

Forum:	Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)
Issue:	Measures to reduce tourism congestion at natural and cultural sites [SDG8-SDG14]
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Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's fastest-growing industries, creating economic opportunities, cultural exchange, and jobs in both developed and developing nations. In 2024, tourism accounted for 10 percent of the global economy, supporting 357 million jobs worldwide - approximately one in every ten jobs - highlighting its central role in the labor market. However, rapid tourism growth has also led to congestion at natural and cultural heritage sites, threatening both environmental sustainability and cultural preservation. Overcrowding causes physical degradation of ecosystems, such as coral reefs and national parks, and accelerates wear on ancient monuments and heritage sites. It also diminishes the quality of the visitor experience and can negatively affect local communities through rising costs of living and strained infrastructure.

The challenge for policymakers is therefore to balance the economic benefits of tourism with the imperative to protect natural and cultural heritage. This issue calls for innovative strategies that encourage sustainable tourism management without undermining local economies that depend on visitor flows.

Definition of Key Terms

Overtourism

This occurs when too many visitors overcrowd and lead to congestion in a destination¹, exceeding its capacity to manage them sustainably, where life is made difficult for the people who live there as well as many other negative impacts².

Carrying Capacity

Carrying capacity is the maximum number of a species an environment can support indefinitely. Every species has a carrying capacity, even humans, in this case indicating the maximum number of visitors a site can accommodate without damaging its environment, infrastructure, or cultural value⁹.

Sustainable Tourism

Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities⁸.

Cultural Heritage Site:

Cultural heritage includes artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance⁵.

Background Information

Historical context

In the past decade, overtourism and congestion have gained global attention. Destinations from Venice and Machu Picchu to the Great Barrier Reef and Mount Everest are under pressure due to overcrowding.

Natural sites often experience ecological degradation when too many tourists visit in concentrated periods. Coral reefs, for example, are damaged by divers, snorkelers, and cruise ships, while mountain ecosystems face waste accumulation and trail erosion. Cultural sites face physical damage, such as erosion of ancient stone at Angkor Wat and the Parthenon, alongside intangible impacts like the commercialization of local traditions.

Furthermore, overtourism negatively impacts local communities. Rising demand drives up rents, displaces residents, and strains public services. Traffic congestion, overcrowded transport, and pollution reduce quality of life for locals. Left unchecked, such congestion risks undermining the very qualities that make destinations attractive in the first place.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

In 2018, Thailand closed Maya Bay for several years to allow coral reefs to recover from damage caused by 5,000 daily visitors³. Over 80 percent of its coral reefs had been damaged from boat anchors, sunscreen pollution, litter, and trampling of marine habitats. To rehabilitate the area, the government undertook several measures such as stopping boats from anchoring in the bay, building floating walkways at nearby entrances, and capping visitor numbers per time slot.

At Machu Picchu in Peru, a famous tourism spot, strict visitor-management reforms have also been introduced in recent years. Starting in mid-2024, general admission tickets are limited not only in number but also in time: visitors with general tickets may stay at the archeological citadel for only about 2.5 hours per visit to spread visitor load over the day. These measures aim to reduce wear on infrastructure and improve the preservation of the ruins, while also enhancing the visitor experience by avoiding overcrowded peak hours.

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention has also attempted to solve this issue by publishing a document about concepts of nature conservation and the preservation of cultural properties. The Convention recognizes the way in which people interact with nature, and the fundamental need to preserve the balance between the two⁶.

The UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism is a comprehensive set of principles whose purpose is to guide stakeholders in tourism development, aiming to reach responsible tourism. It is endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

UNESCO

United Nations organization that promotes cooperation in education, science, culture and communication to foster peace worldwide. It manages World Heritage properties, publishes “How To” toolkits for sustainable tourism, can place properties on the “World Heritage in Danger” list and convenes governments, site managers and experts to recommend corrective measures⁷.

UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

Promotes sustainable tourism practices and develops international guidelines such as the global code of ethics for tourism

Italy

A country facing overtourism due to the largest cultural heritage in the world since it consists of 60 to 75 percent of all the artistic assets that exist on each continent.

Thailand

A country facing overtourism especially in major destinations like Phuket, Samui and Pattaya, where visitors lack respect for the local community.

Peru

Tourism congestion is threatening one of the world's New 7 Wonders, where Peru's Machu Picchu risks losing credibility as a wonder due to mismanagement and overtourism.

Viable Solutions

One effective measure is implementing visitor caps and timed ticketing systems at heavily congested sites. For example, staggered entry times at Machu Picchu have already proven effective. Extending this model globally could help maintain carrying capacity while ensuring visitors still gain access.

Economic approaches, such as tourist taxes or dynamic pricing can also reduce congestion. Higher fees during peak times can discourage overcrowding, while revenues can be channelled into site conservation and local infrastructure. Venice's new entry fee system could serve as a global model.

Technology can also be integrated within this issue. Smart tourism apps providing real-time updates on site congestion can redirect tourists to alternative attractions. Digital reservation systems, combined with AI-based crowd monitoring, allow authorities to make data-driven management decisions.

Another solution is tourism diversification. Promoting lesser-known destinations can reduce pressure on iconic sites while spreading economic benefits. Community-led management models are also critical. Local residents should be empowered through participatory governance mechanisms, ensuring tourism strategies reflect community needs and protect residents' quality of life.

Finally, international cooperation and capacity-building should be enhanced. Wealthier nations and UN bodies could fund sustainable tourism infrastructure in developing tourism countries, such as waste treatment plants or eco-friendly transport systems, while sharing best practices through peer-to-peer exchange programmes.

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