

# The challenges of over-tourism facing New Zealand: Risks and responses

## Abstract

This *Regional Spotlight* focuses on the challenges of over-tourism facing some destinations in New Zealand and how it affects both the local communities hosting visitors and the brand image of the country. Like many destinations around the world, there is a need at the local level to understand how to better manage tourist flows and ensure sustainable development of tourism in New Zealand. The strain of over-tourism is being experienced differently throughout the country, with some towns and villages risking damage to their natural environment and residents' goodwill more than others. Over-tourism also threatens New Zealand's positive destination brand image strongly associated with picturesque landscapes and a clean and green natural environment. Thus, concerted action at all levels of government, together with the commitment of industry, and the authentic involvement of residents, is needed to adopt a sustainable market orientation to tourism development which genuinely meets the needs of present and future generations.

## 1. Introduction

Once a concern for developing countries, the impacts of over-tourism, including crowdedness, environmental and cultural degradation, gentrification and residential dissatisfaction are being felt by many developed, highly urbanised places in countries such as Italy, Spain, Croatia and the Netherlands (Seraphin, Sheeran, & Pilato 2018). Interest in the antecedents and consequences of over-tourism has developed rapidly since the term was first coined in 2016 by Skift<sup>1</sup> (Ali 2016); with several hashtags devoted to the issue on social media (e.g. #over-tourism, #touristsbegone). Origins of the concept can be traced back to the host-guest literature of the 1960s (Pinke-Sziva, Smith, Olt, & Berezvai 2019; Sharples 2014), and is defined by the Responsible Tourism Partnership (2018, p. 1) as 'destinations where hosts or guests, locals or visitors, feel that there are too many visitors and that the quality of life in the area or the quality of the experience has deteriorated unacceptably'. In addition to the subjective evaluation of a place by its users, the concept of over-tourism also includes the inability of the destination to effectively handle a certain level of tourism activity within a given time, suggesting that each destination has a social and environmental carrying capacity. Once this capacity is reached, the destination is strained by additional users and cannot develop sustainably, thereby threatening the wellbeing of its residents, the environment, and visitors' experiences.

Residents, as permanent place consumers, with cognitive, emotional, spiritual, moral/ethical, mythical and material bonds (Cross 2001) to a place, might lose disproportionately from over-tourism, compared to excursionists with a fleeting connection. Resident dissatisfaction and frustration with the negative consequences of over-tourism can lead to tourism-phobia (Zerva, Palou, Blasco, & Donaïre Benito 2019) and expression of anti-tourism sentiment (Kleeman 2018; Novy 2018). Resident resistance to tourism has been reported in many destinations, most notably Venice (Coldwell 2017),

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<sup>1</sup> According to Skift (cited in Ali, 2016, p.1), it is the 'largest industry intelligence platform providing media, insights and marketing to key sectors of travel'.

Amsterdam (Boztas 2017), Barcelona (Hughes 2018), and Hong Kong (Garst 2014). Such feelings and actions affect a destination's brand image, tarnishing the tourist experience and influencing the destination's ability to attract tourists in the future. Coverage of anti-tourist sentiment and resistance in the media might alter tourists' travel intentions, benefiting those opposing over-tourism in the short-term, but with unknown long-term consequences for the destination. Furthermore, a tourist's direct experience of over-tourism might negatively influence their appraisal of the destination, word-of-mouth and advocacy of a destination.

International tourists are frequently the target of blame for over-tourism due to the steady growth in international tourist arrivals from 25 million in 1950 to a total of 1.24 billion arrivals in 2016 (Roser 2019). The trend continued in 2017 with international tourist arrivals growing by 7%, to reach 1.326 billion tourists visiting destinations around the world. This growth was higher than the annual rise of 3.8% forecasted by the United Nation's World Tourism Organization for the decade 2010-2020 (World Tourism Organization 2018). Domestic tourists, including those from surrounding regions, also contribute to over-tourism in many cities (Peltier 2017). Yet, these visitors do not receive as much attention as international guests. Similarly, research tends to focus on urban centres as the sites of over-tourism, however it is occurring in many rural and regional towns and villages as well (Jacobsen, Iversen, & Hem 2019).

The rise in international tourists is a noticeable trend in smaller countries like New Zealand, which recorded growth of 3.6% in 2018, to reach 3.8 million arrivals (Stats NZ 2018). European cities have largely been the focus of recent enquiries into overtourism; less emphasis has been on countries with smaller population bases where tourism is the leading export industry. The purpose of this Regional Spotlight is to focus on the risks and responses to over-tourism in New Zealand and how it is affecting residents' well-being, the country's brand image, and the visitor experience.

