

YOUR TOURIST ATTRACTION, OUR WAY OF LIFE

By Deborah McLaren, Director of Rethinking Tourism Project

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Tourism--arguably the largest industry in the world -is, increasingly targeting indigenous peoples' homelands and cultures as destinations for tourist development. The classic pattern of development starts with a build-up of transport, technology, communications and economic infrastructures. This provides easy access for other industries in search of natural resources and cheap labor, and leads to the displacement of local people, increased migration and colonization. It also promotes a transient but permanent overpopulation in fragile ecosystems, some of which are the last reclaiming 'hot spots' of biodiversity on the planet.

These assaults upon indigenous lands and cultures are made possible by the prevailing ethic of western society, which prizes economic growth and globalization. Tourism increases the dependence of indigenous peoples on a globalized economy and, correspondingly, lessens reliance upon local resources. An increased dependence on the foreign, fluctuating, seasonal economy that typifies the conventional tourism industry (and indeed often the 'sustainable tourism' industry), promotes industrialization and with it, regular import and export trade. Globalized tourism threatens indigenous knowledge and intellectual property rights, our technologies, religions, sacred sites, social structures and relationships, wildlife, ecosystems systems, economies and basic rights to informed understanding; reducing indigenous peoples to simply another consumer product (that is quickly becoming exhaustible).

Although many nongovernmental organizations, governments, environmental/scientific groups; and private initiatives are working with indigenous communities to develop sustainable tourism or ecotourism, it is debatable whether indigenous peoples are in a position of true equality in these relationships. Many indigenous people: would argue that their consent to tourism developments can only be "fully informed" once they are in possession of- ALL the information about a project -including its long-term negative impacts. Roy Taylor of the North American Indigenous Peoples Biodiversity Project (NAIPBP) says that "what corporations, the military and governments make decisions, they make sure they learn everything there is to know -the pros and the cons-of planned development before making a decision. We need to also have that information. We are tired of hearing about the 'enterprise concept', which usually promotes only the benefits of 'development'; we need to know the potential downside, too. That is the hallmark of informed consent. There is a lot of experience that could be shared by other indigenous communities indigenous communities through teaching and training, cases of how NOT to do development. We are looking at these well-intentioned terms like 'equitable sharing of benefits' and 'prior informed consent' and believe there needs to be intense research and discussion about what is truly happening."

Taylor believes the concept of linking conservation with 'enterprise' is a non-starter for many indigenous peoples in debates about the protection of biodiversity. 'The way

conservation is practiced in the West is as conservation-for-development and that is not necessarily consistent with our traditional view of guardianship and protection. We wouldn't even use the word "conservation." The questions generally put forward by western institutions seeking partnerships with indigenous peoples would work better, Taylor argues, if they were turned on their heads so that they reflected positive approaches to supporting indigenous peoples' own framework for sustainable or subsistence lifestyles. So, for instance, instead of asking how indigenous peoples can utilize sustainable tourism to protect their culture, a better formulation might be: "How can the tourism industry/tourists become unique partners in enhancing and preserving indigenous cultures for future generations?"

Or the question, "How does tourism threaten local culture?" could be addressed instead as: "How widely is local culture disseminated by tourism without adequate local protection?" As Taylor points out, "Indigenous peoples have no idea how our culture is used or restricted by tourists, the industry, or wider western interests. It's becoming a fundamental concern because many scientists and policymakers oppose the approach of direct support for indigenous perspectives for protecting biodiversity but then work to convince others that when indigenous peoples raise concerns (especially about medicinal plants), it is a threat to humanity."

Such debates about information rights, intellectual property rights, and equitable sharing of benefits are urgent: the threat of investment by major players in the tourism and hospitality industry looms, and with it the likelihood of communities opting for short-term financial rewards over long-term analysis, strategic planning and management. Organizations promoting 'sustainable' tourism, yet which follow the conventional, western development model, are also part of the threat. Indeed it was as a response to the encroaching 'ecotourism' programs in indigenous territories that the Rethinking Tourism Project was established in 1995. RTP's mission is threefold: to strengthen indigenous peoples' capacity to critically analyze tourism development; to create self-development strategies and projects that protect biological diversity, culture and traditional economies; and to establish a network of indigenous expertise on tourism issues.

RTP has set up an Internet network which sends out action alerts, announcements, information about indigenous activities, answers questions and links indigenous peoples and communities to innovative resources. A workshop program concentrates on promoting community self-reliance, through the development of critical thinking about tourism. Tourism-related topics include: de-bunking Euro-economics and protecting biodiversity; land use planning; environmental and cultural assessments and indicators; monitoring environmental change; limiting excessive growth and immigration in indigenous regions; government decentralization and co-management; voluntary private land reforms and partnerships; establishing Native land trusts; ecological planning; appropriate and indigenous technologies; monitoring and restoration; discouraging water diversion and privatization of natural resources; participatory mapping of subsistence resources; preserving and/or obtaining traditional and customary access to subsistence resources and religious sites.

The educational workshops are founded on the belief that learning is a two-way street: that we must hear and learn from our partner organizations in order to build an effective North/South collaboration and potentially develop future strategies. We believe there is much to learn from Indigenous programs around the world.

The Yukon River Tours case gives an example of this positive partnership approach in practice. The challenge here is to protect one of the world's last remaining boreal frontier forests and the mighty Yukon River. To this end, RTP helps with community education about tourism and alternatives. Stevens Village is the 'front door' of the Yukon and Arctic and unsustainable development is literally knocking their door down. This development includes extractive industries, an ageing oil pipeline, an industrial river corridor plan, high-impact tourism and recreation, increased air pollution to the Arctic, and increased settlement and development along the oil pipeline highway. Stevens Village is responsible for both fending off unsustainable development and creating alternatives for the region. As the lead project for a ten-village natural resources management program, the models created there have widespread application throughout the region.

Dave Lacey, the manager of Yukon River Tours, explains their part in the project. "We try to incorporate traditional values of hospitality and sharing as part of the basic guiding philosophy behind our tours. Yukon River Tours is owned and operated by the village and has been in operation since 1990. We have held public meetings in the village and send out a small newsletter during the visitor season. The visitors do not come to the village. We restrict our tours to areas that will not interfere with the local subsistence activities; we only do sightseeing tours with education and interpretation, not fishing or hunting trips. We do not want to compete with the local subsistence users for the limited resources.

"Tourism threatens traditional knowledge most by presenting an affluent image of the visitor, which can make the locals feel inadequate or inferior. This can make one feel that one's system is backward. Tourists can help to preserve local culture by purchasing local crafts such as models of traditional subsistence tools and traditional beadwork. We believe that local knowledge can be marketed without threatening it, but the important thing is for the local people to be in control. That way they can put the brakes on at any time.

"Sacred sites and sacred knowledge are not used in our tours. We feel that the best way to protect these things is to keep them secret. It is no one's business except for the tribe's, like a family secret. The role of education is critical in protecting the traditional culture and knowledge. Our tours are efforts to take advantage of the educational opportunity that tourism gives us with a captive, receptive audience. If we can educate them some as to the value of traditional native culture and what it has to offer to the modern world then we have done our job while entertaining them at the same time. The relationship between traditional culture and wilderness is the important point that we try to get across. Wilderness is the most rapidly diminishing commodity in the world today and the indigenous cultures disappear along with it." .

The Rethinking Tourism Project is an international Indigenous education and network organization founded in 1995 to address justice in tourism issues.

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