Foreword

Archipelago Tourism: Some Thoughts and Reactions

Richard W. Butler

Introduction

A recent issue of the journal *Tourism Recreation Research* published a ‘Research Probe’ on the nature of island tourism (Sharpley, Butler, and Hall, 2012). Along with other aspects of that subject, it contained a discussion about whether there was such a phenomenon as *island tourism* as distinct from tourism to and on islands. The general conclusion was that this depends very much on the perceptions of each reader or discussant, the specific tourists involved, and also that ‘a deeper understanding of how islands are consumed by tourists remains elusive and demands further scrutiny’ (op. cit., p. 182). Clearly, there is both tourism to islands and tourism that takes place on islands, as all the chapters in this volume bear witness to.

Whether there is island tourism as a unique form or sub-category of tourism is much more of a perceptual problem. I strongly believe that island tourism – that is, visiting a destination specifically because it is an island, and perhaps a member of an archipelago – is a specific form of tourism, one that is quite distinct from simply participating in tourism at an island destination. It may appear pointless to consider whether one is examining island tourism or archipelago tourism (tourism to a group of islands); but again, there is an important perceptual issue involved in such a consideration. To tourism researchers, it is important to know what is motivating tourists to visit a specific destination, and what are their knowledge, understanding, and perceptions of that destination; that same information would presumably be useful also to tourism industry practitioners and relevant public sector agencies. In reality, knowledge of the mental processes of tourist destination choice is relatively poor, despite a number of models and concepts that have evolved over the past twenty years. In general, it is assumed that potential visitors have an initial idea of the kind of destination they wish to visit, presumably one which will provide the appropriate setting and opportunities for the type of vacation they wish to enjoy. They then work from a large set of possible destination choices (but as no tourist has complete knowledge of all potential destinations, their initial set is limited by their background, education, and information/knowledge) down to a smaller number of destinations that are given active consideration and then they finally choose one location from this smaller set. Depending on how they are arranging their holiday, they may go on-line to search for flights and accommodation, or visit a travel agent, in both cases perhaps unconsciously further limiting their options; in the first case by their own knowledge of what and how to search, and in the second by the experience and commercial integrity and values of the travel agent (reflecting their experience, their commissions from specific tour companies and their own company policies). Thus, the final selected destination may match the needs and preferences of the tourist perfectly or be a less than ideal compromise; it will fall somewhere on a continuum from perfection to failure and will have repercussions in terms of subsequent destination choices depending on the success of the holiday.
To the Archipelago

So far, I have not mentioned how archipelagos fit into this decision-making process, primarily because we have little or no such knowledge, a situation that hopefully this volume may help rectify. One can argue, in my own case from personal observation rather than from the academic literature (which really does not cover this topic), that some tourists are often unaware of whether they are even going to an island, let alone whether this is a solitary island or a member of an archipelago. This seems to be particularly so in the case of British tourists, with whom I am most familiar and of course on occasion, one myself. It is clear that many make little or no differentiation between whether a destination is on an island or not, let alone whether it is an island that is alone or is one member of an archipelago. In most cases, they are more concerned with what their destination can provide by way of services and opportunities. For those who are truly island tourists – that is, they are going to a destination specifically because it is an island – then its insular characteristics and qualities may well be of paramount importance. Even then, however, the question of single island or island group is, in many cases, still irrelevant. An example may clarify this situation.

As an enthusiastic bird watcher, I have spent several holidays and research visits to Fair Isle, the most remote (in terms of distance) of the inhabited British islands. It lies midway between the island archipelagos of Orkney and Shetland, belonging administratively and geologically to the latter group. I go to Fair Isle because it is probably the ultimate location in the United Kingdom from which to observe rare birds on migration, having recorded more ‘first visits’ to Britain by vagrant species than any other location. To visit the island, (unless I use a privately chartered plane as a few affluent bird-watchers do when a true vagrant or first record appears on the island), I have to travel first to what is known as the Shetland ‘mainland’, and from there travel to Fair Isle by boat or plane. Thus, being aware of the existence of and visiting the Shetland archipelago is inevitable. This awareness may even extend to the realisation that Shetland has its own ‘mainland’, which includes the capital city (Lerwick), and the main air and sea port terminals; with various other islands one or more ferry crossings away. These outliers have their own challenges in attracting tourists, their own multiple insular status creating both challenges (added distance, time and cost) and also opportunities (seclusion, rusticity and unique features) in developing themselves as boutique ‘cold water’ tourist destinations. However, as a more common ‘sun, sea and sand’ tourist, venturing to popular British foreign destinations, I could travel directly to Mallorca, or Ibiza (in the Balearics archipelago) or Lanzarote or Tenerife (in the Canaries archipelago), without any contact with any other island in their particular group and to all intents and purposes being ignorant of their very existence. Most of the islands in these groups are not visible from each other and travelling between them for a foreign tourist with minimal language or geographical abilities, let alone an interest in seeing other islands, is not easy or necessarily desirable.

If one’s purpose on holiday is to spend most of one’s time on a beach, any beach is as good as any other of equal quality (water temperature and purity, hours of sunshine, and clean sand in particular). Thus, there is little need or incentive to travel, at additional cost, to a neighbouring island. In the case of tourists whose primary or a major reason for travelling is related to culture and heritage, then visiting another island might be of considerable appeal and would justify any added cost and possible inconvenience. Thus the importance or added value of an island being a member of an archipelago may depend very much on the orientation and preferences of the tourist, as well as on their awareness of the characteristics
and quality of the destination they are visiting. However, such tourists are generally in a minority, as most island tourists are on a sun, sea and sand type of holiday.

