



Journal of Tourism Futures

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Alexis Papathanassis, Stavros Katsios, Ramona Nicoleta Dinu, (2017) ""Yellow Tourism" - Crime & Corruption in Tourism", Journal of Tourism Futures, Vol. 3 Issue: 2, pp.200-202, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JTF-09-2017-060>

Permanent link to this document:

<https://doi.org/10.1108/JTF-09-2017-060>

Downloaded on: 25 December 2017, At: 05:07 (PT)

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Conference report

Alexis Papathanassis, Stavros Katsios and Ramona Nicoleta Dinu

“Yellow Tourism” – crime and corruption in tourism

The 1st Yellow Tourism Conference, Corfu, Greece, 27-29 April 2017.

The first International Yellow Tourism Conference was held over three days in Corfu in April 2017 (Katsios, 2016; Gretzel, 2017). Tourism sector growth over the last years has been accompanied with a critical discussion over its economic and developmental potential and the corresponding externalities. Crime and Corruption are not merely holiday themes (e.g. “Dark Tourism”), but also constitute a bitter reality counting many victims.

Tourism is a globalised business sector impacting the livelihood of millions of people in all parts of the world. As any other “big business”, where significant circuits of capital and information, and power imbalances exist, tourism is fertile ground for corruption and economic crime. The globalised scope of the tourism industry renders it into a very challenging field of action for national legislators and law enforcement agencies. Novel tourist experiences, interactions with unknown environments and places, and a sense of freedom from care represent core elements of the holiday experience. For these very reasons, holidays inherently entail a number of dangers for tourists, rendering them vulnerable to crime. Conversely, the anonymity that is combined with the consumerist/hedonistic mindset of many tourists, may well lead to irresponsible and even criminal behaviour towards locals and others.

With tourism’s increasing importance as a strategy for economic development (especially for developing as well as post-industrial economies), countering corruption is becoming an increasingly relevant priority. The impact of corruption on tourist-income distribution and allocation, as well as its role of contemporary mass-tourism supply-chain structures and power balances (i.e. between source markets and destinations), is eroding the justification basis for tourism development altogether. Various media-reported events, namely, anti-tourism sentiments in the Netherlands, anti-cruise protests in Venice and Dubrovnik, value-added-tax increases in the Greek islands and legal disputes between local authorities with online tourism intermediaries, are all symptomatic of an increasingly questionable business system. Indeed, corruption is neither unique nor novel to tourism. It is however underresearched, underrepresented and highly fragmented within the scientific tourism literature.

The aim of this inaugural conference was to create an interdisciplinary “research-space” for understanding tourism-related corruption, whilst initiating the formation of a corresponding international network of tourism academics and practitioners. The main theme of the conference was coined as “Yellow Tourism”, symbolically drawing from Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime & Punishment*, in which the colour yellow is associated with corruption and decay.

Held in the historical Ionian Academy building of the Ionian University, the venue of the oldest modern Greek university, this inaugural conference aimed at initiating and encouraging open discussions between academics of different academic disciplines such as: law, economics, humanities and tourism, and professionals representing anti-corruption and crime-prevention organisations. Each conference day ended with a social activity programme, including local specialty cuisine restaurants and beach-side venues. Those events supported the creation of an informal atmosphere, which, in turn, enabled intense and controversial discussions during the conference tracks.

A total of approximately 60 delegates, representing 19 different universities and institutions, attended the conference’s three tracks:

1. corruption, corporate social responsibility and destination reputation;

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2. corruption and the holiday experience; and
3. tourism corruption, crime, heritage and governance.

The track sessions were held successively (i.e. no parallel sessions) in order to avoid “overdispersal” of the audience. Each of the conference’s tracks entailed six to eight paper presentations. Each paper was presented for 15-20 minutes allowing for a 10-minute discussion. The 24 papers presented, by a total of 34 speakers, as well as the enveloping discussion could be summarised under the following themes.

Multi-attribution of tourism corruption

Corruption in the holiday domain has indeed many facets and cannot be reduced to its macro-level interpretation (e.g. tax evasion, money laundering, nepotism, bribery). In tourism, corruption is readily visible in the daily holiday experience, and it directly affects the satisfaction, integrity and even safety of the individuals involved in it (Papathanasis, 2016). Exemplary cases and examples supporting this statement were presented and discussed during the conference and included:

- conflict and fraud during holidays (e.g. sunbed availability disputes, counterfeit products);
- criminal and negligence offences at the expense of tourists (e.g. missing cruise passengers, sexual offences during holidays, tourist substance abuse, misbehaviour and vandalism);
- exploitation and mistreatment of service workers (e.g. guide abuse, cruise staff exploitation);
- deterioration of heritage, cultural and natural resources (e.g. destruction of cultural property, antiquity trafficking, tourism/maritime spatial-(mis)planning); and
- securitisation of tourism (interpretation of security measures, threat/security perception).

