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Serving Sustainable Island Tourism: Hot or Cold?

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Abstract

Not sun, sea, sand but ice, isolation, indigenous people: the critical exploration of extreme tourism in cold water locations has barely started. Yet, the practices of the industry and ensuing reflections already provide insights towards a more sustainable form of island tourism, dramatically different from what is experienced on the warm, tropical and exotic island stereotype.

This paper critically reviews some of the salient contrasts between the 'hot' and 'cold' versions of island tourism, concluding that, from a sustainability perspective, cold water islands are really 'cool' – but perhaps for reasons that can be copied by warm water destinations.

Experiences Apart

Even when experienced by the same person – as the two factual, auto-biographical narratives by the author of this paper above portray – the experiences of warm water and cold water tourism could not be further apart. In the all-too-common warm water environment, the setting is almost oppressive; the body lethargized; the obligation to play tourist and go through the expected motions is strong; the tourism industry dominant in society at large; space is at a premium; staged authenticity is rampant – evident in the cheap nature of most souvenirs, 'made in

China' – and the natives can only be obligingly happy. Hedonism – pleasure to the highest good – translates as wild, wanton, excess heat, noise, food and drink. Much activity takes place in or near the water.

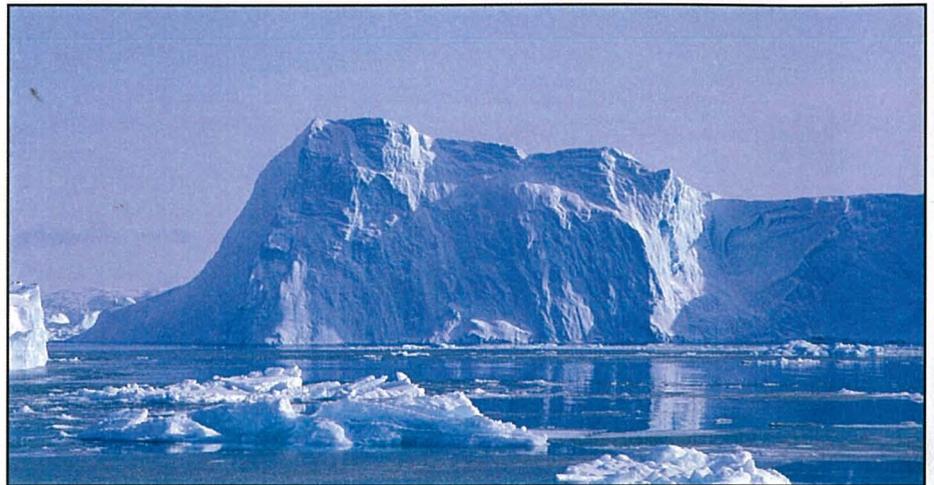
In sharp contrast, in the cold water environment, the water is not appealing, and its temperature may even be life-threatening; the beach may not be accessible, and whale bones rather than seashells may haunt its shore; the setting is however generally more liberating; the body is energized; the tourism industry and product are overshadowed by nature (always) and culture (where it exists). Pleasure is derived from being overwhelmed, respecting, and succumbing

to the environment. Wide open vistas are everywhere. Souvenirs are indigenous and expensive. And the natives are ... well, it may be difficult to assess their expression because they are covered in fur and warm clothing, or perhaps, they don't even exist.

Every island is unique. Every cold water island is unique as well. Yet, a comparative 'island studies' perspective alerts us to some underlying patterns lurking within the diversity of cold water islands: apart from the obvious pronouncement that the water is too cold to swim in. Cold water island locations tend to have harsh as well as pristine and fragile natural environments, characterized by wide open spaces; this makes them support low populations at best. They become contexts for an exceptional and expensive form of vigorous, outdoor, adventure or cultural tourism, and direct encounters with nature (observing penguins, bears or wild flowers; hunting wild game; visiting parks); history (whaling stations, abandoned mines, battle sites, research stations, explorer routes); and local culture (indigenous people, their lifestyle and artifacts): definitely not places to laze about and relax in hotel precincts. Indeed, there may not even be a hotel. The locals, where they exist, are not particularly enthusiastic about visitors; few of the locals owe their livelihoods to tourism anyway, and they are usually in agreement that visitor numbers must remain low – and especially so if the locals happen to be a bunch of scientists. Specific local interests - a company, a monastery, a corporation, apart from the scientific community – can have inordinate influences on local public policy, since there is a tighter, more compact and more identifiable resident elite. This acts as a brake towards the encou-

