International Tourism Trend Analysis: Tourism as a Learning Experience and Educational Tool

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Abstract

The international use of tourism as a learning tool can be argued to be fundamental to the history and expansion of the industry, as the original 19th century European tours were devised to enable experience of the cultural epicentres of the continent. It can equally be argued to be a relatively recent development, which all levels of tourism actors, from multinational tour operators to local businesses, are now embracing in order to provide a holistic and forward thinking product. As the founders of the membership organisation Educational Travel Community (ETC) state, “educational travel facilitates deeper, more enduring connections between travellers and the communities they visit through strong interpretation, experiential programming, and meaningful engagement,” (ETC online, 2010). This essay seeks to explore the history and current extent of this trend, with reference to utilising educational tourism to benefit indigenous cultures, as well as outline its anticipated future evolution and impacts.

Keywords: educational tourism, aboriginal tourism, cultural tourism, gap year, Vancouver 2010 Olympics

Description of Trend

The experience of travel in itself can be argued to be a learning experience, and yet it is important to make the distinction between separate types of tourists. There are those that travel for one’s own desire and well being, taking a break from work and home life, or for the tradition of taking a holiday; and those that travel for the experience of travel and to learn about the various aspects of the destinations they visit, the people, lands, and alternative cultural experiences. Various attempts to define typologies of tourists result often in criticism and lack of conclusion. Acknowledging the difference exists is perhaps the only safe argument, although an example of the different tourist types can be made from Holden (2008), citing Cohen (1979). He outlines the following tourist types:
Recreational: Where emphasis is placed on restoring well being, profiting from entertainment, and returning to their society happily.

Diversionary: where the tourist seeks diversion from their mundane every day social centre

Experiential: where the behaviour of the tourist is largely aimed toward experiencing the guest culture, although remaining aware of it’s ‘otherness’ and inherent difference to the visitor’s society.

Experimental: where the tourist experiments with different ways of living within, rather than simply visiting, foreign cultures.

Existential: where the tourist finds a spiritual centre located elsewhere to their home society.

Using these typologies as guides for the different reasons why people engage in tourism, it can be understood that both ‘Recreational’ and ‘Diversionary’ tourists do not seek a learning experience from tourist experiences, whereas ‘Experiential’, ‘Experimental’ and ‘Existential’ tourists are looking to expand their knowledge, and gain from the cultures and destinations they visit. From such categorisation, it could be proposed that a definition of using tourism as education is for anybody interested in seeking resonating experience rather than a temporary distraction when they engage in tourist activity.

According to Gibson (1998, cited in UN PAN.org), educational tourism is made up of many different sub-sectors of tourism, including eco-tourism, heritage tourism, rural tourism and student exchange. It could be argued that rather than making up educational tourism as a sector, these sub-sectors draw from educational tourism to deliver their own product. Many of these sub-sectors are about promotion and education of a particular aspect of the host destination, which when viewed globally, results in educational tourism encompassing activities as diverse as wine-making in Western Australia to understanding natural wildlife in sub-Saharan Africa. Certainly, when using tourism as a driving force in the economies of developing regions, a predominant international trend, including education into that strategy helps to make the development more holistic and promote comprehension and consideration when engaging in visiting these areas.
The other side of the coin to these consumers of tourism is the suppliers, businesses and producers who deliver the tourism product. By aiming to deliver educational tourism to the consumer, the provider can improve their product and contribute to more than simply their profit. This holistic view of tourism is apparent in the UN’s Millennium Development Goals scheme, adopted in 2000 (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2010). All types of organisations seek to implement strategies through the scheme, which comprises of ‘the most broadly supported, comprehensive and specific development goals the world has ever agreed upon’ (UNWTO, 2010). The UNWTO encourages and promotes Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) through, amongst other means, the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, and has had success in varying degrees from a variety of tourism actors, including, for example, Lufthansa Air promoting sustainable technology, and the Banyan Tree Holding of Singapore committed to sustaining village development, and showcasing ethnic crafts and culture, in order to foster awareness of the local communities’ heritage. It is therefore possible to see that tourism is increasingly explored as an educational tool and experience across many aspects of the industry.

