What is Tourism? Definition of the World Tourism Organization of the United Nations

To understand how we propose to measure tourism impacts in the Arctic, it’s useful to first understand more broadly how tourism is defined and measured. Here we use definitions of the World Tourism Organization.

- **Tourism** is defined as activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business, or other purposes.
- **Tourism** is usually referred to as an “industry,” but we can’t measure tourism the way we do other industries. Industries are typically defined as groups of businesses producing some specific goods or services—that is, they are measured in supply-side terms.
- **Tourism isn’t measured by the production of goods or services but by the activities of those who consume the goods or services—so tourism is measured in demand-side terms.**
- **Whether an activity is considered “tourism” depends on who the consumer is.** For example, if residents buy beverages at their local stores, these transactions are clearly not tourism. But if visitors buy beverages in the same stores, the transactions are “tourism.”
- The definition of “tourism expenditure” is therefore linked to tourism consumption. The World Tourism Organization’s definition is “the total consumption expenditure made by visitors or on behalf of visitors for and during their trips and stays at destinations.”
- **Domestic tourism (tourism by people traveling within their own countries) often has the important effect of transferring income from more affluent to less affluent areas of a country.**
- **International tourism and visitor expenditures are viewed from the perspective of the destination country for inbound visitors and from the perspective of the origin country for outbound visitors.** These expenditures are included in balance of payments for international trade accounting, under international standards that allow comparisons across countries.

The above definitions sound simple, but measuring tourism is difficult.

Measuring Tourism: How Well Are We Doing?

A major science goal of SEARCH is understanding how climate change interacts with other forces for change and with human responses and the overall well-being of Arctic residents. A major goal of AON is measuring changes in tourism impacts over time and space.

We developed 12 tourism indicators to use as potential measures to track changes in tourism across the Arctic. Comparable data are not available for even one of these measures at the national or regional level, nor is there annual data across all the jurisdictions. Data on total numbers of visitors exist for Alaska and part of the Canadian Arctic. All the Scandinavian countries track monthly accommodation nights—a better measure of tourism activity. But neither of these measures is sufficiently refined to enable tracking of the well-being of Arctic residents in response to climate change and resulting changes in tourism.

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Main Science Questions

The goal of the Study of Environmental Arctic Change (SEARCH) project is “to understand the nature, extent, and future development of the system-scale changes presently observed in the Arctic,” according to the SEARCH Plans for Implementation (2005v4). The overarching SEARCH science question is this: “Is the Arctic system moving to a new state?” That in turn leads to six other science questions, one of which is: “How do cultural and socioeconomic systems interact with environmental change? Both of these questions drive the science in this project.

Measuring Tourism Impacts in Arctic Communities

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Conclusion

There are no comprehensive data or databases on regional or place levels that can link tourism activity to measures of well-being for specific populations. Data are not collected in a consistent manner to allow comparisons across jurisdictions. In addition, we have no baseline data for many of the locations that are most vulnerable to impacts of tourism from climate change. This is a large data gap in the human observation system.

Recommendation

Conduct international case studies in collaboration with participating communities. Foster development of this approach as part of a community-based observation network that can be sustained over time. This is especially important given the retreat of Arctic ice and increase in tourism to little-before-visited locations.

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