

## Tourism and Digital Dystopias this World Tourism Day



World Tourism Day arrives annually on September 27<sup>th</sup>. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) seizes the moment to tout tourism as the solution to poverty, the pathway to development and the tool to empower communities. This flies in the face of the evidence from the grassroots that we of the Tourism Alert and Action Forum see every day.

This year's World Tourism Day (WTD) theme is "Tourism and the Digital Transformation". The UNWTO proclaims:

*We know that a digitally advanced tourism sector can improve entrepreneurship, inclusion, local community empowerment and efficient resource management, amongst other important development objectives. This year's WTD will help us to further explore the opportunities provided to tourism by technological advances including big data, artificial intelligence and digital platforms (<http://wtd.unwto.org/content/world-tourism-day-2018>).*

Invoking the public relations terms long favoured by tourism proponents including "sustainable", "responsible" and "inclusive", the UNWTO joins the bandwagon praising the arrival of digital technologies in tourism :

*World Tourism Day 2018 is a unique opportunity to raise awareness on the potential contribution of digital technologies to sustainable tourism development, while providing a platform for investment, partnerships and collaboration towards a more responsible and inclusive tourism sector.*

This statement is laughable when this WTD would be better invoked with the word on everyone's lips, "overtourism". The digital technologies the UNWTO advocates are in part the cause of the overtourism onslaught. For instance, the digital disruptions of Airbnb and Uber are decimating neighbourhoods, making workers precarious and shirking corporate regulations. The social media apps of Instagram and Facebook are increasing the almost pathological narcissism of tourists. A case in point is found in Goa, India, which has taken the step of implementing 24 "no-self zones" on its coastline as a response to deaths and casualties of selfie-taking tourists. Destinations are no longer seen as vibrant places with living and struggling communities but instead as photogenic locations holding iconic sites attractive solely for their Instagram capture-ability.

A philosophical point to address is exactly what do the UNWTO's WTD public relations crew mean by "sustainable tourism development"? The term sustainable is problematic and has been abused for years as a cover for the irresponsibility and unsustainability of tourism. Almost universally, tourism practices have been geared to growth and it is clear that ceaseless growth on a finite planet is not possible. These words could be more accurately rearranged as ceaseless development to sustain tourism.

Tourism authorities also remain uncritical of these new technologies. When the global community has been scandalised on learning that Facebook has abused users' privacy and we learn how mass surveillance can be used for both harm and exploitation, an uncritical advocacy of these technologies is reckless if not feckless. Now the World Economic Forum brings us the "Known Traveller Digital Identity" using blockchain technology to make the world wide open for the business traveller, the global elite and holidaymaker. Meanwhile countries we identify as reviving white supremacy across whole continents, such as the USA, Australia and Hungary, are issuing travel bans, border walls and other forms of exclusion all of which are aided and improved by these digital technologies. This WTD

supports the mobility of some and the exclusion of countless others. Without any sense of shame, Hungary is the host of this WTD 2018. It is telling that a nation leading the lurch to the right is selected as the public face of the global tourism industry while its government blocks refugees and asylum seekers seeking refuge in Europe and bans organizations committed to helping them in their humanitarian needs.

From our experience, we see technology differently. Our communities face imposed and exploitative forms of tourism backed by bulldozers, police weapons, imposed aerotropolis, mass surveillance for dissenters and barbed wire. Technology also enables widespread sexualisation and exploitation of women and children, enabling forms of sex tourism connected to paedophilia and sexual slavery that rips apart the social fabric of our societies. We do not accept the image of friendly and empowering digital technologies that this WTD is trying to market.

We witness:

Tourism is only sustainable when the local communities are self-determining in tourism and they must be recognized as non-excludable rights-holders by the tourism sector. If the local community allows tourism, tourism must benefit them and improve their lifeways. Ecological destruction, enabled by advancing technologies, is not sustainable. The advancing movement for the rights of nature indicates nature also has rights that must be respected.

The Technologies advocated currently stand to kill jobs in the tourism and hospitality sectors and few are advocating plans to systematically and meaningfully address these facts. One of the key features of tourism and hospitality as industries is the human engagement of the tourism encounter. A pillar of sustainable tourism futures is dignified work, fairly remunerated and with full conditions. Living wages and a universal basic income then are essential to fair and sustainable futures. Sustainable tourism can only be founded on fair and just tourism workplaces.

Tourism is a human endeavour. Current technologies wielded by profit-seeking capitalists are tools of relentless dehumanisation. It is blatantly false that social media is socially responsible, that digital disruption is liberating and that the gig economy empowers people in the current context.

Technological fixes are promoted so that the industry does not have to address its structural injustices. Tourism, wielded by capitalists in search of profits exploits people and places, is structurally unjust. The digital revolution being touted this WTD only stands to exacerbate these injustices.

We challenge the UNWTO and other leaders to undertake critical engagement with the future of human communities faced with mounting challenges. Technologies offer us no solutions in a situation of structural injustices.

Finally, we declare our intentions to seize these technologies for freedom and justice. We will use social media to campaign and digital cameras to record the events at our protests and actions. Through these, we will tell the truths that the tourism industry seeks to distract the world from. We will video their bulldozers. We will link up and build solidarity. The future dystopia the tourism corporates are heralding will meet with our determined resistance.

Signed members of the Tourism Alert and Action Forum

For more information see: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TourismAlertAndActionForum/>