agement of more tourists, since there is no grassroots, democratic pressure to do so (Baldacchino, 2006b: 9-10). The anomaly in our set remains Iceland, since 1944 the world's coolest sovereign state: for a cold water island, it has by far the largest population, the highest tourism numbers and the strongest tourism infrastructure in the world – which, by the way, includes one small, heated beach.

Smith (1997) do somewhat better: three (opening) chapters address themes largely relevant to islands beyond the tropical 'pleasure periphery'. However, once the text goes into case study mode, only 3 out of 14 chapters are not sourced from warm climes: Butler (again) on Orkney & Shetland (Butler, 1997); Royle on the South Atlantic Islands, which includes the Falklands (Royle, 1997); and Aronsson on Swedish islands (Aronsson 1997).

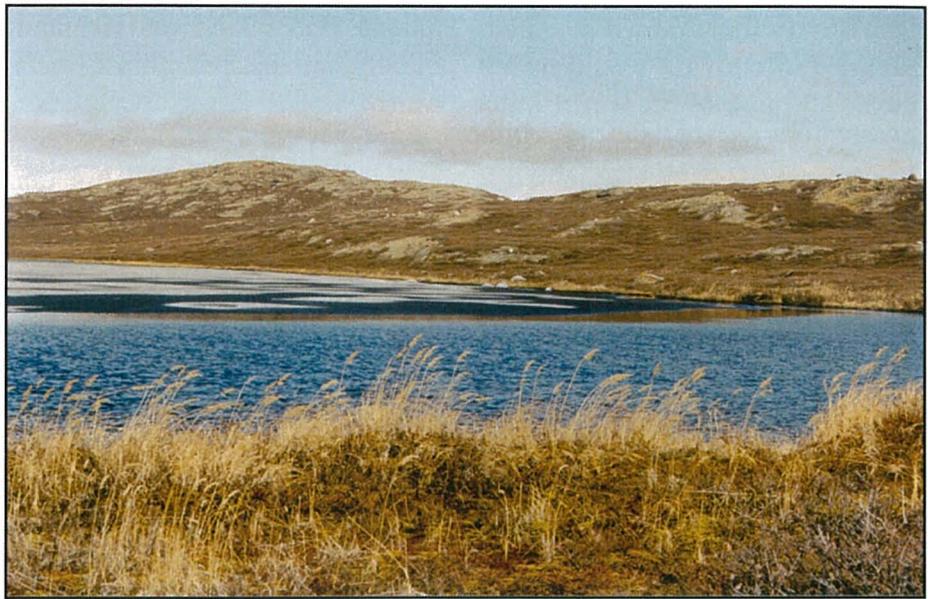


A Late Development

Cold water island destinations seem to have only been discovered of late. In Conlin & Baum (1995), a typical text on island tourism, only one out of the nine chapters dedicated to 'management practice' deals with a 'cold water' location (Corner Brook, in Newfoundland). Out of 93 different islands or island regions listed in its index, only five at most could be considered as 'cold water' ones (Antarctica, Falklands, Newfoundland, New Zealand & Prince Edward Island). Briguglio et al. (1996a, 1996b) are landmark volumes on island tourism issues, but only one out of 29 chapters deals with a cold water location – Butler's on the Shetlands (Butler, 1996). Lockhart & Drakakis-

