

A Vacation is Not Activism Part III —On Tourism and Ecosocial Disasters

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This article is one in a four-part series on climate change. Read the full series [here](#).

After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans it seemed like everyone and their mothers were appealing to the public, encouraging them to visit the city in order to boost the local economy. This response to the unnatural disaster was heard from likes of then-President George W. Bush as well as feminist folksinger Ani DiFranco, and it was broadcast without much inquiry or even feedback from those most affected. It’s hard to imagine anyone who had just lost loved ones, or anyone who was living in a FEMA trailer, thinking that tourists getting wasted on Bourbon Street were helping them at all. Because they weren’t.

Tourism as a response to ecosocial disasters, or preventable crises brought about by intersecting inequalities that meet at the

environment, is often touted as unilaterally positive. Once a devastating natural hazard afflicting marginalized people pops up on Western social media feeds, we're pressed to pray, to donate five bucks to the Red Cross, and then to visit the affected place, whether to aid in the reconstruction effort or to just "boost the economy" by tipping the hotel masseuse, I guess. But calls to "fly and buy" serve those who have the most to gain from disasters, and when you consider how much the tourism industry not only takes advantage of aid money for development but also contributes to climate change in already vulnerable regions, it becomes clear that this response is a capitalist ploy working to exploit Black and brown bodies while they're still warm.

Let's start with New Orleans, whose tourist brand relies on (read: exploits) Black American culture, Mardis Gras Indians, and French colonialism for "authenticity" points. Tourists consumed these cultures to the tune of about \$7 billion in 2015 alone, more than double what the city made on tourism before Katrina in 2004, according to the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB). Tourism in New Orleans is one of the leading providers of jobs in the state—through mostly menial and/or seasonal positions. Tourist dollars are hoarded in the French Quarter, which provides much of the city's revenues, but those revenues don't usually fund city services; instead the money stays in the Quarter. In 2014, for example, the Louisiana House Committee passed a bill creating a new tax district, or "hospitality zone," by levying a tax on CVB member hotels, which promised to bring in up to \$14 million a year for tourism marketing, policing, and infrastructural improvements in the hospitality zone.

The bill allowed for the adoption of the Tourist Support Assessment, a fancy name for the tax, which was voted on by a governing body of tourism industry representatives, mostly hotel owners

whose properties were located in the hospitality zone. Each guest room counted as a vote, so the more hotel rooms you had, the more votes you got. Essentially, this tax zone is left to function as a self-serving tourism empire where much of the tax money generated goes to institutions like the New Orleans Tourism and Marketing Corporation, both of which only serve the tourism industry. These policies neglect the vast majority of the city and its residents, who could really use that \$14 million. Despite this tourism and gentrification boom, poverty rates in the city are the same as they were in 1999 and the child poverty rate is 17 percentage points above the national one. I guess you can't expect much from an industry that capitalizes on the city's history of slavery and Black cultural responses to it while barring Black people from the profits. Or as C. W. Cannon, a professor at Loyola University New Orleans and a lifetime resident of the city, puts it, "That's what tourism wants Black people to be: part of the architecture. It's not going to cause a problem; a building doesn't talk back to you, and it looks right and it acts right." He adds, "Tourists want Black culture, but not Black people."

This is a global trend that is seen often after ecosocial disasters ravage tourist destinations, especially those on coastlines. After the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, one of the worst disasters in human history, tourist entities in the affected countries were quick to mobilize and respond by either pretending the tsunami wasn't as bad as it was, exploiting the tsunami (Thailand proposed a "Tsunami Trail Tour" and built the 'Tsunami Memorial Museum' against the community's wishes), throwing much-needed funds into tourism marketing (\$19.5 million in Thailand alone), creating "conservation buffer zones" in India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, keeping residents from rebuilding on the beaches where they lived, and displacing fisherfolk inland on tiny plots of land, away from their livelihoods, to earmark for tourist development, and more, accord-

ing to a report by the tourism watchdog organization Tourism Concern. In the report, Kelly Haynes, the organization's research coordinator wrote, "Governments have used the devastation of the tsunami as an opportunity to push through tourism strategies that drastically affect local coastal communities," and many believed they did so by withholding aid money that was collected in record numbers. "Tourism is the new occupying force," she concluded. In 2006, geographer Neil Smith wrote that "locals increasingly call the reconstruction effort the 'second tsunami.'" In fact, Haynes said Thai field workers talked of suffering through six tsunamis: the actual tidal wave, disorganized and divisive aid agencies, intrusive and insensitive press, landlords threatening eviction with violence, religious organizations trying to convert beneficiaries, and researchers and NGOs collecting information without sharing it with local people. The effects were similar in New Orleans.

