year Economic Cooperation Programme. However, by linking these flagship initiatives with its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (poverty alleviation, gender equality and empowering women and sustainable development in the sub-region), it attempts to incorporate sustainable tourism development

in meeting the needs of tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing future opportunities for local people— an advance on the earlier ASEAN agreements.

The concern remains that although the single ASEAN market and accompanying initiatives may eventually provide a boon for regional tourism, it may not augur well for sustainable tourism. As will be discussed later in this paper, the current regional tourism discussion is overwhelmingly commercial, encompassing corporate, MICE and mass tourism, especially from Asia: As the PATA CEO trumpeted, “With 100 million Chinese tourists expected to travel by 2020, and Indian tourist numbers growing at a steady 12%, the travel industry is very upbeat about this region,” This commercial preoccupation would seem to give further support to those who criticise tourism academically as vacuous and simply a sub-part of business studies (Botteril, 2003).

Against this backdrop, there is a little serious discussion about practical approaches to sustainable tourism on an ASEAN wide basis and the benefits of attracting the discerning, particularly the high end, traveler. There are a small number of country-based approaches (e.g. Laos) and a few sustainable, discerning destinations (e.g. Four Seasons Camp).

### The Theoretical Context

The turbulence of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has yielded massive demographic, intellectual, economic and lifestyle changes – globally and, of course, in ASEAN. It has also transformed our values concerning communal and individual responsibility and altered how we interpret the world (Zahra & MacIntosh, 2007) These changes are apparent in the attitudes of the postmodern traveler and carry serious implications for the future of tourism in the AEC, which is, as the Asia Development Bank notes, still a work in progress (Asia Development Bank, 2013)

Although today’s tourists are different to those of even last century, the transformations in these travelers have yet to be fully investigated academically. The upheaval of the past one hundred years has produced enormous demographic, intellectual, economic and lifestyle changes, transforming values about communal and individual responsibility and altering how we interpret the world (Zahra & MacIntosh, 2007) These changes are apparent in the attitudes of the postmodern traveler and carry serious implications for tourism.

Rightly or wrongly, the academic area of tourism has been criticized as lacking scholastic depth (Botteril, 2003) and critical theory (Veal, 2002) with Jones describing it as

an intellectual void (Jones, 2004).and others noting a preoccupation with operational management (Taylor & Edgar, 1999). This paper seeks to answer these criticisms in part by demonstrating the linkages between sustainability, postmodernism, development and the discerning traveler.

The influential, but controversial, intellectual current of postmodernism is apparent in Urry's "tourist gaze" (Foucault, 1980). building on Foucault's "medical gaze" (Urry, 2002). Postmodernist approaches bring a theoretical depth and contribute to tourism research by highlighting the variegated and situational nature of tourism experiences (Hottola, 2004) Postmodernism seeks a critical engagement with the modern era – not its replacement - extracting meanings from the human life worlds with which the traveler interacts (Hottola, 2004).

Tourism in this context, is not simply a commercial activity nor the intellectually impoverished child of business studies, but an enriching, optimistic and deeply significant pursuit. "Mindless hedonism and pleasure seeking are no longer fashionable" (Singh, 2005). nor are template travel or "fordism" (Haanpaa, 2005). The postmodern tourist is different, searching for meaning, a lens through which cultural complexity can be viewed and organized (Zahra & MacIntosh, 2007)

## Upsides and Downsides of Tourism and the Rise of Sustainability

The longstanding debates about whether tourism is a boon or a curse persist, falling into three main areas: economic, socio/ cultural and environmental.

On the positive side, economically, the tourism industry is a most important sector of the global economy, creating millions of jobs, contributing massively to GDP and one of the world's fastest growing industries (World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), 2012; Hassan, 2008) Tourism stimulates the growth of local products and has massive multiplier effects in communities. It increases state and regional revenues and facilitates local and national infrastructure development. From the social and cultural perspective, tourism can increase educational opportunities, preserve local cultures, reinforce identity and enhance human rights. Environmentally, postmodern tourism particularly can raise consciousness of the environment, local ecologies and measures to lessen pollution (Coathup, 1999). Tourism has goaded governments into implementing policies aimed at habitat preservation and sustainability, e.g. national park protection.

However, tourism has familiar downsides, including economic exploitation, cultural devastation and environmental destruction, especially in mass tourism

destinations (Haanpaa, 2005) In the case of mass tourism, there is what McCannell calls the cannibalization of the exotic – the destruction of what attracted MacCannell (1999) This is why some are concerned about PATA's triumphant prediction of expected increased traveler numbers (Shankar, 2012; Hassan, 2008). Will this exacerbate existing 'cannibalization of the exotic' in ASEAN.