Gradus & Lithwick (1996) and Krakover & Gradus (2002), in spite of promising titles that highlight frontier regions, do not discuss islands at all. Jan Lundgren (2001) does the same: his brief prologue - on tourism destination development in extreme locations - does not address islands. A paper and then a monograph on cold water tourism in the North Atlantic appeared in 1993 and 1998 respectively (Baum & Hagen, 1993; Hagen-Grant, 1998); and this was developed into a book chapter on 'cold water island tourism' a year later (Baum et al., 2000). Baldacchino (2006b) is probably the first volume to look critically at the phenomenon from a global standpoint. (There may be subtle advantages in this non-generic recognition, as we shall discuss below.)

This may appear strange, since the physical evidence is skewed in the other direction: the distribution of islands (land surrounded by water than is larger than 0.1 km² in area) according to latitude shows that most of them are located in the temperate zone of the northern hemisphere, with a high island density occurrence between latitude 50°N and 80°N, and a sharp peak within that band between 58°N and 66°N.



At those latitudes, there is the lowest ratio of ocean to land. The density of islands of about 30 per 10,000 km² is ten times higher there than anywhere else. Most of these islands are located along the coast of mainlands, creating a patchy landscape made of tiny islands separated by narrow channels.

Perhaps, one is excused for assuming that the typical island is located in the tropics, and is therefore warm, since it is precisely thanks to the marketing juggernaut of the tourism industry that such perceptions have become a common occurrence today. Moreover, if it is in the interest of states and governments to promote tourism to their island or archipelago, then we should also keep in mind that 42 out of the 43 sovereign states of the world are exclusively island or archipelagic states located in tropical or temperate zones (Baldacchino, 2006a; CIA, 2005); only one of the world's sovereign states is an exclusively cold water location – Iceland. In fact, as an indirect confirmation of the power of jurisdiction in promoting tourism, Iceland is the island that probably receives the largest number of cold water tourists per annum – some 320,000, plus 60,000 cruise ship visitors (Gössling, 2006).

Yet, compare this to annual tourists to other islands: 1 million to Guam; 1.2 million to Malta, 2.3 million to Cyprus, 3.2 million to Puerto Rico; 7 million to Macao ... and to the highest penetration indices of tourists per indigenous population and land area in the insular Caribbean (Aruba, Cayman, BVI, USVI, St Maarten) – McElroy, 2002; 2003).

The difference is clearly one of matched low tourist numbers (demand) and low tourism capacity (supply): The world's largest island with a sprawling land mass of over 2 million km², Greenland, receives just 30,000 tourists annually. This is not difficult to explain: most visitors come to cold water islands on small vessels or on small planes after long haul flights that deter all but the strong-willed and affluent. They may get off their vessels on zodiacs, braving the waves, cold winds, ocean spray and ice floes, and spend just a few hours on shore, under the watchful eye of scientists, expert guides or locals, just in case they wander away, do something foolish, or threaten to damage the fragile ecosystem. There may be no hotels, and visitors (for those staying more than a day) may have to stay with locals.

And, in the absence of demands by indigenous people for better tourism infrastructure – roads, docks, airports, runways, hotels, restaurants, etc. – an absence of demand often sealed by the absence of any indigenous people or permanent residents – access and facilities are not likely to improve markedly. Strong vested local interests – commercial, scientific, political or religious – can easily conspire to prevent any such suspicious trappings of modernity from materializing, a policy stance more easily maintained because the significance of tourism to the domestic economy is usually small.

The tourism 'footprint' is therefore much less significant on cold water islands, even though the potential damage which even that may cause to the environment is larger. However, the value added per tourist is greater, and the opportunity for this tourist to get really in touch with nature or indigenous people (where they exist) is also much higher, providing a different sense of satisfaction.

