Costs of Tourism

***Impacts of Tourism on Prince Edward Island*, Executive Summary $1.50, Analysis and Recommendations $2.50, from**
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PEI's Premier Alex Campbell has long been working to support the Island's simple yet deep-rooted and rewarding lifestyle. An advocate of a conserver society, self-reliance, solar energy and energy conservation, Campbell sponsored the building of New Alchemy's ARK—a research and demonstration project for integrated wind power, solar energy, food production and living which was recently dedicated on the Island.

Questioning the social value of an economy increasingly dependent upon tourism, he also commissioned, in 1975, an unprecedented analysis of the social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism on the Island. The study, performed by a Cambridge, Mass., consulting firm, was released this summer and unfortunately turned out to be a model of how not to answer the right questions. It bears looking at, however, to see how such studies can obscure basic questions and because the questions of tourism and the impacts of allowing a region's economy to depend on such outside support are important. The report asserts that the only significant impacts of tourism are positive and that the people of a region really have no options but to accept tourism and perhaps fiddle with signboard regulations to minimize its impact. Inevitably such a report becomes a major force in people's acquiescence to a fundamental change in their way of life that many of them intuitively and actively oppose, and the omissions of such a study need to be brought to light.

The economic impact of tourism on PEI is significant and seemingly positive. Tourists spend more than $23 million a year, and, subtracting the dollars that immediately go off the Island to pay for imported goods and services, they leave behind more than $20 million. This sounds great, and that's where the story is left in the report, other than examining which tourists leave the most money (therefore to be encouraged?) and which the least (friends and relatives—should they stay home?).

The story doesn't end there, however, as tourism has been depositing such amounts of money on the Island for a number of years and the environmental impact section of the study didn't mention any mountains of cash lying around disrupting the Island's ecology. In fact, the money does leave the Island again—in the expenditures of the Islanders for goods and services imported from elsewhere. And there basic questions appear, for the social and economic impacts would be very different if the Islanders provided goods and services for each other rather than providing tourist services for outsiders and then using that income for purchasing goods and services from outside.

In spite of its $20 million per year "input," tourism, when combined with off-Island purchases, may cause a net economic loss to the Island through establishing unfavorable trade arrangements with other areas. The economic impact of tourism is more than the money income it brings—it must include the unequal value of city money vs. country money, city prices and wages vs. country prices and wages, and energy slaves vs. people's work which occur in large-scale systems. The odds are that PEI, like most rural areas, doesn't come out ahead on such exchanges, which almost universally work to the benefit of the urban industrialized areas that control the economic systems.

In addition, the effects of tourism on the internal economy of the Island itself are not explored in the study. Who gets the money? What changes are there in the relative wealth of people on the Island? Who owns the tourist facilities? What effect does tourism have on in-migration? How many people come to PEI for summer jobs, taking money away; or stay, splitting the pie into smaller pieces? How much does the Island have to spend on tourist infrastructure—roads, sewers, power plants, motels and police—and is that the kind of surroundings the people of the Island want to have?

Whether we think about Prince Edward Island or America Island or Earth Island, the questions of who benefits and who pays are basic. The report implies that encouragement of tourist patterns that bring the greatest expenditures are best and should be encouraged. Yet the people of PEI take vacations, too, and for them the best vacation at least cost is as much a benefit as it is to the tourists coming to PEI. For society as a whole as well as for the people who pay, the less work, dollars, or energy necessary to satisfy our needs, the better. It would seem that a wise society would ask for a fair return for everyone's work rather than trying to milk each other for the highest possible prices. The absurdity of that approach is apparent in the strategies proposed for PEI to encourage "paying" visitors at the expense of friends and relatives which are of more than economic benefit to the Islanders.

The social impacts of tourism are equally neglected in the PEI study, which examines only surveys of residents' attitudes towards tourism—a process of relatively little use unless the residents have a real feel for what options and alternatives are available to them and what the costs and benefits of each might be. Believing that tourism "gives" them $20 million a year, frequently being personally dependent on tourism income and having little awareness of the indirect and delayed effects of a tourist economy upon their lives, few people can be expected to express what intuitive reservations they might have. Even well articulated attitudes towards tourism express only a small part of the social impacts of the industry. This is particularly true when tourism's significance lies as much in its being a disruptive economic wedge diverting people from a local, self-reliant social and economic pattern into one tied into urban and international operations as it does in the activities of the tourists themselves.

Omitting examination of social impacts implies that there are no significant social effects of different sources of people's livelihood. Yet, if people are dependent upon an institution for their income (as with tourism on PEI), can they fairly evaluate and regulate that institution? If people are largely self-reliant, either individually or as a community, do they develop a deeper and more rewarding understanding and relation with the ecological and cultural webs that support and nourish them? Do the trappings of wealth, such as television, fancy clothes and houses, and big cars create different social impacts than the leisure to enjoy other people, to have satisfying places to spend time, and to enjoy the dignity and self-confidence of forming one's life and surroundings that a slower, less materialistic way of life may offer? Is the additional effort necessary to obtain fair representation in the operation of large scale economic and social patterns greater than the benefits received?

To be of real value, a study of the impacts of tourism needs to explore and lay out meaningful options in addition to a thorough analysis of the impacts of tourism itself. Such options need to include the implications of alternative means of livelihood—small scale, self-reliant patterns of fulfilling the Island's own needs as well as options for livelihood other than tourism within larger economic patterns.

Options for modifying tourism in socially responsible ways need also to be examined. Making clear on what grounds and in what ways visitors will be accepted can strongly affect tourism patterns. Promotion of at-home vacations, local resorts and improvement of communities can reduce the need and desire to travel. Inns and guest houses can replace motels; franchise businesses can be banned on both economic and social grounds; "working" vacations, person-to-person visits, bans on non-resident cars, and dozens of other measures can be developed to allow tourism to operate at a scale and in ways that provide opportunity for visitors and Islanders to enjoy and benefit each other on a non-exploitive and non-dominating basis.

There needs to be a right as well as a necessity to maintain a society based on deep and loving relations between people and between people and land; based on the ability to relate to people according to what they contribute to your life rather than to your pocketbook; and based on chosen rather than imposed economic and social patterns. True accounting of the operation of such a society as opposed to that of an economic-exchange based society would probably show it to be less costly to operate as well as providing more satisfaction, well-being and happiness for all concerned. That kind of social accounting rather than superficial economic analysis is necessary to evaluate the fundamental changes that tourism brings to PEI or any other place.

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