

Why Travel?

Ecology



Introduction

The impact of travel and transport on ecology and the environment is a hot topic. Our everyday movements are capable of changing the world, from ancient travel for territorial protection and finding food and shelter, to modern day commuting, social and freight transport. There are also journeys that are part of the world's ecology: migrations can be regular or erratic, brought about by many different factors: the grey whale has the longest known migration, at 10-12,000 miles. Starlings use the sun to navigate; turtles use the earth's magnetic field; salmon use smell to return to the stream they were born in to reproduce. Human migrations have traditionally worked with the native ecology.

From global climate change to the local impact on threatened species and plants, the impacts of travel are criticised, but some are positive: ecological exploration has also brought many benefits.

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Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed seasons, and the dove, the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration.

Jeremiah 8:7, New International Version (1984)

Take only memories; leave only footprints.

Chief Seattle (1780 – 1866)

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Key Aspects

Making the world a better place

- Travel and transport enrich our experience of ecology in many ways, from the Gardens at Kew to wider varieties of flowers in our homes and vegetables on our tables.
- Feed the World: the importation of the potato from South America enhanced the survival possibilities for peasants across Europe; more recently the quality and variety of our foods have bloomed. With the spread of new cereals and fruits we have boosted land productivity, while the discovery of new natural remedies through travel and exploration has brought medicinal benefits for those suffering from diseases ranging from childhood leukemia to malaria.
- Conservation: many travel corporations take pride in conservation activities: for instance, air companies might have local conservation programmes and voluntary environmental levies on air tickets.

Young people are going to have to come to grips with the fact that climate change is going to alter their world—not in their children’s lifetimes, but in theirs. Melting asphalt, a melting Arctic—it’s going to change the way we live, work, and, of course, travel.

The Economist, July 2012

Practical Implications

- **We need to consider carefully how to balance travel needs with ecological considerations. Policy makers are already using fiscal policy to discourage some forms of travel in an effort to reduce carbon emissions.**
- **Human economic migration can cause lasting environmental degradation. This can then force further migration and travel, as happened with the US dust-bowl in the 1930s (Texas and Oklahoma), where extremely difficult conditions and dust storms led to large-scale migration to more hospitable regions in the US.**
- **We need to consider how much travel is too much in environmentally sensitive areas. The Antarctic Treaty places strict limits on tourism to prevent damage to the pristine environment. Bhutan has for years protected its natural environment from the damage witnessed in neighbouring countries by rationing tourism, limiting visas and keeping their prices high.**

Key Questions

To what extent do policy makers need to restrict travel in order to prevent dangerous climate change?

Can tourism ever be ecologically sustainable?

Environmental damage

- Human travel activities often cause unwanted side effects, particularly in the spread of disease: examples being the spread of smallpox to the Indians in the Americas and the transmission of rabies.
- Climate change and natural disasters. The emissions from modern travel are blamed for influencing climate change; transport accounts for 25% of UK carbon emissions. Aviation is thought to be particularly problematic because carbon dioxide is released at high altitudes where it has a more powerful insulating effect. Travel can also be responsible for natural disasters, most vividly seen with oil spills such as the Exxon Valdez disaster.
- Exploitation: Travel to environmentally sensitive areas can cause degradation of the natural environment.
- Invasive species (whether deliberately introduced or caused by moving to avoid habitat changes) can drive out native species or lead to their endangerment/extinction. A frequent reminder is seen at airports across the world, where passengers are warned not to bring in any fresh foods, as they might host bugs or themselves be hostile to the local environment.

Further Reading/Resources

Aristotle, *On the Motion of Animals* (350 BCE)

One of the first thinkers to explore the importance of movement for the natural world.

Baker, R. Robin *The Evolutionary Ecology of Animal Migration* (1978)

Good introduction to the ecological dimensions of migratory travel.

OECD, *Globalisation, Transport and the Environment* (2010)

A thorough exploration of the modern environmental impacts of transport.

Ben Daley, *Air Transport and the Environment* (2010)

Scholarly introduction to the ecological aspects of aviation.

<http://www.enviro.aero/Default.aspx>

Web Resource on measures taken by the Aviation industry to reduce environmental impacts.



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