The clear contrast between a sample of cold water islands studied in Baldacchino (2006c) and tourist penetrated warm water islands is evident (See Table 1). None of the warm water islands sampled have more rooms per km²

than any of the cold water islands sampled (the lowest would be Samoa); all but 2 of the warm water islands sampled have more than 1,000 beds; whereas, amongst the cold water islands, only Iceland has more, and 8 have even less than 100 beds; only 2 warm water island destinations welcome less than 100,000 visitors per annum (Comoros & Samoa); only Iceland welcomes more than that number amongst the cold island cohort; all warm islands sampled have resident populations of 21,000 or more; only 2 of the cold water islands have such or larger popu-

lations (Greenland and Iceland). Finally, in sharp contrast, many warm water island destinations have fairly limited land areas, making for quite high population densities (the largest land area in our sample is the Cape Verde Islands); many cold water islands come with large land masses, and very low population densities: amongst the cold islands, only Macquarie and Solovetsky have a land area less than 1,700 km²; but 7 out of the 13 warm water candidates are that small; and actually much smaller. Finally, many warm water destinations are sovereign states; all cold

water destinations (excluding Iceland) are not. Thus, tourism infrastructure in warm locations has to live side by side with resident populations (except in such extreme situations as the Maldives which practise archipelagic zoning), who may resent the high tourist presence and yet would want to have a piece of the action, and would readily apply pressure on the accessible and transparent, 'soft state' (Hyden, 1983) to see to that; all the more so if in a pluralist democratic framework.

Table 1 – Cold and Warm Water Island Tourism – A Comparison

	population	land area (km ²)	tourists per annum	Rooms	Room/km ²	Vis/Pop
COLD WATER ISLANDS						
Nunivak (Alaska)	180	4,210	250	20*	0.005	1.39
Banks (Canada)	160	67,340	50	10	0	0.31
Baffin (Canada)	17,000	507,450	33,000	290	0	2
Greenland	57,000	410,000 (ice-free)	30,000	425	0.001	0.53
Iceland	297,000	103,000	836,000 (45K)	7,490	0.073	2.84
Svalbard (Norway)	2,600	62,000	27,200 cruise tourists	331	0.005	1.46
Lulea (Sweden)	80	10,000 approx.	1,000?	25*	0.003	12.5
Solovetsky (Russia)	1,000	290	30,000	60	0.207	30
Falklands (UK)	2,500	12,000	50,000	25	0.002	20
MacQuarie (Australia)	0	43	400?	0	0	0
Stewart (New Zealand)	400	1,746	60,000	250	0.143	150
Chatham (New Zealand)	700	2,500	500?	20	0.008	1.1
South Shetlands & Antarctica	0	40,000 approx	27,000	0	0	0
WARM WATER ISLANDS						
St. Maarten	38,000	41	475,000(1,348)	4,000	96	17.47
Cayman Islands	44,000	260	260,000(1,693)	5,127	20	11.3
Turks and Caicos	21,000	430	170,000	2,500	6	8.1
Malta	399,000	320	1,158,000(292)	19,885	62	3
Antigua	69,000	440	245,000(523)	3,185	7.2	4.61
Maldives	349,000	300	617,000(4)	8,747	29	1.8
Seychelles	81,000	455	121,000(7)	2,477	5.4	1.51
Polynesia	271,000	3,660	212,000	3,326	0.91	0.78
Samoa	177,000	2,850	98,000	950	0.33	0.55
Cape Verde	418,000	4,030	157,000	3,150	0.78	0.38
Reunion	777,000	2,500	430,000	2,904	1.16	0.55
Comoros	671,000	2,170	18,000	375	5.8	0.03

Tourism Data for 2004

*Author's estimate

Rooms = beds/2 or # of guesthouses X 10

Vis/Pop figured as # tourists + 0.14 X # Day visitors/population

Numbers in parenthesis denote one-day visitors

The table has been kindly compiled by Dr Jerome L. McElroy.

