

## Is overtourism just another 'first-world problem'?

"Overtourism" has become a buzzword, sparking debates reminiscent of those surrounding climate change.

On one side, there are "overtourism deniers" who [dismiss](#) overtourism as a myth, arguing that tourism can and should continue to grow without limits.

On the other side, critics [view](#) tourism as the latest target for those opposing capitalism," calling for radical reforms or for it to even be abolished.

Both extremes, however, are equally unrealistic and pose significant risks to the tourism sector.

Unlike climate change, which is widely recognised and understood by scientists, the concept of overtourism lacks a clear, universally accepted definition.

The term has been in use for decades, but its origins and academic definition are [debated](#). The World Tourism Organization [defined](#) overtourism as the negative effects of tourism on residents' daily lives and the negative experiences of visitors.

This definition raises critical questions about how to accurately assess overtourism. About what it is exactly and what are its specific negative impacts.

There are questions about whether a few thousand protesters represent the attitudes of Barcelona's 1.6 million residents, for instance. And how do these attitudes vary based on where people live or their reliance on tourism for their livelihoods.

### **A numbers game**

Understanding overtourism and devising strategies to address it is a complex task.

Tourism is one of the world's most lucrative industries and serves as a vital source of income for many countries, especially in the developing world. The World Travel & Tourism Council ([WTTC](#)) projects a record-breaking year for tourism in 2024, set to be worth \$US11.1 trillion to the global economy.

In 2024 tourism industry [solidified](#) its authority as a global economic powerhouse, generating one in every 10 dollars worldwide.

That's up on 2023, which was worth \$US9.9 trillion, the largest since the golden year of travel in 2019.

Tourism also bolstered its workforce by an additional 27.4 million, propelling the total to nearly 330 million jobs worldwide.

That's why the World Tourism Organization emphasises that overtourism is not just about the number of tourists but also about how well those numbers are managed. If managed correctly, destinations [should be able to accommodate](#) more visitors in a sustainable way.

## **A matter of perception**

Adopting the World Tourism Organization's definition, overtourism is a matter of perception from both residents and tourists: it exists when tourists and residents believe that the negative impacts of tourism go beyond their threshold of tolerance.

This raises further debate on how this concept applies to developing economies that are densely populated and accustomed to high levels of crowding, unaffordable housing, and gentrification.

For example, if a Chinese tourist used to the crowds in Shanghai doesn't find a beach in Santorini overcrowded, does overtourism still exist from a tourists' perspective?

There is a paradox in the overtourism debate: a concept often used to critique Western capitalism, may overlook the fact that many developing countries rely on the tourism industry for economic survival and employment.

These nations are less likely to be concerned with the influx of tourists compared to developed countries.

## **The importance of studying residents**

The World Tourism Organization suggests that understanding local residents is key to addressing overtourism. This is easier said than done.

Tourism studies [show](#) that residents are a highly heterogeneous group, and their support for or opposition to tourism varies based on economic dependency on tourism, seasonality, level of education and where they live.

[Research](#) has also shown that residents' attitudes towards tourists are not always rational but can be influenced by ideology.

For instance, younger people in Hong Kong were found to be less favourable towards tourists from mainland China, possibly due to their experience during the [Umbrella Revolution](#). In contrast, older people in Vietnam displayed more hostility towards Chinese tourists, potentially due to memories of the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979.

If residents' attitudes are used as a measure of overtourism, can we confidently claim that their negative views are due to the number of tourists or poor management rather than ideological positions towards the tourism industry?

Recent studies advocate for a multidimensional approach to resident attitudes, distinguishing between individual and community-level tourism issues and [indicating](#) that the majority of residents either support or are neutral towards the tourism industry.

From a scientific perspective, the overtourism "pandemic" emphasised by the media is not an accurate reflection of reality, at least if measured through resident perceptions.

## **The risk of 'overtourism panic'**

The recent media focus on overtourism is more than just an interesting hashtag or a trending topic. It can actively distort how the tourism industry is perceived and managed in certain destinations.

Overtourism is rarely measured scientifically and is often used as a buzzword when even a small number of locals protest or graffiti appears on walls.

This can create unnecessary hostility between tourists and locals and divert attention from destinations where tourism genuinely poses a problem.

Tourism is a high-impact industry, easily creating negative effects on the local environment and socio-cultural fabric.

By labelling every minor protest or sign of discontent as “overtourism”, [we risk trivialising](#) more serious issues faced by some destinations, such as [increased crime](#), prostitution, illegal gambling, drug dealing and robbery — many of which occur in the developing world.

For overtourism to remain a useful concept in managing tourist destinations, there needs to be an agreed-upon method for scientifically determining when it has been reached.

Otherwise, the term risks becoming another "first-world problem" that grabs headlines for a while before fading away, leaving large parts of the world still grappling with tourism management and lacking viable economic alternatives.