



## TOURISM AND CULTURE

One of the dangers of cultural tourism is the change in or loss of local identity and values. Several influences contribute to this negative result: adaptation to tourist demands, loss of authenticity, and commodification. Each of these is important in its own right.

Adaptation to tourist demands is an easy trap to fall into. Tourists want souvenirs to remind them of their visit. Arts and crafts serve that purpose in two ways: they are not something that would easily be found “at home,” and they are visually or aesthetically pleasing. In New Mexico, Native American pottery, jewelry and textiles have been an important part of drawing tourists and reviving local economies since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is a positive thing for all involved. Tourists gain an insight into a different culture and the local economy receives a financial boost from the purchase of cultural items. The problem arises when craftsmen, responding to tourist demands, make changes in the design of their products to bring them more into line with the tourists’ tastes rather than with traditional styles. As a result, an erosion of traditional culture occurs. Catering to tourists’ whims has other consequences as well.

Adapting cultural crafts or rituals to the tastes of tourists constitutes “staged authenticity.” In other words, adapting traditional dances, festivals, and costumes and presenting them as “real life experiences” abuses the nature of the activity. Changing to accommodate outsiders’ wishes dilutes the cultural and spiritual effects of these very same rituals for both the participants and the traditional society at large.

Modifying, altering or adapting cultural elements of a society for financial gain is called “commodification.” When religious rituals and traditional rites and festivals are reduced and sanitized to conform to tourist expectations as a method to attract visitor dollars, a reconstructed ethnicity is the result. Change in the culture is not the result of evolutionary factors, but the outcome of short-term economic gain. Once a site and its cultural traditions are sold as a tourism product, the tourist demand for souvenirs, arts, entertainment and other commodities begins to change the values within traditional society. Commodification is not the result of the organic processes of change. Rather, it is an expedient reaction to financial or economic opportunity. Commodification threatens the fundamental values of the society in which it occurs.

The loss of cultural identity and values is only one outcome of the interaction between cultures. It does not always occur. More often, when cultures interact, the result is mutually beneficial. This is the outcome of trade systems, where both sides contribute to the interaction equally. Tourism is not a true example of equal trade. One side, the tourists, establishes the market according to its particular desires. The other side, local artists and craftsmen, respond to these alien tastes rather than contributing authentic items in return. One side, the tourists, establishes both the demand and the price according to its desire. The other side, local enterprise, responds to these “outsider” demands. The end result of that system is the loss of cultural identity and the erosion of cultural values.