Particularly interesting, and partially an explanation for wide scope and variability of the cases and examples reported, was the finding that tourists are very likely attribute various holiday service-encounter failures to corruption. Corruption may or may not be directly related to incompetence, lack of professionalism, expectation failure and/or criminal intent. Nevertheless, it appears that, from an individual tourist perspective, it is a synonym and underlying cause for experienced mishaps during a holiday (e.g. neglected heritage sites). It follows that corruption and its reporting (e.g. corruption perceptions index) have a perhaps underestimated effect on a destination’s reputation and may well play a significant role in tourists’ holiday selection process.

Tourism corruption 2.0

It being a service bundle, tourism consumption is characterised by intangibility and inseparability (i.e. concurrent consumption and production). This, in addition to its cost and information complexity, render the booking of a risky transaction. In this sense, reputation and brand image are highly relevant for the tourism sector; particularly when it comes to health and safety. The proliferation of the internet and social media has created a new reality for companies who have a vested interest to contain the publicity of crime and corruption incidents. The line between reputation management and unethical/corruption practice is rather thin. Arguably, the “age of transparency” has arrived and victims, as well as non-profit organisations, have now the means to expose malignant practice and exercise pressure on tourism companies. Yet, there is another side to the coin. The availability of online published statistical data and information on tourism-related crime rates has been criticised as limited and rather inaccurate (i.e. biased) due to methodological and legal classification/definition issues. This, combined with victims’ comparatively limited online presence, may lead to underrepresentation of “yellow tourism phenomena” in the web. In this respect, the financial leverage and digital expertise of tourism/cruise corporations have been characterised as the source of an imbalance of “online visibility” power and “platform bias”.

Institutional weakness and the tourism system

At a macro-level, corruption has been associated with a number of economic indicators related to tourism development (e.g. tourism income, investments in tourism, socio-cultural and environmental

impacts) and the actual influence of corruption levels mainly in terms of weak law and inefficient government to tourism. In addition, during the conference, an inverse relationship was established between eTourism indicators and corruption. This suggests that the digitalisation of tourism and its transparency potential may well be an effective, medium-term counter-measure for corruption. Yet, the digitalisation of tourism cannot be separated from the general level of “knowledge-based” economic development. A transformation towards a knowledge-based economy is highly dependent on political will, incentives/constraints structures and the effectiveness of the overall institutional matrix. Tourism corruption can be perceived as contributing to a decelerated economic development, and as symptomatic of it. The globalised nature of tourism and the corresponding legislative complexity of tourism pose a considerable challenge in this respect.

Corruption “glocality”

The last theme emerging from this conference is related to the previous ones already mentioned. Countering corruption in tourism requires awareness at a global level and institutionally led counter-measures at a national/local level. The first aspect is undermined by both the multi-attribution of corruption and the visibility of the phenomenon (Corruption 2.0) in the context of tourism. The second precondition is hindered by the institutional challenges facing those economies mostly affected by corruption and its impact on tourism development potential. An analogy used during the conference was that of a “broken window in a classroom”. The ones enduring the cold and noise resulting from the broken window do not have the mandate and means to repair it. Those who do (i.e. in our analogy, the school authorities) are simply neither aware of a broken window nor of its implications for those attending the class. In short, the ones who are aware of it cannot fix it, whilst the ones who can are not aware of it. Raising general awareness on the scope and impact of tourism-related corruption whilst supporting and enabling national/local tourism authorities to counteract it may well be the most pragmatic and effective approach. Here, research and academic institutions can play a decisive role.

The aforementioned themes can be readily translated into to a number of significant and relevant questions for the academic community. More importantly, this inaugural conference provided a thematic framework for synthesising, an otherwise fragmented, “body of tourism knowledge”, and providing a connection between tourism-related themes such as crime/security, heritage protection, health and safety, destination reputation, holiday quality, sustainability and economic impact.

The conference’s outcome demonstrated that exploration and further research in “Yellow Tourism” can significantly benefit from a multi-disciplinary approach, extending beyond the social science inheritance and “managerialism” of mainstream tourism research. Cross-fertilising tourism research with academic disciplines, namely, criminology, law, information science, political science, led to novel and highly relevant research contributions. Concluding, it could be stated that this conference inspired a number ideas and resulted in unconventional questions, which merit further work in the area. On this basis, the organisers and the delegates all expressed their intention to pursue the exploration and establishment of this tourism sub-domain, by transforming it to a conference series and expanding its inter-disciplinary network of researchers.

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Further reading

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