**Historic Perspective**

Since the inception of Thomas Cook’s ‘Grand Tour’ in the 19th century, when rich Western Europeans would travel to the cultural hotspots of the continent, including Vienna and Paris, and to its wilder regions such as the Swiss Alps, travel for education has been a major aspect of tourism. In the last decade however, there have been certain mini-trends within educational tourism which have arguably expanded the trend and increased its global importance.

One of these trends is the rise of the ‘gap year’, or travel abroad after secondary education, for many young people in the 17-25 age bracket. In the UK, the number of
students that deferred higher education doubled in the ten years from 1994 to 7.5% of all applicants to university in 2004 (Stehlik, 2010), and in Australia, there has been a rise from 4% deferral rates in 1974 to 11% in 2004. Although not all these deferrals are specifically for the purpose of global travel, it can be assumed that higher numbers of gap-year travellers are an upshot of deferrals. The desire to travel and explore beyond the known environment has given rise to an entire ‘gap-year’ industry, which is now worth over 5 billion GBP globally, and in 2008 was predicted to rise to 11 billion GBP globally. In the UK alone, the market was estimated to be worth 2.2 billion (Davies, 2008), and due to the length of the trips in question, although gap year travellers accounted for just 1% of outbound tourists, they accounted for more than 10% of all overseas spend. The Global Economic Crisis (GEC) was reported to have in fact had a positive effect on the gap year industry in the UK, as many people opted to travel after being made redundant. The nature of the ‘gap year’ promotes many educational forms of tourism, as volunteer projects in developing countries and activity-based tourism, such as adventure sports, are among the most popular choices in the sector, illustrated by STA Travel’s global survey, indicating young UK travellers as the most ‘adventurous’ and likely to engage in activities such as dune boarding, skydiving and bungee jumping (Davies, 2004).

Another trend which has promoted the benefits and fuelled the growth of educational tourism over the last decade is the promotion of indigenous culture as a tourism attraction. By placing emphasis on the individuality and importance of native culture, this trend fuels tourism growth in both developed and developing countries as a boost to their economies. This practice incites much conflict over whether it is truly beneficial or rather exploitative, as commercialisation of culture appears to in part degrade it, and has not been proven to instantly solve problems in many areas. However, according to Lynch, Duinker, Sheehan and Chute (2010), if managed properly, aboriginal tourism can provide increased economic
growth, community growth and cultural preservation, not only in Canada but on an international level, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, Australia, South-East Asia and the Pacific Islands. As Yalland (2007) describes, just over a decade ago, many of these regions were ‘off the beaten track’ and not mass tourism markets, whereas today, those same areas have undergone rapid development to become tourist hotspots.

**Current Breadth of Phenomena**

Through displays, festivals, mega-events, and hands-on experiences, indigenous culture has and is becoming an important part of educational tourism. This is evidenced by Notzke’s (2004) examination of the developing tourism industry within the indigenous communities in Southern Alberta, Canada, where the author highlights “the potential role of tourism in furthering cultural pride and revitalising cultural traditions” (Notzke, 2004, pg 49). Indeed, aboriginal culture is increasingly a major reason for tourists to undertake travel in the first place, as Kutzner and Wright (2010) found in delineating the market segments in an area of Northern British Columbia, Canada, as ‘culture-seekers’, ‘nature-culture observers’ and ‘sightseers’ (Kutzner and Wright, 2010, pgs 103-104), ‘culture-seekers’ proving the most receptive types of tourist and those of most potential to the indigenous communities. Other types of tourist activity such as family stays, volunteer work (“voluntourism”) and Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOFing), all have the potential to engage tourists with local cultures and provide the educational aspect of tourism. In Canada, the Canadian Tourism Commission recently outlined Aboriginal tourism as one of six strategic issues with potentially significant implications for the country’s tourism industry (CTC, 2007). The CTC identified the largest markets for Aboriginal Tourism in Canada as being France, Germany and the UK, with travellers from all three of those countries found to have very high interest in participating in Canadian Aboriginal Tourism (see Table 1 for figures and sample sizes). Aboriginal Tourism was deemed, through the study, to be of ‘value added’
rather than a basis for wanting to experience Canada, and the CTC aimed to increase awareness and marketing of Canadian Aboriginal tourism for its own merit, following Australia’s example. It was found that visitors desired to engage with landscape and adventure, two significant reasons for visiting Canada, through an Aboriginal perspective, because the perception was that new insight and understanding could be gained – an educational and informative experience. According to the study, in an Aboriginal tourism experience, customers from the UK, Germany and France were principally seeking:

- An authentic experience, not a staged show or artificial village
- Opportunities to meet and interact with Aboriginal people to experience how they live now
- Learn about their cultural traditions and how they lived in the past
- Experience of Aboriginal culture including arts and crafts, dancing, drumming, ceremonies, pow-wows, and traditional subsistence activities (hunting, trapping and fishing).