## **2. Over-tourism in New Zealand**

Tourism is New Zealand's leading export earner. International tourism contributes \$15.9 billion to the country's economy each year and collectively the industry employs over 200,000 people (for year ending March 2018) (MBIE 2018b). Between 1998 and 2018 international tourist arrivals grew by 160% (Stats NZ 2019). By 2024, the number of international visitor arrivals is forecast to reach 5.1 million, growing by 4.6% each year (MBIE 2018a). Indeed, over the past two decades the branding of New Zealand as an attractive place to visit has been effective (MacDonald 2011; Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie 2011). The launch of the highly successful '100% Pure' New Zealand marketing campaign in 1999, followed by the global attention gained through the Lord of the Rings movie trilogy cemented New Zealand's positioning as a destination promising a tranquil, naturally beautiful tourist experience. As several scholars argue, a destination's natural environment is often a core component of its image and a key factor motivating tourists' destination choice and loyalty (Insch 2011; San Martín, Herrero, & García de los Salmones 2018). Adverse impacts of rising numbers of tourists such as congestion and pollution, privatisation of public spaces, destruction of historical sites and the natural environment are being felt in places around New Zealand such as Queenstown, Akaroa and Tarras.

At high season, some attractions and activities are overcrowded and struggle to deliver the picturesque experience promised in the imagery of the '100% Pure' campaign. Furthermore, the

impacts of over-tourism are being felt disproportionately throughout the country, with some destinations feeling the strain more than others, risking damage to their natural environment, residents' goodwill and ultimately New Zealand's brand image. In response, some residents are taking action. For example, residents of the West Coast settlement of Kakapohia have restricted access to a popular, yet inadequately resourced, freedom camping site when it reaches capacity (Sherman 2019).

Auckland is New Zealand's largest city per capita, located in the fastest growing region in the country. As well as the gateway for international tourists (Insch 2017), it is also the most popular destination for domestic tourists. In the year to February 2019, total visitor spend in the Auckland region was worth \$8,268 million, up from \$4,711 million in 2009 (+75.5%) (MBIE 2019). The Queenstown-Lakes District recorded the second highest expenditure by domestic and international tourists at \$2,914 million, up from \$1,182 million in 2009 (+146.5%) (MBIE 2019). Residents' perception that predicted tourism growth is 'too high' has increased significantly from 30% to 52% and perceptions that international tourism places 'too much pressure' on the country has risen from 18% to 43% (both for December 2015 to March 2019) (Kantar TNS 2019).

Perceptions of the negative impacts of tourism, such as increased traffic congestion, traffic accidents, littering, expensive accommodation and environmental damage are strongest among residents of the South Island, in particular the Otago region (including Queenstown). Overall, the perception that international tourism places too much strain on the nation is driven by views that: New Zealand lacks infrastructure to support growing tourist numbers; tourism negatively impacts road congestion and safety; and tourism adversely impacts the environment (Kantar TNS 2019). Using the measures of tourism intensity and density<sup>2</sup>, two regions were identified by Peeters et al. (2018) as experiencing overtourism, supporting perceptual indicators. Similarly, using a composite Tourist Intensity Index (TII), comprised of GDP, tourist spending, population, and number of tourists, New Zealand was classified as having a high TII of 866<sup>3</sup> (Manera & Valle 2018).

Long-awaited investment in infrastructure is being made, such as the upgrading of Auckland Airport, but more is needed to cope with the increasing concentration of visitors in time and space. A report produced by McKinsey & Company in 2016 identified that investment of between \$100 and \$150 million in tourism infrastructure was needed per year over a decade to ensure that infrastructure could support destinations to serve residents and increasing numbers of tourists (McKinsey and Company 2016). However, with the rapid rise in international tourist arrivals, some of the country's existing infrastructure is struggling to cope. Local residents of smaller towns and villages are stressed, losing their sense of belonging, and some might feel that their quality of life is deteriorating. This raises the question - do current policies and practices ensure sustainable outcomes for destinations and their residents throughout New Zealand?

This debate is being staged in the local, national and international news media and through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. To assess the prominence of the issue in the news media, a search of a major newspaper database, Factiva, was undertaken, supplemented by a google search. The Factiva database was queried using the keywords 'New Zealand and overtourism', 'New Zealand and over-tourism', 'New Zealand and tourism and infrastructure' and 'too many' and

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<sup>2</sup> Intensity is measured as tourist arrivals per km<sup>2</sup> and density is measured as tourist arrivals per inhabitant.

