

Climate Crisis, Cruise Ships and Coronavirus

1772 revisited. Time to rethink cruise ship tourism?

With Captain Cook's second voyage from 1772-1775 to the South Pacific, the indigenous populations of a number of island nations were brutally exposed to communicable diseases for which they had no immunity. Explorers such as Cook, the most famous perhaps, but only one of a number of seafarers dispatched by the Royal Geographical Society to chart southern hemisphere, were by no means the first to introduce unfamiliar diseases to vulnerable populations in the islands. The Spanish and Dutch had already been in the region before Captain Cook.

From the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, first contact by the explorers had introduced waves of epidemics in the islands visited – mostly in the form of measles, smallpox, dysentery, as well as influenza – bringing about mass mortality of their populations. Depending on the location, 20-70% of the Pacific islands indigenous populations were wiped out over that period of exploration and colonisation due to such communicable diseases.

The explorers of that era were followed by other adventurers and bohemians, the likes of the painter Paul Gauguin at the turn of the 20th century in the French territory islands, also bringing diseases such as tuberculosis from Europe in their wake.

Today, the explorers and wealthy retirees, do not arrive in small groups - the ships that arrive in the island ports disgorge up to two thousand passengers at a time, overwhelming local markets and seashores like a plague of locusts. Although indigenous populations today are considered no more genetically vulnerable to COVID-19 than the populations of Australia or New Zealand for example, the vulnerability of island populations in succumbing to such a highly communicable disease is accentuated by a multiplicity of threats ranging from climate change to healthcare shortcomings (such as outlined in Terence Wood's excellent piece from 1 April). The challenge for the smaller island states is even greater than the more robust larger ones.

The present COVID-19 is a crisis that Pacific islands could never have planned for, surpassing all security threats and scenarios envisaged in the Blue Pacific joint strategy of the Pacific Forum island nations. In such a dire crisis as we are witnessing now, there are many lessons to be learnt. Not just in health management, but in key economic areas such as tourism. Cracks have emerged revealing that the strategies of the past have contributed to the problems of the present. Against the panic and chaos, on land and off, where cruise ships are refused entry by one port after another, it is somehow gratifying to learn that power has been returned to the traditional chiefs in deciding which cruise ships are allowed to dock and in which Pacific islands ports.

The onslaught of disease seems like a repeat of 1772, but this time the island nations have the capacity and power to make such decisions for the good of their own nation, not for the benefit of a colonial power, or a foreign, commercial cruise company. If ever there was a lesson to be learnt in tourism development for the island countries, hosting the mega-cruise ship is not the way of the future. This form of tourism that has featured in many a tourism blueprint (proposed too often by foreign consultants) has been identified, not only as carrying serious threats in the face of climate change, but now, the added risk to the health of a nation's citizens.

These combined risks presented by cruise ships surely outweigh the economic inputs to the local economy that appear to be won so rapidly once a purpose-built port has been provided. Proponents of cruise ship tourism cite the multiplier effects in order to illustrate how one tourism dollar spent translates into more than one dollar generated in the local economy. Pratt (2015)

(https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stephen_Pratt2/publication/275276534_The_economic_impact_of_tourism_in_SIDS/links/5df88c7392851c8364831fb2/The-economic-impact-of-tourism-in-SIDS.pdf?origin=publication_detail) found that the tourism multiplier averages 0.69 in SIDS (ranging from 0.44 to 0.92, data not restricted to just Pacific Island SIDS) hence generally falling below expectations. Moreover, when it comes to cruise ships the input multiplier can be expected to be even lower.

Nowadays, instead of the tourist dollar multiplier, we should be paying urgent attention to the epidemiologist's multiplier, known as 'R0' which indicates how many people are likely to be infected, through exposure to one person as a vector. The current COVID-19 virus has an RO estimated between 2 and 3 (compared with normal flu of 1.3) <https://www.livescience.com/new-coronavirus-compare-with-flu.html>. Measles which decimated much of the islands' original indigenous population at the time of Captain Cook has an RO of 15, but that is little comfort in a world that has become so densely populated and highly mobile.

It is time to rethink Pacific tourism. Cruise ships not only pollute the waters, but it is a well-known fact that little of the expenditure goes into the local economy beyond trinkets at local markets (and port dues). With meals and accommodation provided for onboard, there is little else – earnings from local pre-arranged tours are frequently attributed back to foreign owned companies (what remains in the country is the 'income multiplier').

The cruise ship business has been expanding relentlessly in recent years to match demand, with ever larger ports being constructed to accommodate the increasing number of vessels and their oversized dimensions.

Right now, being on a cruise ship looking to dock, has the allure of a floating prison.

But memories are short. When, and if, the world ever returns to normal, tourism will have to reinvent itself. It will be a chance for the people of the island nations to rethink what kind of contact they want with foreign tourists. The softer kind of resort tourism, and eco-tourism adventure, don't offer the quick wins of the cruise ships but they don't bring the threats either.

Kim Titcombe
Bern,
March 2020

About the author: Kim Titcombe is an independent Gender and Development researcher and consultant based in Switzerland; and a former Economic Affairs Officer at UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), Small Islands Developing States Program, Geneva.