Foreword

Helena Norberg-Hodge

This book comes at an important juncture, as global tourism again begins to pick up after the interregnum brought about by the COVID pandemic. The great pause that accompanied the early phase of the pandemic especially offered the planet a moment to breathe as globalisation's incessant busyness, acceleration and movement of material and people – including for global tourism – ground to a standstill. For communities and regions that have grown heavily dependent on tourism for livelihood security, this episode exposed in the harshest terms how perilous and brittle such economic dependence is. Neglect of a real, productive, local economy, including food production for local needs, is possible as long as cash income and a global supply chain is maintained, but its sudden removal lays bare the folly of hitching a whole economic wagon to this mirage.

In Ladakh, India, where I first had my eyes opened to the basic lessons of local self-reliance and the hazards of a commodity-consumerist 'development' model back in the 1970s, I have been able to witness in real time the steady substitution of a localised agrarian economy by a tourism-based cash economy and the many cultural, psychological and ecological consequences that shift has entailed. Despite the manic pace of change there, however, it remains largely agrarian, with villages that – however atrophied compared to the pre-development era – maintain an agricultural base, and many people returned to this comparative security and safety during lockdown. The reigning ideology that endlessly valorises the urban office, the so-called service economy while neglecting the rural and bemoaning its 'backwardness' was completely turned on its head.

The great pause also offered us – or should have done – an opportunity to critically reassess every aspect of pre-pandemic 'normal', to recognise the planetary-scale catastrophe this normal was producing and to imagine profoundly different directions. This is as true of tourism as anything. Mass global tourism has never been and cannot be sustainable in any circumstance, but its democratisation especially in the form of 'cheap' air travel, heralds a hitherto unimaginable ecological impact. Like many other aspects of the global economy, this too needs to be reduced rather than expanded, and what remains must be radically re-imagined and reoriented towards the 'local turn' that this book so admirably advances.

With regard to the first point about reducing tourism, I am increasingly convinced that in a more localised world which allows for genuine

biological and cultural diversity, there will be much less need to travel in the first place. In such a world, people would be working far fewer hours at a more relaxed pace. The beauty of nature would be closer to home. In other words, the soul-crushing alienation and stress that compels so much of escapist tourism today would be less. It can sound unrealistic and utopian, but my experience in both localised traditional cultures and in newer re-localised hubs around the world has affirmed to me that this change is beginning to happen.

Of course, none of this is to gainsay the incomparable benefits and joys of travel. For those from heavily industrialised contexts, there is a critical role for travel to less-industrialised places where land-based old cultures can still be experienced, especially for young people. Over many years my organisation Local Futures facilitated such immersive experiences for young Westerners (and, increasingly, urbanites from various parts of Asia) with Ladakhi farming families. Needless to say, such immersive experience with a local culture – paired with deep facilitated learning programmes – can be profoundly influential on people from the overdeveloped/techno-industrial realm, sometimes effecting changes of perspective and later of life that hardly any other experience could match. This was our experience, with many participants having been inspired to undertake relocalisation initiatives like farmer's markets when they returned to their home countries. In the other direction, it is equally important to facilitate travel to the urban-industrial contexts for people – particularly young people from rural backgrounds – in the so-called developing countries, in order to counter the shameless glorification of the West, the urban, the 'modern' that is ubiquitous in mass media and education systems around the world. This process, which we undertook by sponsoring community leaders from Ladakh to travel to the West on 'reality tours' for many years, helps in what I call positive counter-development. It replaces the myths of progress and development with a more balanced understanding of the previously unknown ecological and social realities of the conventional models of development. These reality tours also provide experience of the sincere and inspiring efforts of so many people in the industrialised world to shift direction towards slower, simpler, more localised and sufficient lives and economies. This in turn reverses the arrow of development, showing the land-based village cultures to be lighthouses of sustainable futures newly aspired to by the 'over-developed'.

For the meaningful, thoughtful international travel that will remain, air travel is still an unsustainable mode, and needs to eventually – sooner than later – be replaced by slower, far more pleasant, modes like boats and trains, as well as walking and cycling holidays, often combined with a more spiritual approach, for example the 'pilgrimage' walks.

In addition, by way of gentle critique, my impression is that too many of the 'responsible tourism' initiatives that are becoming increasingly

common, while having the best of intentions, tend to be reduced to the individual level – how the individual tourist, or maybe their tour group, can do differently, can spend their money better. This is indeed welcome, yet, there can be no responsible or sustainable travel or tourism within a congenitally unsustainable economic context. Put differently, if economies were localised, tourists would automatically have less destructive impact, and this is a political project, compared to ultimately ineffective efforts to cajole them into individually seeking out the few 'green' options within a corporate-dominated economy.

There can be an important role for tourism being directed in a way to support the local economy, for example via local food cafes, farmers markets, sensitively done homestays using local produce and appropriate technology, and so on. A scaled-down tourism, in collaboration with local organisations and sensitive governments, can also do much to boost both the esteem and prestige of the local and artisanal economy, as well as its economic viability. In Ladakh, the presence of environmentally sensitive tourists has helped raise awareness of and demand for zero waste/plastic-free local products, as well as spurred the opening of a number of local and traditional food cafes that source from a network of nearby farmers.

On the other hand, a reality check would quickly show that this segment of tourists and this proportion of the total tourist-directed food and craft spend that is local is negligible compared to the overall scale of tourism that has ballooned beyond any reasonable optimum, causing a cascade of problems from farmland conversion to hotels, to mountains of plastic waste, to dangerous water depletion and contamination. Hence, the primacy of the need for establishing hard limits on tourism, no matter how green, since beyond critical thresholds it will overrun and overwhelm a place and create dangerous levels of economic dependency. Clearly, relying on conscious consumption by sensitive tourists to sustain a local food system is precarious to say the least. Tourism should supplement and encourage the local economy, but not become its central pillar. This important collection helps point the way toward a tourism that serves local cultures and economies, rather than the other way round.