Introduction to Tourism: Themes, Concepts and Issues

Introduction

• “Tourism and travel have been part of the human experience for millennia” – Smith

• In the last 30 years, most certainly with the rise of the jet aircraft, tourism has grown significantly and emerged as a global phenomenon.

• The late 20th century and the new millennium have witnessed the sustained growth of the leisure society in which people place value on holidays, travel and the experience of visiting new places and societies.

• The growth of this consumer focused society in the developed world since 1950, with its emphasis on discretionary spending on leisure activities, reflects greater disposable income and the increased availability from time to time to engage in leisure pursuits and holidays.

• Although the leisure society has its roots in the Western developed world, trends that emerged in the 1990’s indicated and expansion in the global propensity to travel and engage in holidays.

• As a result of major economic, political, social and cultural changes, demand is escalating in countries formerly not engaged in international tourism activities such as post-communist countries and in new world regions such as Asia, China and the Indian subcontinent.

Tourism: A Global Activity

• The development of tourism throughout the world is a function of complex factors that coalesce to generate dynamic processes that one must understand in a local context while recognising the national and international factors affecting change.

• Governments are recognising the importance of tourism, in particular to national economies, but they are also recognising the problems arising from tourism activity as a route to national economic development.

• Many analysts at the World Travel and Tourism Council argue that tourism is the world’s largest industry.

• The Tourism Satellite Account was developed to provide more reliable and comparable data generated by individual nations, as it has been easy for governments to underestimate the real value tourism has in different countries.

• There is growing evidence that tourism is a volatile economic activity that can be subject to shockwaves.
• Certain events rapidly change the economic fortunes of the tourism industry in specific countries and heightened public consciousness about global travel and the associated risks.

• Consumer confidence can be damaged by media reporting, resulting in changes in consumer behaviour, propensity to travel and choice of destinations.

Tourism as an Area of Study

• Some of the principal problems are:
  
  o Recognition – tourism is not easily recognised as a subject because some analysts view it as an industry while others view it as a subject or as a process. Consequently there is no universal agreement on how to approach it.

  o Conceptualisation – academics argue that tourism is a subject that is conceptually weak which means that there are no universally agreed set of laws or principles that all researchers adopt as the starting point for the discussion of tourism. To add to the difficulties, tourism is a multidisciplinary subject and different disciplines examine tourism from their own standpoints rather than from a universally agreed tourism perspective. In this respect, the different subject areas that inform tourism use concepts and modes of analysis that have been developed in their own disciplines, this means that as a multidisciplinary subject area, tourism is not integrated between the different disciplines studying it and this severely limits the intellectual development of the area as there is no cross fertilisation of ideas across disciplines.

  o Terminology – there is a wide range of jargon used that refers to facets of the same issue which is perplexing because of the semantic complexity, the lack of universally agreed definitions of phenomena being studied.

  o Data Sources – the data sources available to tourism researchers are weak compared with those available for other subjects.

  o Reductionism – the different approaches used by researchers from different disciplines and industry backgrounds have led to reductionism. This means that tourism is reduced to a series of activities or economic transactions and is not seen in terms of a wider series of concepts and overarching analytical frameworks that would help in the understanding and interpretation of tourism.

  o Rigour – in academic environments there is still suspicion about the intellectual rigour with which tourism researchers approach their subject. This is made more difficult by the tendency for non-specialists to dabble in this area of research, which is perceived by some as easy to understand and associated with fun aspects.