Economically, tourism can leak funds and resources away from localities, by import substitution and destruction of local trades, skills and economies, increasing staples and land prices, and inducing dependence on "visitors". Local access to jobs in the industry is not guaranteed and unemployment may increase through the destruction of lifestyles, resulting in increased poverty, prostitution and mendicancy. Socially, tourism has often led to corruption, displacement of indigenous people, human zoos, deterioration of local cultures and loss of identity, the exploitation of women and children, increased inequality, crime and conflicts over land, traditional customs and law. In regard to the environment, unsustainable tourism has had three major effects: increased pressure on natural resources, pollution and damage to ecosystems (Singh, 2005). Most commonly, it is governments, tourism companies and authorities that facilitate these transgressions and certain types of tourists

who unwittingly conspire in perpetrating them. Most threatening to sustainability are mass and charter tourist firms and travelers while, as Choibamroong notes, discerning travelers or what used to be called elite tourists are least likely to be attracted to places which are exploitative or unethical Eber, S. (1992).

In reaction, to avoid the devastating negative economic, social and environmental impacts of this avalanche of visitors, the search for a tourism that conserves rather than destroys, together with the sustainable development movement, has led to the rhetoric and sometimes implementation of sustainable tourism (Eber, 1992).

#### Tourism and Sustainability

Sustainable tourism completely dominates current discourse on ethical travel Tribe, J. (2006). Most interpretations emphasize environmental threats, with only a few dealing with total sustainability—economic, social, and environmental Butler (1999). Interestingly, most authors define sustainable tourism and tourism separately, assuming the former is a sub-part of the latter. Eber in his classic definition states: sustainable tourism is "tourism and associated infrastructures that: both now and in the future, operate within natural capacities for the regeneration and future productivity of natural resources; recognize the contribution

that people and communities, customs and lifestyles, make to the tourism experience; accept that these people must have an equitable share in the economic benefits of local people and communities in the host areas" (Eber, 1992).

The World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as that which meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. This description complements the post-materialist values of postmodernism, emphasizing the role and responsibility of the individual in making ethical, sustainable choices (Haanpaa, 2005). This dominant postmodernist discourse underpins ethical tourism activities and is integral to the industry's development and management.

#### Sustainable Tourism and the Discerning Traveler

Perionova provides a limited typology of tourists as organized mass, individual mass, explorers and drifters, observing that each type impacts differently on locals and the environment (Perionova, 2005). Choibamroong's categorizations include the elite tourist, somewhat similar to today's high-end discerning traveler (Coathup, 1999). Haanpaa notes the dominant tourism trends as fordism, prepackaging and postmodernism,

with postmodernism manifested in the hyper real and the ecological and ethically responsible (Zahra & MacIntosh, 2007). Tepalus remarks that many tourists, not simply the elite or high-end, have become increasingly discriminating and conscious of sustainability (Tepalus, 2000). Numerous wealthy, ecologically conscious, older tourists "were the mass travelers of the 1960s and 70s, and are today's discerning and sophisticated travelers" (Tepalus, 2000). For this traveler, tourism concerns experiences rather than products, a search for destinations that provide culture, community, security, leisure, tranquility, learning or adventure. MacCannell describes the discerning traveler as a "pilgrim", in search of authentic experiences and even a way of life (MacCannell, 1999)

Postmodernism emphasises values such as quality of life, culture, lifestyle, freedom and health (Haanpaa, 2005). so that tourism becomes integral to the postmodern traveler's quest for personal experiences (Zahra & MacIntosh, 2007). Yeoman states that the discerning postmodern traveler, "is searching for new experiences, is concerned about the environment, is interested in taking part in a health/well-being lifestyle and wants to experience the local culture" (Yeoman, 2008).

Boniface & Cooper (2005) identify that the discerning traveler:

1. knows what he/she wants - quality, service and value for money
2. is concerned about the environment and the ethical consumption of tourism
3. is experienced, evaluating destinations and products
4. is flexible and spontaneous in travel arrangements
5. has consumer and technology skills
6. is motivated by experience not products, e.g. wanderlust, culture, curiosity.

Increased large-scale tourism to ASEAN, from India and China particularly, ensure that there remain mass tourists, trudging around markets and temples, following flags and megaphones. However, there is now a critical mass of experienced, discerning travelers. Not all are wealthy, but some are and, unsurprisingly, postmodern values tend to predominate in these individuals who generally come from affluent societies (Haanpaa, 2005). These wealthy postmodernists are the discerning travelers, the ones with high purchasing power.

#### Sustainable Tourism and High-End Discerning Travelers

High-end discerning travelers have the same concerns and desires as other postmodern tourists but with this key

difference: because cost is not an issue, they will only patronize experiences which are the best in their class. The high-end postmodern tourist is concerned with individualization of destinations and demonstrating superiority, not expense. They are flexible and seek experiential variety (Uriely, 1997). Although financially similar to the elite traveler, they exhibit postmodernist values, taking ethical and ecological issues very seriously, and are technologically adept. Consequently, tourism offerings must meet the postmodern discerning traveler's ethical and ecological benchmarks (Haanpaa, 2005). As Jefferson observes, "they are today's sophisticated and discerning travelers with the means and will to travel. They expect high standards." (Jefferson, 1995)

What does this tourist, so financially attractive to governments and operators, demand? They are time-poor, cash-rich, expecting ease of consumption and the opportunity to experience, unwind and relax. They will not tolerate uncaring or ignorant staff, mismanagement, stress, disorganization or inattention to detail (Semone, 2008). Simple functionality, exploitation and performativity, i.e. minimum input for maximum cash return, do not attract these travelers (Tribe, 1997).

