
Scott MeisCanadian Tourism Commission (CTC)

The Right to Travel v. Barriers to Travel

Once in a while it is helpful to take a step back, gain some perspective, and glimpse some of the longer term, deeper trends which are affecting our work.

These days we can see that there are two currents affecting the tourism industry, each of them going in different directions. One is heading towards the goal of free access to services and free movement of people, everywhere and all the time. The other is concerned with issues that slow travel down or impede it. The right to travel v. barriers to travel.

Most commentators agree that over the past 50 years tourism has been a success story. Relatively few barriers have stood in the way of tourism growth, especially domestically. This was as it should be – after all travel is identified as a human right, with the same status as free speech, by the United Nations (UN). Europeans have had the experience of seeing tourism grow after they removed border controls and passport requirements on much of that continent.

In Canada we have a lot of geography, we have lived through a half century of economic growth and relative political stability at home, and we experience a noticeable lack of hostility to us outside our country. Also, with the U.S. we have the longest undefended border in the world, and many of us cross that border as visitors. We have become used to ever-expanding horizons, and we witnessed long-term growth in our industry.

Then we were hit with the double whammy of 911 and SARS. During this decade issues of protectionism, security and health made it legitimate to erect barriers to travel. Especially in North America. At the Canadian Tourism Commission we have recently been working on a series of studies on the proposed new U.S. passport regulations which, if enacted, would represent a major new barrier to travel on this continent.

Governments have always played a role in the economy. They help the tourism sector in many ways, including by building safe roads and laying reliable telephone networks. They develop and operate some attractions such as casinos, and services such as parks and campgrounds. They also subsidize many of our festivals and events, such as the Formula One car race.

As we know, in some jurisdictions governments are less supportive of tourism. In developing countries there is a concern that their tourism industry will be dominated by foreign service providers, leaving local residents none the richer. Anyone looking at the case of Greece, where even after several decades of strong tourism activity the government still has trouble scraping together the money to build safe roads, would agree that developing countries may have a point.

And so some countries maintain restrictions on travel, such as exit taxes, restrictions on expenditures abroad, and visa requirements. China is a good example of a country that restricts

movement of its citizens through visa requirements. Reducing as many restrictions to travel as possible and getting governments to concentrate on supporting the tourism industry is the focus of the latest round of negotiations going on at the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO is aiming for a General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) to achieve this. While the goal of the GATS is free trade, free movement of people inevitably follows as a concern.

One of the research challenges in all this is to realize what is happening, and spell out what the implications are for the tourism sector. We need to get specific and identify what the costs are of these barriers to travel. And we need to remind everyone and provide specific numbers on just how profitable the tourism sector can be when it is supported and grows.

Another research challenge lies in identifying what industries are included in the definition of tourism. Since the tourism phenomenon cuts across several industries, which are perceived differently in different jurisdictions, we will have to establish standards in this critical area of definition. Should we follow the rigorous guidelines available in the Tourism Satellite Accounts, which are being adopted by more governments around the world? What about industries which have an effect on tourism, but are not presently included as tourism industries, such as construction, or airport infrastructure and services?

We don't believe in crystal balls in research. It is more a case of looking at the past and glimpsing the big currents that will likely be affecting our work in the near future. The right to travel versus barriers to travel are a couple big currents.