Table 1: Interest in participating in Canadian Aboriginal Tourism

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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>France (2544)</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (2548)</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK (2697)</td>
<td>46%</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: adapted from Aboriginal Tourism Opportunities for Canada: UK, Germany, France CTC, 2007

In order to further examine the scope of educational tourism through Aboriginal involvement, it is fruitful to regard the recent Vancouver Winter Olympics, as their global prominence brought Aboriginal involvement to the forefront of Canadian tourism and increased global awareness of its potential for learning. The Games themselves contributed an additional $463 million to the Canadian tourism industry and created 45 000 jobs (Calgary Herald, 2010). Innovative schemes such as the e-legacies scheme at www.elegacies.ca/2010, or ‘Learning Legacies’ were developed to “maximise post 2010 Olympic Games learning opportunities”, (Learning Legacies, 2010) and continue to draw focus to the integral role that
Aboriginal involvement had in the 2010 Games. It was planned that improvement of the communities where the games were to take place was as important as staging the games themselves, and from the start, the communities of the Four Host First Nations were chief among those communities as outlined by the Vancouver Organising Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, (VANOC, 2010). The partnership of Aboriginal peoples in the planning and implementation of the Games resulted in more than $200 million in contracts, sales and gifts of land to Aboriginal groups and individuals. In addition, more than sixty high profile media stories on Aboriginal Tourism BC were a direct result of the 2010 media efforts. The effect of both is important for continued tourism growth, as improvement of the communities leads to infrastructural development which is vital to receive tourists, and the media presence served to promote their culture. Thus the high profile involvement that the Aboriginal communities had in the Games served to bring their role in Canada to a global audience, enrich many people’s view and understanding of Canada’s history and multiculturalism, and therefore endorse their appeal to potential international tourists.

Figure 1: ‘Ilanaaq the Inukshuk’, the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics logo (Inuktituk word for ‘friend’), an example of integral Aboriginal influence on the Games.

Source: Free Spirit Gallery online, 2010

It is worth comparing the Vancouver 2010 Olympics with the Australian Sydney 2000 Olympics in terms of the educational value of Aboriginal tourism and Aboriginal
involvement in the event. After the International Olympic Committee called Agenda 21 in 1999, calling for Olympic host nations to create sustainable development for traditionally disadvantaged groups, the Sydney Games’ opening ceremony placed emphasis on its indigenous culture, and Aboriginal-born Cathy Freeman won gold in the women’s 400m event. However, post-Games, the Australian Olympic Committee attracted much criticism for in effect putting its Aboriginal culture partially in the spotlight, but failing to integrate it into the full operations of the Games (MotherNatureNetwork, 2010). It is therefore clear that stressing indigenous culture’s educational value and involvement in large scale visitor events is a very current trend, and potentially an enduring legacy for Canada. It has resulted in the acknowledgement that more recently, Indigenous people are feeling empowered to play a more active role in shaping the industry (McKenna, 2010).

A recent study carried out in Nova Scotia, Canada, on the cultural tourism development of the Mi’kmaw community (see Figure 2), found that the profile of the type of tourist likely to engage in cultural tourism was most likely in the 55-64 age group, and over 60% of the sample had a university degree. This group is part of the baby boomer generation, and comprises of older, more affluent tourists seeking “softer, more educational tourism experiences” (Lynch et al, 2010, pg 540). Reinforcing the previously mentioned principal market trends, while the majority of the sample were Canadian and from the US, 6.3% were from Germany and 4.9% from the UK. It was found that the most important aspect of the cultural tourism was the community’s ability to provide an educational and authentic experience. The author points out the similarity here to tourists at the Tjapukai Aboriginal Culture Park near Cairns, Australia, where the most important factor to visitors was learning new things and increasing knowledge. Certainly, the trend for tourists to seek out educational experiences and learning opportunities is truly widespread.
Figure 2: The Bear River Heritage and Cultural Centre, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Such a statement is further illustrated by the development of educational tourism interaction in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, educational tourism provides knowledge exchange, cross-cultural engagement, and has been found to prove beneficial to both hosts and guests in the environment, principally by breaking down barriers and preconceptions between the ‘developing’ world and relatively affluent tourist generating countries. A study based on a 2007-8 educational field trip for UK students to the Gambia revealed that: “exposure to a different set of values contributed to enhanced experiential learning...working in this environment forged cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of each other’s life settings” (Novelli and Burns, 2010, pg 753). Educational tourism for students continues to grow internationally, as Table 2 illustrates.