Being concerned with quality, not cost, places pressures on destinations



to ensure that they are 'the best in their class.' The high-end discerning traveler is a postmodern child "of the information age, sophisticated and discerning, increasingly alive to 'green' issues" (Jefferson, 1995). They are heavy users of online agencies and social media, e.g. Twitter, FaceBook, YouTube, and contribute to user-generated content sites like TripAdvisor (Rabanser & Ricci, 2005)

#### How Credible is the Discerning Traveler?

Adding to the familiar challenges to tourism, especially in interaction with local communities, recently, there is growing skepticism about the motivation and tastefulness of the so-called discerning traveler. How discriminating and 'chic' are these people really and how committed are they to their banner postmodern values? As O'Reilly notes, there are always risks when tourism is about affluent people from fortunate places visiting poorer people in developing locales (O'Reilly, 2007).

Tourism is "between leisure and work, home and away, every day and holiday" (Urry, 2002). It is about escaping the drudgery of the prosaic for the exotic and the other. But is it condescending to view tourism as postmodern and experiential - as a "laboratory where people have been able to experiment with new aspects of

their identities, their social relations or their interactions" (Lofgren, 2001) McCannell highlights the dangers of the discerning tourist seeking validating experiences with his dramatic description of travelers cannibalizing the exotic (MacCannell, 1999).

Tourism requires people and places to be exposed to the tourist gaze. Of course, the more endangered and threatened the target, the more desirable it is to visit or expose (Franklin & Crang, 2001) especially to a high-end discerning traveler, unfettered by cost. Weakened cultures and vulnerable communities can form part of a discerning traveler's routine, with these often unprepared peoples and places transformed into snapshots and stories to tell friends (Franklin & Crang, 2001) As the owner of one high-end destination confided: "The main reason these sophisticated, super rich visit, is to brag to their friends." Thus, tourism forms part of the discerning tourist's culture (Picard, 1996)

A less romantic view of the discerning traveler is provided by Lew Lew, Hall & Williams (2004), Hughes (2004), Mowforth & Munt (1998), Munt (1994), in reviving the notion of cultural capital, Hughes asserts that tourism can be a dispute over taste, with the high-end discerning traveler prevailing by determining what good taste is Hughes (2004). Tourism becomes, like fashion,

a competition about what is stylish. The motivation to control what is 'good taste' and appear fashionable brings into question these travelers' 'eco-credentials' and authenticity. Are they any more committed to, or better for, the environment and communities than other travelers? Some researchers, refer to these travelers as not eco- but ego-tourists, with Munt asserting that their primary motivation is not to support sustainable tourism but to demonstrate their superiority to other travelers (Munt, 1994).

Krippendorff's defense is that their exploitation and superficiality are due to ignorance, not indifference, as they have little influence on tourism implementation (Krippendorff, 1997). However, in this information-rich age, dominated by social media, that argument is hard to sustain.

The high-end discerning traveler may not be the environmentally, culturally sensitive, economic godsend that was previously thought, but rather a somewhat superficial seeker of fashionability and self-promotion. Luckily, for those committed to sustainable development, sustainability dominates current discourse and is, for the moment, stylish, fashionable and 'cool'.

## CONCLUSION

In line with this investigation's original objectives, this paper achieved the following objectives, all of which provide promising areas for future research. This study described the advantages and disadvantages of tourism and the consequent emergence of sustainable tourism.

In doing so, the paper discussed the upsides and downsides of tourism, and the conceptual linkages underlying current theory and practice and the emergence of sustainable tourism (sections 4 and 5). In line with the second objective, the paper then identified the different types of tourists and their effects on sustainability. Having noted various typologies and types of tourists (section 6), it was then possible to provide a context for the discerning traveler and the high-end discerning traveler, thus meeting the third objective, that is, position and describe the high end discerning traveler within tourist categorizations. A detailed discussion of the characteristics of this type of traveler and the currents of sustainability and postmodernism (section 7) enabled the fourth objective to be achieved to examine the relationship between sustainability, postmodernism and the high-

end discerning traveler. Finally, from current literature and discussions, the authenticity of the high-end discerning traveler was strongly questioned in answering the fifth objective (section 8), explain and critique the relationship between sustainability and the high-end discerning traveler. Each of the above provides a promising area for future research, thus meeting the sixth objective.

Although querying the authenticity of the high-end discerning traveler, the paper acknowledges their economic and sustainable importance to the tourism industry. Given the economic, social and environmental impacts of increasing visitor numbers, stakeholders must prioritize sustainable tourism policies. This investigation offers an achievable objective and strategy, to complement policy change, for maximizing the upsides and minimizing the downsides of tourism: appealing to the discerning traveler, particularly the high-end.

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