

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor  
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I first visited Kenya in 1970 and the Seychelles in 1980 on Smithsonian business. Each country was then struggling to reap the perceived benefits of the growing global tourist industry; both had recently expanded their principal airport to accommodate jumbo jets and the tourists flocked in. Several weeks ago I was a lecturer on a tour of Masai Mara National Park in Kenya, followed by a voyage through the central granitic islands of the Seychelles.

Since my initial visits, tourism has become a major foreign income source for Kenya and the Seychelles, but I noticed how much the landscape and the culture had changed over 30 and 20 years respectively, and saw the offsetting costs for many of the benefits. For example, our group of mostly Americans stayed at the Kichwa Tembe Tented Camp at the foot of the Siria escarpment, just outside the park's western boundary. The camp was well-maintained and discretely located within a grove of trees along a tributary of the Mara River, whose main bed was now too rain-swollen to ford. Tourists arrive by small plane at an unpaved strip about a ten-minute drive from the camp. All supplies, however, must come by truck in a day-long drive from Nairobi on mostly unpaved roads. Not only food for the 100 plus guests must be transported, but also fuel for generators and for 22 Toyota Land Cruisers used for game viewing.

The presence of so many people, both tourists and support staff, has a profound effect on the landscape. Drivers stay in touch via two-way radios, and whenever a lion pride or elephant herd is spotted, six to eight vehicles quickly assemble. Although the red oats grass on the plains was uncharacteristically lush at this time of year, the Toyotas created endless new tracks through the tall grass, tracks that are clearly visible from the air. Soon all game watching in the Masai Mara may be confined to designated roads as it now is in South Africa's Kruger Park. Nonetheless, whatever the cost to the environment from such heavy tourist presence, economic benefits to the host country may more than offset it. However, as visitors we should be aware of the trade-offs involved.

Tourism is a huge global industry that generates enormous sums, but often only a relatively small percentage of the total revenue remains in the host country, despite the high local costs. For example, a five-star hotel on one of India's beautiful west coast beaches uses as much water as five of the surrounding fishing villages. One guest uses 25 times the electricity as a local villager. In some countries tourist development has blocked access to beaches for fishermen, and in extreme cases golf course construction has led to the eviction of small farmers. Golf courses often use as much water as a rural town of 5,000 in the developing world.

Basically the issue is how best to handle the conflict between a burgeoning and prosperous tourist population that is seeking "idyllic paradises" in remote, undeveloped areas and the social and economic costs incurred by local people to meet this demand.

This conflict in the Masai Mara is evident. The lure of endless grassy plains with scattered but visible megafauna is a powerful attraction. Most first-time visitors are unaware that before the park was created, the Masai had occupied this land for millennia and had evolved a cattle culture well-adapted to this environment. An articulate, fluent English-speaking Masai in full regalia explained his culture to our group one afternoon. It was fascinating to learn that property is communally held, polygamy is accepted, and there is no stigma for a widow to have children by other men as long as all issue carry the name of her dead husband. Masai cultural traditions are increasingly hard to maintain in today's world; I compare their effort to do so with that of the Amish in our own country. There is some hope, however, for the only future prediction of which we can be certain is that conditions will be far different from life today. Our current concept of an "idyllic paradise" will surely change and our endless quest to experience it may be satisfied in the future by landscape conditions far less ideal than we would accept today.

For those who have visited the Seychelles, it comes close to filling the western mind's ideal fantasy landscape. Beautiful beaches are fringed with coconut palms, and huge takamaka trees are delineated by clusters of enormous granite, Cambrian-era boulders (600 million years old), rocks left from the ancient megacontinent of Gondwana, after India had moved north to crash into Laurasia. After the international airport opened on the main island of Mahé in 1972, developers were under pressure to build hotels quickly to tap the new tourist market. Prime beach sites skyrocketed in value and high construction wages led to inflation. Often the rush to complete new facilities precluded adequate planning for proper sewage disposal, but many problems only became evident years after the hotels opened; these burdens imply that shoddy planning was indeed the case in the Seychelles, but the scenario is common in new resort development throughout the world, including the U.S.

