

E. Sustainable Tourism in Hawai`i

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Background

Tourism has been the mainstay of Hawai`i's economy. The number of visitors has grown steadily, increasing from 686,314 in 1965 to 4.8 million by 1985. With a resident population of 1.2 million, nearly 7 million people presently visit Hawai`i each year. Visitor expenditures account for \$11 billion, one-sixth of total expenditures in the state. They generate nearly a billion dollars in State and County tax revenues. About one-third of jobs in Hawai`i are related to the visitor industry.

Visitors are attracted to the beauty and uniqueness of Hawai`i's natural and cultural environment. Yet, excessive tourism growth may pose a threat to the very environmental and cultural assets that visitors seek. Visitors contribute to congestion on our beaches, trails, and roadways. They consume scarce water and energy and generate pollution, sewage, and solid waste. They create a demand for expansion and development of transient accommodations. This is particularly important as visitors are attracted to near-shore and pristine areas, where the environmental impacts of hotel and resort development are likely to be particularly high. Other impacts include increasing stress on public infrastructure including parks and recreation facilities. Conservation of Hawai`i's natural and human environment is critical not only to preserving the quality of life of residents but also of the visitor experience. Thus, a balance is sought between economic prosperity for residents, environmental preservation, and social well-being. Although the visitor industry has been an economic engine for the State, its growth must be carefully managed so as to offset or mitigate negative impacts.

Sustainability means different things to different people. Among economists, sustainability tends to refer to the preservation of a quality of life for future generations of consumers. Natural resources have an economic value in that they may be an input into production (lumber, petroleum) and may provide direct amenities to households (scenic views, clean air). A significant component of economics involves the valuation of non-market natural resources and the environment (hedonic pricing, travel cost analysis, contingent valuation). Sustainability thus involves an appropriate passing along of natural assets to future generations such that an appropriate quality of life may be maintained. To the extent that natural resources are extracted or degraded, human made capital or innovations may compensate to maintain acceptable levels of economic prosperity for future generations. In terms of the visitor industry in Hawai`i, the loss of a shoreline or deterioration in a hiking trail may be substituted with built amenities that would continue to attract visitors.

From the viewpoint of natural scientists, sustainability refers to the preservation of ecosystem quality. Ecosystems naturally evolve over time. Species evolve, land forms shift and change, environments respond to changes in temperature and climate. Yet, human interferences in natural areas have rapidly, and in some cases irreversibly, changed ecosystems. Sustainability thus involves the preservation of an acceptable quality of the natural environment. A pristine state of nature may be compared to various levels of ecosystem degradation that are associated with human interactions. Particularly relevant for Hawai`i are the uniqueness and the fragility of various micro-ecosystems of

the islands. Be it endemic and endangered species, delicate shorelines, or scenic vistas, Hawai`i's ecosystems are precious. In this view, the focus is on how infrastructure might be used to offset the negative aspects of visitor industry growth. Important infrastructure demand elements include water, waste water, solid waste and energy. The role of open space in preserving environmental quality is relevant. Land-use planning becomes a particularly important tool of sustainable policy as certain environmentally fragile areas may be designated as unsuitable for development.

Another perspective on sustainability becomes one of culture. Traditional ways of life may be eroded with the introduction of foreign influences. Traditional gatherings or practices may become difficult to maintain if development interferes with access to culturally important public spaces. In adapting to the presence of outsiders cultural influences, both positive and negative, may alter cultural traditions. In Hawai`i, this is of particular concern to the indigenous people of the land whose way of life and values have been required to respond quickly to Western influences.

Tourism industry experts focus on the sustainability of industry demand and output. The visitor industry in Hawai`i is a mature one, well developed with an extensive inventory of assets including hotels, restaurants, retail, transportation, and entertainment amenities. Hawai`i's reputation is well-established and widely recognized worldwide as an exotic, romantic, exciting, and yet comfortable destination. Alternative destinations are increasingly becoming available as competing destinations enhance investments in the visitor inventory. Travelers are also seeking new, exotic, and increasingly remote destinations. Many middle income and developing countries are able to provide attractive holiday packages at relatively low prices. Sustainability of the industry involves continued enhancements in the quality of the visitor experience through public and private investments. Environmental quality and cultural quality become important in that they provide amenities that tourists demand.

Issues

There may be other concepts of sustainability, and this working group will be involved in formulating such concepts. The group will discuss the degree to which alternative paradigms of sustainability complement are in conflict. Additionally, this working group will jointly identify the various pathways and linkages by which the visitor industry contributes to or distracts from sustainability in Hawai`i. We will work to categorize these pathways. We will seek to identify the choices and tradeoffs that our society faces in relation to tourism. In addition to articulating the issues and concerns, we will prioritize the opportunities and threats facing our community.