The difference in numbers and capacity is, in turn, the effect of a 'double-punch' of cost and distance. Difficulty of access and limited tourism infrastructure means that only small scale vessels or planes can make land. Absence of economies of scale maintains prices in the stratosphere, and often means that the trip to the cold water location is a long one. For cold water travellers, the trip is often experienced as an integral part of the journey, and not just a necessary distraction – and especially so if it is on a boat, rather than a plane.

Tourism in warm water islands also started from a very narrow base; but the industry in most cases just grew and grew, mainly because many of the locals perceived that there were benefits to be enjoyed by plugging into the industry – whether for secure all-round employment, seasonal part-time work or self-employment – while governments encouraged the development of tourism infrastructure, often seeking to lure foreign investment and identifiable brands. Today, the insular Caribbean, the most tourism branded and penetrated region in the world, now has most of its shorefront controlled or owned by hospitality interests or expatriates. The pressure on public infrastructure (roads, electricity, sewage, water, parking) is immense; the associated environmental issues (air, sea and noise pollution) just as challenging. The leakages from the domestic economy – via foreign air lines, foreign travel agents, foreign hotel chains, imported cars, food, furniture and gas - considerable. The price of property has reached dizzy heights, ushering in a process of 'gentrification' (Clark, 2005) that may crowd out the locals from the housing market, starting – but not stopping - with the poorest.

To such problems of non-sustainability, can be added other disadvantages: the transformation of resorts into sanitized and secure enclaves; the (often racist) stereotyping of locals as happy, pleasure-seeking, lazy and inferior catering to the leisure requirements of the visitors; a locals resentment that would be fuelled by the parading of foreign affluence and indigenous poverty (Dann, 2006: 27). Tensions are high and can erupt in conflict (Cambers et al., 2002).

Except for the undesirable onslaught of global warming, tourism in cold water islands is not likely to experience the same spurt of growth. Temperature, and difficulty and cost of access, will keep the numbers down – and that is where the local authorities wish to keep them. Fortunately, at their early position in the resort life-cycle, they have ample time and room to plan a sustainable industry

The cold water cases at hand

Cold water islands, from both northern and southern hemispheres, differ widely in size, population, tourism penetration or tourism capacity (see Table 1). They range from Greenland, the largest island in the world (population 55,000, over 410,000km² of ice-free land), and Iceland (population 300,000, 103,000 km²); to tiny Macquarie Island in Australia (population = zero; 34 km²), Banks Island in the Canadian Arctic (population 153; 67,340km²), and the 742-island Luleå Archipelago in Sweden (population 80). They also exhibit a variety of distinct traditions including, among others, the Inuit culture in Baffin Island, Canada, Viking history across the North Atlantic Islands, and the

Maori muttonbird harvesting in Stewart Island, New Zealand. Most are recently emerging as international destinations. Some have no airports. Few have cruise liner terminals. Visitor numbers are as less than 500 a year on Macquarie Island and Nunivak Island; there are only 50 hotel rooms in the Falklands and two hotels on Chatham Island; and there is absolutely no dedicated tourism infrastructure in Antarctica. Other destinations do better: Baffin (Nunavut), Greenland, Stewart, Svalbard and Solovetsky attract some 30-60 thousand annual stay-over or cruise visitors each.

In spite of these differences, these cases possess a range of similarities. Their assets include isolation (ironically), unusual terrestrial and marine wildlife and scenery, unique geologic and atmospheric features and ample opportunity for adventure holidays (such as hunting, fishing, dog-sledging) and cultural experiences – all of which are inherent to the place. They appeal for active leisure, as well as to rather mature tourist types. They illustrate the constraints on tourism development imposed by climate-induced seasonality and difficult and expensive access. They each have a distinct, differentiated product – not easily subsumed under a generic label, and therefore not operating in direct competition with other cold water locations (as many warm water islands find out about themselves, to their cost). (This recognition perhaps explained why they have not been seen as 'cold water islands', in a collective sense.) They also represent (with the exception of Iceland and Antarctica) small-island economies undergoing tourism diversification in the face of declining traditional sectors (mining, fishing, agriculture). Many face

the similar challenges of determining destination identity, the small-scale ecotourism attractions compatible with that native natural and cultural “genius of the place,” and establishing the infrastructure and facilities to access them. Unlike Iceland (which may, in coming decades, need to begin seriously managing visitor densities), these destinations are in the initial stages of visitor marketing and promotion to establish international visibility (McElroy & Potter, 2006; Butler, 2006).

