



## TOURISM – ESSAY

Since the advent of the transcontinental railway system in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tourism has flourished, especially in the Trans-Mississippi West. The lure of wide-open spaces, magnificent vistas, and a fascination with Native American culture and the cowboy myth of the “Wild West” has drawn tourists from across the globe to New Mexico and the rest of the Rocky Mountain states. From the beginning, tourism has been a “double-edged sword.”

Some people look forward to the jobs, income and increased activity that come with the arrival of tourists. Others resent the new arrivals, the loss of privacy, and the negative impacts on the environment, infrastructure, and culture that accompany the tourist industry. The topic of tourism remains controversial, not only in New Mexico, but also across the West.

In New Mexico, there have been many positive effects from the arrival of tourism. In 2014, the tourist industry employed just over 43,000 people, accounting for 1 in every 15 jobs in the state. In addition, tourists spent just over \$5.5 billion dollars on food, housing, car rentals, entrance fees, fuel and other items associated with tourism and recreation. Overall, tourism accounted for more state revenue than did construction and manufacturing combined. Tourism can be a positive contributor to New Mexico and its citizens.

Tourism also influences destinations in negative ways. Automobile traffic becomes very congested during the spring and summer. There is tremendous crowding at popular attractions – the Balloon Festival, on the plazas of Santa Fe, Albuquerque and Taos, and at the major museums and national monuments in the state. Much of New Mexico’s tourism is cultural tourism. This means that people come to New Mexico to see and experience a culture different from their own. In New Mexico, this means the culture of Native Americans, especially that of the Pueblo peoples from Albuquerque to Rio Arriba and Taos. While income and jobs are a result, the potential also exists for the exploitation of these cultures through the settings of “staged authenticity” that contain little meaning for the participants. In addition, tourism can create an economic imbalance between the “haves,” the tourists, and the “have-nots,” local residents mired in low paying service jobs with no future. This situation can create great social and political tension that serves neither party in the conflict.

Tourism purposely brings people from different cultures together. Sometimes it benefits both sides. For instance, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tourism was largely responsible for the revival of folk arts in the Southwest in general, and in New Mexico in particular. At the same time, tourism helped to undermine those same traditions through the introduction of “green ware” pottery and the shift in Navajo textile production to fit the preferences of tourists rather than the needs of the Navajo themselves.



Tourism is truly a “double-edged sword.” It can improve the economic well being of individuals, families and communities. At the same time, it can cheapen the very cultural traditions and events on which it is based and damage the social and natural environment of both people and places. Studies have shown that those communities with the most control over tourism in their area are the most successful in their efforts to protect and preserve their culture, their traditions and their way of life. Tourism is an enterprise in which all elements of the society should participate in the decision-making process.