

## **The Need for Responsible Environmental Stewardship**

Many destinations aggressively recruit the cruise industry to call on them in order to benefit the local economies and communities. The visiting cruise ships grow local businesses and employment through tourism, ship provisioning, and required infrastructure expansion while providing significant tax revenues through port fees. The cruise lines gain by offering their passengers attractive vacation destinations. Since the destinations benefit economically, the cruise industry has generally left the stewardship of the environment to the local communities and governments even though their visits adversely affect the local environment. Once the habitats are degraded sufficiently, a destination will no longer be attractive to the passengers, and the cruise ships can move on to another port of call – a very shortsighted approach given the finite number of suitable seaports.

The environmental practices and policies of the major cruise lines are accessible through their websites and the cruise associations. Independent analysts, though, have generally concluded that the cruise lines have not adequately addressed the cumulative environmental impacts of their actions including air and ocean pollution from cruise ships, habitat degradation from rapid expansion, and habitat loss from overdevelopment. Given the economic benefits to the destinations, the cruise industry has traditionally felt justified in leaving the stewardship of the environment to the local communities and governments. Cruise lines are under constant pressure from their shareholders to improve their bottom line while dealing with rising costs from fuel, port fees and security. Sustainability efforts can be quite expensive and many in the industry feel that the bulk of the investment should come from the local communities and governments.

Hotels and resorts, though, have made a more long term commitment to their locations and, unlike the cruise industry, they cannot simply move to new destinations once their local habitats are degraded and no longer desirable. Hotels and resorts, then, have a vested interest in maintaining the local environments as suitable vacation destinations. These businesses often felt that the cruise industry takes tourism business away from them not only through competition but by adversely affecting the local habitats (Brida and Zapata-Aguirre, 2009).

While local businesses receive significant economic benefits from cruise tourism, the cruise industry typically receives the bulk of the passenger revenues. The visiting cruise ships directly compete with local businesses through onboard shopping and shore side services including photography, collectibles and duty-free products. The cruise lines take advantage of duty-free shopping zones at the pier to entice their passengers as soon as they leave their ships and later when they return. The local businesses normally can only market to the passengers away from the ships and without the benefit of duty-free products. Outside of cruise tourism jobs, the local people realize few economic benefits from the cruise industry while feeling the bulk of the negative environmental impacts. Negative environmental impacts include overcrowding from embarking cruise passengers, reduced access to desirable resources and destinations, and increased waste and pollution.

Local governments benefit from tax revenues collected from visiting cruise ships including departure taxes and port and handling fees. As with local businesses, though, the cruise industry uses strong negotiation tactics with the local governments in order to keep these fees as low as possible. Cruise lines will threaten to reduce ship visits or even pull out of the destinations entirely over perceived high fees (Brida and Zapata-Aguirre, 2009). Since the local governments are under severe pressure from the cruise industry to lower their fees, they are not very open to

partially investing this hard earned revenue in addressing the negative environmental impacts caused by visiting cruise ships. Seaports have expanded their infrastructure, including new piers and terminals, in order to attract and retain cruise ships (Klein, 2003). These expansions, though, have assisted in the degradation of the local environments. Some pristine wilderness areas have also been compromised to make room for growing infrastructure demands.

Cruise ships mostly operate under international agreements which are quite lenient. Ships are registered by design in countries with lax environmental regulations and are therefore essentially free from the environmental laws of the U.S. or any other strong enforcing nation. Environmental regulation, then, generally falls to voluntary agreements between the cruise lines and their cruise associations. The cruise industry recognizes the recent increased awareness of environmental issues by these passengers and the marketing need to address their concerns. The largest group is the Cruise Line International Association (CLIA) whose members have voluntarily agreed to adopt environmental best business practices.

These voluntary policies, though, are more reactive in meeting the demands of their passengers than proactive in addressing the adverse environmental impacts of the rapid expansion. Destinations can enforce their own environmental regulations while cruise ships are in port. However, most ports do not have the appropriate infrastructure in place in order to adequately inspect the visiting cruise ships (Brida and Zapata-Aguirre, 2009).

Rapid expansion has also led to habitat degradation due to overcrowding. Belize, with the largest coral reefs in the Western Hemisphere, is an excellent example as its pristine habitats are threatened by this growth. The daily number of cruise passengers visiting the coral reefs has exceeded the tourism carrying capacity of the reefs, resulting in many sections being damaged and torn up. Coral reefs take centuries to re-grow so some of this damage is essentially

irreversible. Belize, like a number of cruise destinations, has recently created new regulations in order to protect its remaining pristine environments. These destinations, though, generally fail to adequately enforce the new restrictions in order to gain the short-term economic contributions from the cruise industry. This short term approach fails to recognize that this rapid, uncontrolled growth of cruise tourism cannot be sustained in the long term (Diedrich, 2010).

The cruise lines, then, must not think in the short term. For many destinations to remain viable for cruise tourism in the long run, their infrastructures must be improved to handle shore side waste and other overcrowding issues. The industry must be more willing to accept higher port fees to partially pay for these infrastructure improvements or invest in projects directly as partners like hotels and resorts often do.

The cruise industry, then, must adopt this role and provide the responsible environmental stewardship for their destinations. By addressing the adverse effects of cruise tourism, cruise lines can supply habitat protection and recovery for the local environments. Since uncontrolled growth and development cannot be sustainable in the long term and can only lead to habitat degradation and loss, environmental stewardship by the cruise industry is essential.

### **References**

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