But let's look at the bigger picture. Recent "natural" disaster or not, how much of the money spent on your vacation actually goes into the pockets of local people? Tourism functions like Reagan's trickle-down economics, so the idea that it helps residents is bullshit. Most all-inclusive resorts, and resorts in general, are chains originating from wealthy countries foreign to the (developing) countries they operate in. All-inclusives are a detriment to every place they're developed, as they keep money from leaving the resorts, and it's not like your bartender or maid is rolling in tourist dough. Eighty percent of what travelers spend on all-inclusive package tours "go to the airlines, hotels, and other international companies (who often have their headquarters in the travelers' home countries), and not to local businesses or workers," the United Nations Environment Program estimated. In a tourism-dependent, disaster-prone country like Thailand, 70 percent of all money spent by tourists leaves the country, and in the tourism-dependent, disas-

ter-prone Caribbean, the figure is 80 percent. A UNEP study concluded that out of every \$100 spent on a vacation tour by a tourist from a developed country, about \$5 stays in the developing country's economy, or, rather, that country's tourism board or its politicians' pockets.

Not only do post-disaster tourism profits seldom reach those in need, the industry also contributes to climate change by weakening natural shore protection and depleting desperately needed resources in vulnerable communities. Tourist infrastructures (don't get me started on cruise ships) on coastlines have been responsible for destruction of mangroves, marshland, and coastal reefs, contributing to the erosion of vital buffers when sea levels rise due to global warming. Resorts in the Philippines and Maldives have even dynamited and mined for coral reefs to use as building materials, which can lead to irreversible effects. That's the thing about vacationing. You could have your "first-world" lifestyle exported to a "third-world" region for a weekend, and you don't even have to stick around to experience the consequences. In fact, Western tourists tend to be the first evacuated in any kind of disaster, and news media centers them almost heroically in footage of them. Who knows how Western media would have covered the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami if 9,000 mostly European tourists hadn't died in it. But even though "sustainable" and "eco" tourism have developed considerably in response to this reality, the industry as a whole is environmentally unsustainable.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, there are one billion tourist arrivals in the world every year, a number that's expected to triple in the next three years. Many of these arrivals are on coastal destinations in developing countries, luxury hot-spots that suck the life out of poor communities. Tourism puts great pressure on local resources like water, food,

energy, and raw materials in places where they already may be scarce. And since those consumers are generally coming from privileged means, their demands outweigh what “destinations” can offer, so they’re sold to the consumer at the expense of the local who also has to tend with rising land and real estate costs, not to mention sea levels. At the center of this is the global struggle for water, and the crisis in Bali is a prime example.

The tourism industry in general overuses water for hotels, swimming pools, golf courses, and spas in places where access to drinkable water is critical, like Bali; researchers deduce Bali will run dry by 2020, and tourism is primarily to blame. On an island where 1.7 million out of 3.9 million people have inadequate access to a clean water supply, where the government has declared up to 80 percent of its watersheds dry, the tourism industry—mainly made up of resorts and yoga retreats—absorbs at least 65 percent of the island’s total water supply, according to a study by Dr. Stroma Cole of University of the West of England. Though 80 percent of the island’s economy is dependent upon the industry, with a fourth of its population accounting for its workforce, 85 percent of tourism businesses there are owned by non-Balinese people and entities. The industry has absorbed much of the water that is commonly used for agriculture on an island celebrated for its heritage of rice paddies, whose farmers are among those hardest hit by the crisis. Bali’s poorest and most marginalized people, who relied on their own hand-dug wells, usually can’t afford bottled water or the city’s tap water supply, nor can they compete with neighboring resorts, which can afford the technology to drill deeper wells literally next door, since each four- or five-star hotel requires 50,000 liters of clean water to run each day. It’s straight up theft.

There are more sustainable ways to manage tourism, and it is rapid, unchecked, mass tourism developments on coastlines in par-

ticular that are to blame for the majority of these ills. But an industry as environmentally unsustainable as tourism shouldn't be turned to in the event of a climate-caused disaster. It is a form of disaster capitalism—where most see devastation and need, foreign elites see opportunity for “growth”—and whether they see through it or not, most Westerners go along with it. To prevent ecosocial disaster, efforts both short- and long-term should go into sustaining local industries, like small fisheries that coastal communities subsist on, that are endangered by climate change, tourism development, and globalization. As we saw in New Orleans, responding to ecosocial disaster with gentrification and tourism has irreversible effects on the cultural landscape of a place. Unfortunately, tourist economies are not known for their stability, and a city with so much poverty and crime shouldn't have to depend on pimping a Disney-fied version of its culture for outside consumption to survive. At the rate that disasters brought about by climate change are now occurring, tourism funding should be considerably defunded and rerouted to healthcare, education, and ecological preservation and restoration projects. The time to be alarmed or even on the fence about climate change and its disastrous effects passed in 2005. Now is the time for action, not a vacation.