



How to Report on the Impact of the Tourism Industry in Local Communities

by Luis Joel Méndez González

Overview

The tourism industry — which encompasses everything from high-end resorts to cruise ships and short-term rentals — is more than flying or traveling to other places around the world to explore new cultures, landscapes, or traditional dishes. It is also associated with the degradation of natural resources, increased air and water pollution, damage to ecosystems, the loss of sociocultural values, and strain on basic infrastructure services, according to a study published in [Environmental Science and Pollution Research](#). We cannot report on the tourism industry without also examining the strain on basic infrastructure, gentrification, and, of course, its connection to the ongoing climate crisis.

Economic and Social Impact

A report conducted by the [World Economic Forum](#) pointed out that the travel and tourism sector is projected to account for about 30 billion tourist visits and contribute \$16 trillion to global GDP by 2034 — more than 11% of the world's economy. However, it also poses several challenges, especially for local communities:

- Risk of global economic disruptions caused by catastrophes, crises, and pandemics
- Increased friction between visitors and residents
- Growing pressure on nature
- Labour and skills crisis
- Local capacity-building
- Infrastructure and investment requirements
- Cultural and heritage dynamics

Worldwide, [academics](#) have also mentioned the correlation between tourism and gentrification, especially in regions such as the Caribbean.

The Impact of Travel

Journalists must be aware that every human action has a consequence on the environment and climate, regardless of the part of the world. Tourism is no exception. It often results in an increase in congestion and overcrowding caused by the large number of cars, trucks, trains, airplanes, cruise ships, and boats used to transport tourists from one place to another. This increases emissions, (see [report](#)) producing air pollution and contributing to global warming. [Emissions](#) from tourism grew by 3.5% per year between 2009 and 2019 — more than twice the rate of global emissions overall. By 2019, the sector accounted for 8.8% of total global emissions. [Highly developed countries](#) with large populations contributed 75% of the tourism-related emissions. However, the United States of America, China, and India are in the lead with 39%.

Additionally, the construction of tourist facilities such as hotels, resorts, piers, and airports can accelerate coastal erosion and destroy natural barriers like mangroves, coral reefs, and sand dunes.

But maritime or ocean-related tourism and coastal tourism are [vital sectors of the economy in small island developing states and coastal least developed countries](#). And yet, tourism can in fact make these areas even more vulnerable to climate change. Island nations such as the Maldives, Tuvalu, and the Seychelles, which depend heavily on tourism for their economies, [face the risk of ending up submerged due to sea level rise](#). The Bahamas, [vital for the cruise ship industry](#), is at risk of losing 32% of its land because of climate change.

Key Questions

For journalists interested in reporting on the environmental impacts of the tourism industry, there is a set of key questions they should ask:

- Will the scope of my reporting be national, regional, or international?
- What are the key economic sectors of the tourism industry in the country or countries I will be reporting on?
- Which communities are nearby?
- What environmental impacts have been linked to that economic activity?
- Have residents already reported these impacts in their communities?

Finding Answers

Finding the answers to the following questions is extremely important in order to green-light the formal reporting process:

- Identifying those involved in the story –
 - Residents (taxi drivers, tour guides, art curators, chefs, vendors)
 - Government Agencies
 - Private Sector Actors (business owners, developers, investors)
 - Scientists and other academic experts
- Find data already available –
 - Research (academic, third-sector investigations)
 - Reports (federal, state government reports)
 - Statistics (government agencies, think-tanks, non-profit organizations, private business)
- Look for communities that are directly impacted –
 - Maps (Google Maps, OpenStreets, U.S. Census)
 - Complaints (Social media, police stations)

Story Angles

[**Mangroves at risk as El Salvador begins work on new airport**](#)

By Maxwell Radwin | Mongabay

El Salvador has begun building the Airport of the Pacific near La Unión to spur economic growth and create thousands of jobs, but the project has sparked concern among environmentalists. The site overlaps with vital mangrove ecosystems that protect coastlines and provide freshwater, and experts warn that clearing even small areas could cause long-term ecological harm. While the government promises mitigation measures such as reforestation and pollution controls, critics doubt they will be effectively enforced.

[**Ivory Coast tourist haven battles coastal erosion and rogue waves**](#)

By Loucoumane Coulibaly and Media Coulibaly | Reuters

In Assinie, a resort town in southeast Ivory Coast, hotel owners are struggling with severe coastal erosion and powerful rogue waves that have destroyed parts of the shoreline. Beaches are disappearing at rates of 0.5 to 3

meters per year, forcing businesses to spend heavily on sandbags and temporary barriers. Authorities warn that these events are becoming more frequent and urge stronger government action to protect coastal areas.

[Governor's Order to Remove Structures in the Maritime Terrestrial Zone Is Ignored](#)

By Luis Joel Méndez González | Centro de Periodismo Investigativo

In Arecibo, Puerto Rico, a governor's order to remove illegal structures in the maritime-terrestrial zone has largely been ignored, with some property owners continuing construction without approval. Despite complaints about blocked beach access, environmental damage, and unregulated short-term rentals, authorities have taken no action. The situation highlights weak enforcement of coastal laws and ongoing harm to public land. Local residents continue to push for accountability and proper regulation.

On the ground reporting

As in any other beat, it is important to be aware of certain realities that shape this topic. While the environmental, social, and economic harms of the tourism industry are real, it enjoys a positive perception among the general public, and it is vital to understand how to approach communities:

- For some people, the tourism industry creates jobs and stimulates the economy, despite the fact that these jobs are not always well-paid and the economic benefits do not always remain within the local community. Ask them about the pros and cons of this industry from their perspective.
- People often argue that hotels, resorts, and other tourist infrastructure are developed with significant government economic incentives. Ask where those funds should be allocated instead to improve locals' quality of life.
- Hotel and resort developers often spend large amounts on greenwashing, promoting environmental commitments that are not genuine. Ask communities near these tourist facilities whether their natural resources have been degraded and how this has affected them.
- If, during the reporting process, sources are reluctant to speak on the record, consider proposing a written interview instead of a recorded one. This approach often makes people feel more comfortable. Always have your notebook with you and be ready to write everything down.
- If the interview will not be conducted in your first language, it's helpful to write down your questions so you don't appear unorganized. Please remember: you are enough and it's okay not to be perfect!
- Remember, the most important part of field reporting is to write down everything: what you see, what you hear, what you feel, and what you smell. That will enrich your story.