Political Geography Insights

One interesting set of similarities relates to the political geography of the tourism industry in these cold water islands. This factor might partly explain why there are less pressures to expand tourism on these locations.

Extreme island regions tend to lie on the political periphery, especially when they have small populations: un/under-represented in the corridors of power; largely forgotten by centralized policy makers suffering from ‘the urban bias’; dismissed as insignificant backwaters other than, perhaps, in strategic (military and resource) terms (Butler, 1993; Wilkinson, 1994). A weak local political influence and interest from the centre does, in turn suggest that local elites assume significant politico-economic power. These elites also tend to be narrower and more concentrated in island jurisdictions with small populations. The concentration of local politico-economic power is more likely to lie in the hands of a small identifiable group: a religious congregation (Solovetsky), a team of scientists (Macquarie);

an indigenously controlled corporation (Nunivak; Baffin); an arms-length enterprise trust (Chatham); or a municipality (Luleå). Antarctica has its own, unique, multi-lateral governance regime, which transcends national territorial sovereignty. Such skewed influence creates a situation where there is hardly a plurality of interest groups clamouring to benefit, and benefit fast, from the tourism bandwagon. The oligopolies in power are champions of tradition; they effuse caution and harbour a suspicion of change. They are aware of the environmental and economic risks of mass tourism. There is limited discussion on whether to take the industry forward. The situation may be different where you have at least two centres of power with divergent views about the future of tourism: this is the case of Svalbard, where the local entrepreneurs wish to expand tourism, but the Governor is less keen. However, Svalbard – along with Iceland, of course - appears to be the exceptions in the cold cases analyzed.

Solovetsky Archipelago (Russia)
Solovetsky Monastery



Discussion

A few warm-water island tourism destinations, like the Seychelles, have developed their tourism strategies in a top-down fashion, and during a period of mostly one-party rule. This island state, (along with a few other islands – like St Barths in the Caribbean) have transformed what might at first glance appear to be awesome physical obstacles (remoteness and archipelagicity in the case of the Seychelles; a small airport runway in the case of St Barths) into assets which help to filter and control access, increasing the distinctiveness – and price - of the tourism experience. Infrastructure and logistics conspire to maintain a few warm water islands in a niche of envious exclusivity. This creates possibilities for sustainable, low volume, but high value added per capita tourism, with less strain on infrastructure and resource needs. The product is also differentiated from the more competitive mass warm water tourism market, where individual island attributes tend to be glossed over, and where price is the all important determiner of demand and supply.

Cold water islands inadvertently play a similar game – not so much as the outcome of a deliberate strategy, but because of the ‘double-punch’ of cost and distance, maintained and safeguarded by wary local political elites. In spite of the democratic deficit that may prevail in such locations, perhaps it is necessary to be cruel in order to be kind?

Sound, strategic, long-term local management (albeit perhaps authoritarian) can conspire with climate and relative inaccessibility to limit tourism to small scale, low-impact but high and locally retained value added, dispersed and more genuinely sustainable development (e.g. Butler 1997: 78). This is well captured in the following statement, uttered by none other than Archimandrite Josef, Solovetsky Monastery representative. It leaves no room for any discussion:

“Overgrowth of tourism flows and preservation of divine spirit of the island are incompatible. Nobody even thinks of converting Solovetsky into a trendy resort where the White Sea shore is full of restaurants and ... the sky above the Monastery’s towers is crossed by para-gliders” (International symposium, Solovetsky: Future Insights, 2003; quoted in Nevmerzhtskaya, 2006: 162).

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