Table 2: Increase in international educational trips abroad (excludes day trips.)

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<tr>
<td>No. Of educational trips abroad (mn)</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending (US $ bn)</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending per trip (US$)</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>771</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>810</td>
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</tbody>
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Not only do educational aspects of tourism satisfy the individual traveller’s needs, but also plays an increasingly important part in many national education systems. The European tour company Holidaybreak’s recent acquisition of NST Holdings, an educational tour specialist company, for 47.2 million GBP, is a recent example of the sector’s importance in the market (Fearis, Travel Mole, 2007). This particular company organises trips for thousands of school children under the slogan ‘Bringing the curriculum to life’.

The examples provided of the trend contribute to the UN Millennium Development Goals in many ways, and some, for example the Gambia-UK field study, specifically mention it as a significant contributor toward those goals, particularly those of eliminating poverty and extreme hunger, environmental sustainability, and developing a global partnership for development.

**Future Evolution**

Over the next few years, the continuing advancement of sustainable tourism will mean a large place for educational tourism, and naturally, tourism will continue to be a powerful and valuable learning tool. Not only will the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals incite a bigger push toward achievement worldwide, but the very nature of sustainable tourism require further research and knowledge of the environments that necessitates lighter footprints, from which further educational tourism for visitors and hosts will stem.

The mini-trends fuelling educational tourism growth will also advance. The growth of American young people taking gap years is predicted to increase as they slowly embrace the trend, and companies such as Adventures Cross-Country deliver their newest programs aimed at this market, including GAP Africa and GAP Asia. Across Western countries, the need for graduates to stand out in a society of increasingly common university degrees will make
voluntary work and broader education experience valuable assets. The trend for older people to take gap years, possibly due to redundancy through the GEC, is resulting in the rise of new favourite destinations, including Canada, the Philippines, Japan and Hawaii (Gap Year Travel Sector, 2008).

Importantly for Canada, the strategic promotion of Aboriginal tourism is being implemented by the CTC and expected to have positive economic and social gain for Aboriginal communities, while adding a new dimension of cultural experience to travellers (Lynch et al, 2010). McKenna (2010) outlines three main recommendations for successful further development of the sector: incorporating Aboriginal tourism with regional DMOs; making Cultural Protection Protocols mandatory in tourism practice to safeguard the indigenous culture; and, increasing awareness among youth of the opportunities, such as employment, that tourism can provide. The CTC identify authenticity and marketing improvement as the key areas to aid Aboriginal tourism growth within the next five years. The largest growth potential is in the German, British and French markets, and that is where Aboriginal educational tourism is expected to have the most impact (CTC, 2010).

The UNWTO also outlines a future strategy which consists of a framework to create closer links between the public and private sectors, also raising awareness of the importance of CSR within the industry. This will result, not only in such strategies as cross cultural exchanges and Aboriginal experiential tourism becoming more commonplace, but the actors within the industry themselves becoming more educated and equipped to drive the trend forward.

To conclude, educational tourism, and tourism as a learning experience, is deeply rooted in the nature of the industry, and yet recently much more widely recognised as a potential force for positive international development. As globalization and modernization
reshape the world’s tourism industry, inter-cultural experience becomes more pervasive, and opportunities for learning materialise further and further afield. The fostering of ‘enduring connections... and meaningful engagement’ (ETC online, 2011) through educational tourism is an international trend from which many aspects of society will benefit.

References:


Stehlik, T. 2010, *Mind the gap; school leaver aspirations and delayed pathways to further and higher education*, Journal of Education and Work, Vol 23, No. 4, pgs 363-376


