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Sustainable Tourism in the Anthropocene: The Case for Ugly Tourism

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Abstract:
    In 2016, it was recommended by the International Geological Congress that we declare Earth is now in a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene. The period started in 1950. The exact start is moot, but the acknowledgement that human activities have a profound impact on Earth is of little doubt in the scientific community.
    The Anthropocene characterizes a geological trajectory of Earth defined largely by human activities. The acceleration of greenhouse gas emissions, rising sea levels, global mass extinction of species, wanton deforestation, and aggressive urbanization come about from our social, political, economic, and cultural practices. The prevalent vision of human development, growth, and prosperity have shaped our planet. Tourism is one of those human activities. This proposed presentation is a first step for me to present initial ideas on Anthropocene and Ugly Tourism, or hard-truth tourism. The increasing interest in sustainable tourism is an indirect recognition that tourism is contributing to climate change. This presentation will highlight a number of paradoxes and contradictions in sustainable tourism practices. It will also present the case for Ugly Tourism.
    What is Ugly Tourism? Selected places and stories are often stylized and aestheticized for tourism consumption. Many places with dark histories are presented in creative and palatable forms, for instance. There are many places that tell unpleasant stories that have not been spruced up—such as urban slums, deforested areas, abandoned mines, and polluted skies—and tourists encounter them. These are not considered tourist attractions. These places may attract curiosity, comments, anger, disgust, and ambivalence. Ugly Tourism refers to the often inadvertent encounter of these unpleasant sites.
    There are at least three elements in the definition of Ugly Tourism. One, it refers to "non-places" that tourists inadvertently encounter. Two, these places tell unpleasant stories and realities about the human situation, and these places may not look offensive to some people. Three, these realities remain relevant to modern society.
    For instance, a derelict mining town like Tallah in Tasmania is not considered a tourist attraction. Many tourists drive past Tallah on their way to the beautiful Cradle Mountain attraction or the surrounding nature spots. But the town holds stories of past glories and current hardships of the dwindling community. Just as importantly, despite its downtown, the extractive industries remain active, relevant, and central to our consumerist society and to economic prosperity today. Many environmentally oriented tourists passing through will look at Tallah with indifference or even with disdain. But these same tourists may carry gadgets such as smart phones that are dependent on the extractive industries.
    This project wants to address the fleeting encounters tourists have with these ugly non-places. It will accentuate the myriad of contradictory stories of the human situation and tourism practices. The project will also advocate Ugly Tourism as a form of sustainable tourism practice, with the intention of converting tourists' senses of disgust and possibly guilt into constructive activism during their travels.