The Seychelles, like Hawaii and other scattered island archipelagos, generally have only one or two airports capable of handling jumbo jets. Therefore, these islands must develop tourist dispersal mechanisms to keep their principal island from being swamped. The Seychelles government has constructed small airstrips on five outer coral islands; one (Assumption) is 600 miles west of Mahé. Frequent air service to these atolls and small cruise ships keep the tourists scattered. Aldabra, the world's largest elevated coral atoll, has no air strip and lies 20 miles north of Assumption. With human access to Aldabra limited to shallow draft zodiacs that can cross the fringing reef at high tide or tourists walking ashore in knee-deep water at low tide, the 120,000 giant tortoises, hundreds of nesting marine turtles, and a dozen endemic birds are currently protected from the immediate threat of tourist development. However, with the construction of 50-passenger, high-speed, long-range helicopters, no place will remain remote enough to protect its environment from human invasion.

The Seychelles government is well aware of the importance of maintaining its magnificent landscape to attract tourists. About 30% of central Mahé is designated the Morne Seychellois National Park. Most of the small surrounding islands are marine sanctuaries, and of the larger granitic islands to the north, four or five are patrolled sanctuaries that maintain themselves by tourist entry fees. Direct charges are crucial in

most developing countries to finance reserves. In the Seychelles, the admission cost is usually the equivalent of US \$10/head. This is modest compared to the current US \$80/head fee to visit the Galapagos or the US \$170/person fee to visit the habituated gorillas in Rwanda. Although these sums may seem high, they are modest when compared to the total cost of traveling to these remote locations. Both Kenya and the Seychelles charge a US \$20 departure tax, a common but important source of hard currency revenue.

There are few practical ways to limit tourism in order to control rampant commercial development. One is to limit the number of tourists. This is being tried with only limited success in U.S. National Parks, mostly through advanced occupancy permits for camp sites. Such limitations are often politically unpopular and seldom sustained. Only 20 years ago the Ecuadorian government decided that 10,000 tourists was the annual capacity of the Galapagos. Today, thanks to the construction of a second airport, 50,000 tourists a year come. The rapid visitor increase sparked a huge migration of impoverished job seekers from the mainland, but since about 90% of the tourists live aboard ships, the local economy could not absorb them. Slums developed, sewer and water systems collapsed, and poaching of fish and invertebrates from the marine sanctuaries exploded. When the government cracked down and forbade such fishing, there was a nasty uprising of fishermen that closed the Darwin Research Station and threatened the tourist industry. Although the Galapagos are relatively peaceful now, tourism has suffered this year from frequent El Niño-caused rainy days.

There are movements designed to counter the seemingly irresistible destructive course of rampant tourist development. An enterprising American has started Bush Homes of East Africa Inc., which is an association of ranchers and farmers who open their homes to families interested in a low-cost approach to game viewing. A large touring operation, British Airways Holidays, employs an Environment Coordinator and funds conservation projects in their destination areas such as the Seychelles. Resort hotels encourage their clients to save water and electricity, and suggest using towels more than once to reduce washing. In May 1997 representatives of governments and private groups from 77 countries signed the World Tourism Organization's "manila Declaration on the Social Impacts of Tourism." Such commitments are a welcome sign, but whether and how they will be implemented remains to be seen.

The best tactic for a developing country may be to let tourism grow as slowly as politically possible. The Seychelles seems to be trying this approach. In 1990, with assistance from UNEP, UNDP and the World Bank, the government published an Environmental Management Plan for 1990-2000 that covered such topics as the reduction of feral goats on Aldabra, improvement of the botanical Garden on Mahé, and control of the trade in hawksbill turtles shells. Costs were estimated and performance schedules laid out. It is an impressive effort and hopefully it will be implemented.

No clear solution exists to resolve the conflict between preserving an attractive cultural and physical environment and catering to an increasing number of tourists. Many elements can disrupt well-laid plans to mitigate damaging development: 1)

prolonged rainy weather, 2) political instability that threatens tourists, 3) economic collapse that causes breakdown in tourist housing and transportation, and 4) unexpected public health problems. Tourism, as in any other business, is risk-prone, but it is increasingly crucial to the economic well-being of both Kenya and the Seychelles. The health of the industry is dependent on factors far beyond the control of the host country, such as the continued long-term prosperity of the developed world to sustain a constant flow of hard currency tourists.

Considering the almost limitless choice of exotic places to which prosperous tourists can go, it is surprising that so many small nations can still survive on such a fragile revenue source. What is becoming increasingly evident, however, is that virtually no place near the globe's surface remains inaccessible to determined travelers, and that competition for tourists' dollars will increase, as will the interdependence of the tourist-source country with the tourist-host nation.