



# Environmentally sustainable cruise tourism: a reality check

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## Abstract

Cruise tourism continues to be a major international growth area. In terms of achieving sustainable tourism it is, therefore, a sub-sector within which socio-economic, cultural and environmental considerations need to be continually analysed, addressed and monitored. The environmental impacts of cruise tourism are categorised in this paper and potential strategies that can be employed by both cruise line operators and cruise tourism destinations are explored. Secondary evidence of action by both parties suggests that the industry is taking a number of belated positive steps. However, decision-makers in cruise tourism destinations, particularly those outside North America, need to work closely with operators to facilitate both integrated waste management and intergenerational and intra-societal equity rather than merely accept the prospect of short-term economic gain. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the early 1970s sustainable development has become a unifying concept for environmental planning. Politically, sustainability ideals have been given prominence at the UNCED Conference in 1987, the Earth Summit in 1992 and through implementation of Agenda 21. However, the delivery of sustainable development, translating theory into practice, has proved elusive. The concept makes important links between environmental conservation and socio-economics (i.e. quality of life) but contentious issues include the balance between hard and soft sustainability; how the environment is valued; and how to address the dominance of unsustainable vested interests.

These issues extend to the debate about the future of tourism [1]. Tourism by its very nature is a resource dependent industry and some commentators argue that sustainable tourism is unachievable given the industry's ability to pollute and consume resources [2,3]. This view has been summarised as follows:

“Tourism contains the seed of its own destruction; tourism can kill tourism, destroying the very envir-

onmental attractions which visitors come to a location to experience” (Glasson et al. [4], p. 27).

Alternatively, in theory, tourism can embrace sustainability principles by having regard for environmental carrying capacity, social responsibility and the integration of tourism with local peoples' wishes [5–8]. In 1992 Tourism Concern and Worldwide Fund for Nature defined sustainable tourism as tourism and associated infrastructure that both now and in the future [9]:

- operates within natural capacities for the regeneration and future productivity of resources—natural, social and cultural;
- recognises the contribution that people and communities, customs and lifestyles past and present, make to the tourism experience;
- accepts that these people must have an equitable share in the economic benefits of tourism; and
- is guided by the wishes of all stakeholders, especially local people and communities in host areas.

Much uncertainty concerning sustainable tourism has resulted from confusion with the related terms of ecotourism and responsible tourism [10,11]. As a result sustainable tourism has proved difficult to define and, as a consequence, often difficult to implement and evaluate. Within the broad framework of sustainability the

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tourism industry has, nevertheless, made efforts to establish green credentials. Green Globe 21, the World Travel and Tourism Council's environmental management programme for travel and tourism companies and destinations, has developed its own certificate, based on ISO 14001, in an attempt to highlight leading edge initiatives. The International Hotels Environment Initiative (IHEI), which seeks to reduce consumption and waste, is another example of a positive environmental change agent. However, on balance, it has been suggested that while action based on the wider use of techniques such as environmental auditing by tourist firms can bring incremental improvements in environmental performance, in terms of sustainable tourism, this is likely to be from one sub-optimal position to another [12].

To date relatively little work on sustainable marine tourism has been undertaken, although exceptional marine sites, such as the Great Barrier Reef, have developed comprehensive sustainable tourism strategies and management plans [13]. This is a sector which is growing fast and which will present significant future environmental management challenges. Orams [14], when defining marine tourism, emphasised the importance of access to the marine environment and our dependence on equipment to enjoy water-based leisure experiences. Ultimately, he argued, the supply of marine activities and destinations will be constrained by environmental quality. The aim of this paper is therefore to review the environmental sustainability of cruise tourism, which represents a major activity within the marine tourism sector.

## 2. Cruise tourism

Discussions of cruising in the context of its origin, change and development have been the subject of other studies, which explain that cruise tourism has developed in phases [15,16]. At its inception, in the 1920s, cruising was the preferred mode of travel for the world's social elite. Post World War 2 cruising declined, losing trade to passenger aircraft. However, the latter part of the 20th century has witnessed a tremendous revival. Cruise companies have aggressively targeted different market segments, attracted younger passengers, offered fly cruise options, raised cruise capacities and changed cruise durations, prices and itineraries. Reviews of this global phenomenon have demonstrated an 8% annual growth since 1980, and in 1997 cruise tourism catered for 8.5 million customers [17]. A year later passenger numbers increased to an estimated 9.5 million carried by a worldwide fleet of 223 ships. Currently three major companies, Carnival Corporation, Royal Caribbean International and P&O Princess Cruises, dominate the business. A recent industry analysis cited the launch of

Disney Cruise Line's first ship *Disney Magic* (indicating the influence of family cruising); industry orders for new cruise ships in excess of \$ 9 million USD; and the dominance of the Caribbean, Mediterranean and Alaska as principal destinations to be key points which reflect the state of the modern cruise tourism business [18].

Crannell [19] considered the development of more super-mega cruise ships as the main way the industry will develop into the 21st century. These new generation of ships are:

- reliant on economies of scale (i.e. the mass tourism market);
- at the cutting edge of design and technical innovation; and
- offer a multifaceted recreational shipboard experience.

Not untypical is the *Grand Princess* which at a cost of US\$ 450 million accommodates 3000 passengers and a crew of 1100. She boasts comprehensive amenities including luxury sports facilities and virtual reality simulation distractions for passengers' amusement [20]. Even larger ships, such as Royal Caribbean's *Voyager of the Seas* and P&O's *Oceana*, with increased passenger capacity, aim to generate further economies of scale and higher profits. The industry predicts a phenomenal growth to 10% of market share (13 million passengers) by 2005. This optimism is based on assumptions of latent demand and the development of new destination markets.

It has also been argued that cruise tourism destinations benefit from potentially dramatic economic benefits [19,21]. This includes passenger and crew spending together with fees charged for dockage, fresh water and any head tax. Cruise ships also have to be provisioned with fuel and consumables. As a result US\$ 10,000 average daily spend from a cruise ship visit is not unrealistic. Dwyer and Forsyth [21] provided a framework to evaluate these economic factors and substantiated the benefits using an Australian case study.

Geographically the world can be mapped into cruise regions reflecting different densities of demand [22]. One result of the boom in cruise tourism, however, is congestion at traditional destination venues. In 1998 the Caribbean received 50% of total world capacity cruise tourism placement [21]. Many established Caribbean destinations receive more cruises than stopover tourists. In response, cruise lines are considering multi-dimensional expansion to different cruise excursion destinations in future. Carnival Cruise Lines business development plans, for example, include:

- development of 'new geographical markets'—through Airtours and Costa Links;

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