Green Tourism and the Ambiguities of Sustainability Discourse: The Case of New Orleans’s Lower Ninth Ward

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a case study of the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood in New Orleans to examine the relationships between green tourism and sustainability discourse in shaping the post-Katrina rebuilding process. Specially, we draw on long-term ethnographic field observations to highlight the tensions between abstract and idealized conceptions of sustainability and the complicated realities of uneven rebuilding and neighborhood disinvestment. We focus on changes in the tourism sector since Hurricane Katrina, the promotion of green tourism through actor Brad Pitt’s Make It Right (MIR) Foundation, and the ambiguities and paradoxes of sustainability discourse. Overall, our goal is to develop a critical understanding of niche tourism in a disaster-devastated neighborhood and highlight the ways in which unspoken norms about sustainability create political-economic blind-spots to the ways in which socio-spatial inequalities, disinvestment, and entrenched social problems structure life in the city and the Lower Ninth Ward.

Keywords: Green Tourism, Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans, Niche Tourism, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade or so, much research has focused on the increasing differentiation and specialization of tourism practices and activities into particular segments or niches. “Niche tourism” is a practice of splitting, fragmenting, and differentiating cultural forms, places, and groups into ever smaller slices in order to tap into and exploit consumer desires and preferences for profit and economic gain (for an overview, see Novelli, 2012). What distinguishes “mass tourism” from “niche tourism” is that the profitability for the former rests on economies of scale and exploitation of mass, relatively homogeneous markets. Profitability
and competitiveness in niche tourism in contrast depends on economies of scope and market segmentation (for overviews see Urry, 2002; Meethan, 2001). Examples of niche tourism include cultural tourism, heritage tourism, romance tourism, dark tourism, sports tourism, sex tourism, ethnic tourism, eco- or green tourism, and so on (Rojek, 1993; Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Stone, 2006; Miles, 2002; Wood, 1998; Sheller, 2003; Ryan & Hall, 2001; Picard, 1997; Gotham, 2007; Wearing & Neill, 2009; Murphy & Price, 2012). Overall, the growth of niche tourism represents conscious attempts by governments and elites to revitalize the local tax base, attract visitors to spend money, and enhance livability through the construction and promotion of urban or cultural niches where the tourism product relates to a particular symbol, topic, theme, or interest group (Hoffman, Fainstein, & Judd, 2008; Robinson & Novelli, 2005; Rath, 2007).

In this paper, we use a case study of the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood in New Orleans to examine the relationships between green tourism and sustainability discourse in shaping the post-Katrina rebuilding process. Specifically, we focus on the ways in which the discourse of “green sustainability” has been appropriated by tourism boosters and used as a sophisticated niche marketing technique. Through various forms of advertising and promotion, tourism boosters seek to banish negative images of post-Katrina destruction from media and the public consciousness and encourage neighborhood repopulation and rebuilding. We argue that the term “sustainability” has a high level of interpretative flexibility (Jacob, 1997) and therefore symbolic value and utility for cities and neighborhoods struggling to rebuild in the aftermath of a major disaster. The term does not exclude any particular activity or group, exudes positive traits and inclusive activities, and does not seem to have any intrinsic negative features. More important, the term “sustainability” can allow a discursive space for vastly different interpretations and articulations, and can be aligned with a variety of touristic and entertaining activities. Thus, the term tends to be embraced by a variety of different communities, people, and groups for different goals. For tourism boosters and promoters, “sustainability” contains a multiplicity of meanings that provide social actors with a strategic vocabulary but one that leaves the specifics of content ambiguous. Overall, as we show, the growth of green tourism highlights the convergence between sustainability discourse and tourism in the sense that sustainability itself becomes a major tourist attraction and recovery tool for disaster-devastated places.

GREEN TOURISM AND URBAN SUSTAINABILITY

Ecotourism or green tourism is one of the fastest growing areas of the tourism sector and has become a major economic revitalization tool for cities and rural towns. A number of scholars have developed typologies of green tourism, theories of green tourism experiences, and examined the role of climate change and sustainability in marketing green tourism, among other concerns (Butcher, 2007; Wu, Wang, & Ho, 2010; Béteille, 1996). One can find conceptualizations of green tourism as travel to places that are defined by their fragile natural environments, a form of natural resource management, a set of practices for generating environmental awareness and conserving biodiversity, and a force for environmental commodification (for overviews, see Holden, 2007; Honey, 2008; Weaver, 2012). Examples of green tourism include tours that foster awareness for the environment and cultural practices in a local community, landscape museums, agritourism accommodation resorts, spa resorts, one-village-one-product programs, farmers’ markets, and promotion of carbon reduction initiatives and carbon offsetting schemes (Kandari & Chandra, 2005; Font & Tribe, 2001). The notion of “green” tourism seeks to encourage people to pursue leisure activities in a manner that will benefit, rather than harm, the environment, a concern that is gaining popularity especially in the context of global climate change (Gibson, et
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