<sup>3</sup> Mean value for period 1995-2015. A very high TII (mean greater than 1500), a high TII (mean lower than 1500 and over 500), a medium TII (mean lower than 500 and greater than 100), or a low TII (mean lower than 100).

tourists and New Zealand’ for the period 30/12/2017 to 15/5/2019. A Google search was made using the keywords ‘New Zealand and overtourism’ and ‘too many tourists New Zealand’ and ‘New Zealand and tourism and infrastructure’. A total of 380 articles were identified, excluding duplicates. Key themes were identified through a content analysis of these articles, as listed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Themes relating to Over-tourism in New Zealand**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Elements</b>
<b>Tourism Boom</b>	Growth, international tourists, visitor tax Tourist numbers, congestion, overcrowding, capacity
<b>Infrastructure and facilities</b>	Types – roads, airports, accommodation, toilets and car-parks Resourcing, upgrading, spending
<b>Resident perceptions</b>	Support, benefits and costs of tourism Backlash, concerns and negative impacts on well-being
<b>Destinations</b>	Tourist hot spots (attractions, coast vs. city) Local communities, regions
<b>Tourist behaviour</b>	Experience and authenticity, activities (cruising, cycling, camping, great walks) Etiquette and respect, use of social media
<b>Tourism management and marketing</b>	Industry, government (local and national), business operators Strategies, solutions, research
<b>Nature and environmental sustainability</b>	Conservation and sustainable travel, user-pays Birds, parks, mountains, glaciers, national parks

Source: Based on the author’s research

### **3. Implications for Destination Marketing and Management in New Zealand**

As Joppe (2018) argues, due to the focus on tourism’s economic contribution, policy tends to centre on ways of growing visitor revenue, particularly from increasing numbers of international tourists. However, undesirable outcomes of unfettered growth in many destinations demonstrates the need for a sustainable market orientation approach to tourism policy (Mitchell, Wooliscroft, & Higham 2013) at all levels of government. Crucially, this involves authentic input and cooperation from stakeholders, especially the residents who call these tourists hot-spots home (Koens, Postma, & Papp 2018). Unlike the unsustainable overcrowding of some cities including Venice, Dubrovnik, Barcelona and Amsterdam, many of New Zealand’s tourist hotspots are at the tipping point. Across the industry there is growing support for a model of sustainable tourism development which includes greater investment in infrastructure, attracting higher value visitors, achieving regional and seasonal dispersal and ensuring the well-being of local communities (MBIE & DOC 2019).

To mitigate the risks of over-tourism in New Zealand, several initiatives are in place which could have wider application to destinations in other countries. Notably, since April 2019, more than 1,000 tourism operators have adopted the Tourism Sustainability Commitment (TSC). Led by industry organisation Tourism Industry Aotearoa (TIA), the TSC aims to achieve 8 industry goals (economic, visitor, host community and environmental sustainability) by supporting members’ efforts to achieve 14 sustainability commitments by 2025. In 2017, benchmarks were set and progress is being made,

but, for many operators disruption to 'business as usual' will be required. Another initiative is the Tiaki Promise, a pledge encouraging all visitors in New Zealand to commit to behave in a way that protects the environment, respects culture and keeps everyone safe. Launched in November 2018 by key industry players including TIA, Air New Zealand, the Department of Conservation, and Tourism Holdings Ltd, uptake and enforcement of the pledge relies on tourism operators making visitors' aware of behavioural expectations. To enforce the pledge, residents and other tourists are also required to call out inappropriate behaviour.

To boost funding for critical infrastructure and conservation projects, an International Visitor Conservation and Tourism Levy (IVL) of \$NZ35 will come into force in July 2019. The hotly debated tax is based on a user-pays approach and aims to gather \$NZ80 million each year (NZ Government 2018). Another distinct policy change has been a reduction in spending on destination marketing by Tourism NZ, with a shift to sustainable growth and regional product development to drive solutions to seasonality and increase visitors' regional dispersal. Multiple tiers of government and their respective departments and agencies are coordinating efforts to target a diverse range of markets and high-value segments and to encourage visitors to respect the natural environment, as well as New Zealand's people and culture (MBIE & DOC 2019).

While the success of actions to mitigate the risks of over-tourism are context dependent, research can inform more effective responses to these risks, especially for destinations at a tipping point. There is a need to understand how residents of over-crowded destinations cope with the negative impacts of over-tourism and whether they perceive industry and governmental responses as effective or not. Work is also needed to identify the motives for tourism operators adopting initiatives designed to modify their behaviour and the behaviour of their customers (i.e. Tiaki Promise).

To design solutions to reduce over-tourism's negative impacts, insights into tourist behaviour available from analysis of big data could aid tourism managers and policy makers. These insights can be applied as part of capacity management to depict dispersal of tourists around the country at different times of the day, week and year and to develop innovative ways to direct tourists away from crowded and congested places. Indeed, proactive monitoring and assessment of capacity, gaps in critical infrastructure, and residents' sentiment towards tourism is necessary to maintain the quality of visitors' experience, but not at the expense of resident well-being or the natural environment.

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