**Does Awareness Matter?**

Depending on the destination, however, tourists to some islands may be much more aware of the existence of an archipelago as well as the specific island they are visiting; but this is a point about which researchers would be justified in bemoaning the lack of detailed and reliable information on tourist mental images and awareness. It is likely that tourists to the Hawaiian archipelago are aware that there is more than the one island, whichever that may be, that they are visiting or contemplating visiting. They may not be aware that Waikiki is on the island of O‘ahu rather than on Hawai‘i (the Big Island), but may well have heard of Maui and even Kauai, as well as Hawai‘i if only because that is the name of the archipelago as a whole. (This alignment between the name of an archipelago and that of its main island is an issue taken up in this volume.) Such awareness is almost certainly higher among North American tourists than others as they are both the majority of visitors to Hawai‘i and – in the case of residents of the United States – domestic tourists. In the case of the Caribbean, one has to consider if that archipelago includes all Caribbean islands or should be confined to specific groupings with the Caribbean Sea, such as the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, Caymans, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Trinidad and Tobago, for example. Visitors to the Bahamas perhaps have greater awareness of the existence of other islands, although even there, despite the proximity to their major market, one might expect some vagueness and lack of knowledge of the names of many of the individual islands.

One might ask if this matters, and the answer is probably not in terms of tourist satisfaction. But it clearly does matter in terms of island visitation and awareness levels or visibility of individual islands within a group. It is a difficult issue with which to deal, as some of the following chapters indicate. Individual island sensitivities, archipelago politics, economic realities, transport and other aspects of accessibility, degree of development of tourist facilities and policies, and practices of intermediaries, including travel agents, tour operators, airlines and cruise lines are all involved. Some of the above agents will not be concerned about which specific islands tourists visit, while others may be greatly concerned and directly involved in influencing or controlling the pattern of visitation. Cruise line operators are perhaps the actor making most value out of the presences of archipelagos, as many tours/cruises visit island groups deliberately in order to offer the maximum number of ports of call in a cruise as possible and thus reduce sailing time, service demands and costs on each cruise. Their choice of destinations is governed by cost but also by the availability of adequate port facilities and policies in place with respect to number of cruise ships accepted at any one time, and other possible restrictions. As cruise vessels increase in size, some destinations may opt out or fall out of favour because of an inability to cater for the several thousands of visitors on an individual boat; they may be substituted by alternative islands within the same archipelago or elsewhere (e.g. Lawton and Butler, 1989).

**The Archipelago and Island Hopping**

Most of the previous discussion has related to tourists who are single-centre focused in their holiday choice; that is, they select a specific destination (an island, for example)
and do not plan to relocate except possibly for part or all of a day. Indeed, many tourists do not leave even their hotel or resort complex during their stay except on arrival and departure. Thus to them the existence of an archipelago is irrelevant. For those tourists who are ‘island hoppers’, then an archipelago potentially is a considerable attraction and can be a major reason for visiting a specific island destination (Fennell, 1996). Much then depends on the accessibility of the islands within the archipelago being visited. For example, several of the Orkney Islands are linked by the Churchill Causeway constructed during the Second World War and it is easy to drive between several of the islands and the Orkney ‘mainland’ using this structure. In the case of the neighbouring Shetland archipelago, no islands are connected to each other by permanent structures (bridges, causeways, tunnels) and thus ferries or aircraft are necessary to move people, animals and cargo between individual islands. Much also depends on whether the tourists bring along their own transportation (most likely a car or bicycle, but also pleasure craft or yacht) with them. If they are not bringing their own transportation, then the availability of rental vehicles, taxis, ferries, air/seaplanes or similar services are essential if the desire is to encourage them to visit other islands. This then becomes an issue for both individual and archipelago agencies with responsibility for tourism, as well as tour agents and travel companies.

The relationships between individual islands and the other parts of their archipelago are often complex and sometimes controversial, as is amply shown in the following chapters of this timely book. Most such issues do not relate to tourism, although tourism may be a catalyst for the emergence or re-emergence of these issues because of the economic benefits (and costs) and its potential social, cultural and environmental impacts; as well as various related developments (such as transportation and other infrastructural facilities, medical, retail and other services) that tourism requires and stimulates. It is easier in general for specific islands to reject and refuse tourism and its associated developments than it is for any island to require an archipelago to deliver the infrastructure required to ensure tourist visitation. As the authors in this volume show, the island of primary access, often but not always the ‘capital’ island (in terms of political and administrative authority), is generally the one that is subject to most tourism development, thus making itself even more attractive to tourists, not only as the first point of call, but because to stay there avoids the need to trans-plane or trans-ship to another island. Success in tourism, if that is the correct term, tends to generate further tourism therefore, sometimes to the detriment of potential tourism to other islands in the archipelago. In this context, the interplay between endogenous and exogenous forces is of paramount importance, with extra-island players (airlines and cruise operators in particular) often in a more powerful position than the relevant island authorities to craft tourism policy. While the local authorities may limit or prohibit access or development (although few may wish to do this because of the potential loss of economic and employment benefits), it is much harder for them to insist on development in specific islands or parts of an archipelago if that is against the preferences of the external agencies (e.g. Hall, 1989).

**Dealing with Neighbours**

In many respects, therefore, the relationship between tourism to single islands and that to archipelagos mirrors the overall issues of tourism to islands in general: limitations and costs of access from markets, potential vulnerability to external forces, limited knowledge about
the location by visitors, and inconsistency and often inequality in treatment by decision-makers, both within and external to the island destinations. This promising and timely volume reviews these salient and pertinent issues, and also delves into revealing discussions on logistic and infrastructural challenges, as well as specific versus generic island branding and marketing strategies, that bedevil island tourism. In tourism, as in many economic facets of life, one’s neighbour may not be one’s best friend, even if part of the ‘family’.

References


