

The Land of the Sky and the Tourists: Impacts of Tourism in Asheville, North Carolina and Steps Toward a Regenerative Model

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Abstract

The City of Asheville in Western North Carolina has served as a prime tourism location for over a century. First marketed for its healthful mountain air in the mid-1800s, its proximity to the famed Blue Ridge Mountains remains one of the city's major attractions enticing recreationists and health seekers alike. Over the years, Asheville expanded its tourism opportunities and now sits atop dozens of "Top 10" lists, highlighting activities that range from hiking and camping to breweries. Asheville, unfortunately, hit another milestone in 2021 by earning a new designation — one of the top five worst places to live based on standard of living, regardless of your earned degree. With nearly 12 million annual visitors, residents are concerned about the repercussions of tourism including increased cost of living, decreased quality of life, decreased access to natural and cultural sites, and degraded ecosystems. This research project explored tourism impacts in Asheville, conducted a case study analysis of comparable tourism locations, and synthesized previous research including studies of resident opinions. The City of Asheville is recommended to take steps toward more sustainable and regenerative tourism development to combat the growing repercussions of overtourism. Proposed solutions are linked to the three pillars of sustainability — economic, environmental, and social — and include aspects of regenerative tourism through crafting a sustainability pledge, creating a stewardship management body, engaging the community, and educating visitors.

1. Introduction

Nestled between the rolling hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the shadow of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park lies the vibrant city of Asheville, North Carolina. Described as a "thriving mountain city" characterized by its historic downtown, culinary and music scenes, and breathtaking natural landscapes, Asheville has crafted a unique tourist experience that consistently attracts millions of visitors to explore the city.¹ Making its name as a tourist destination over a century ago in the health tourism scene², Asheville has been a long-standing host for people looking to experience its unique artsy hospitality, outdoor recreation, art and music, cuisine, and breweries.³ Over the past 150 years, Asheville has continually relied on and invested in tourism as a means of economic development resulting in a highly successful, multi-billion dollar industry.⁴ However, as visitation numbers skyrocket and tourists outnumber residents nearly 50-to-1, locals are witnessing negative impacts to their community such as increased cost of living, decreased access to desirable locations, and overcrowding.^{5,6,7} If left unchecked, the negative impacts of tourism can deeply manifest throughout the economy, society, and environment to create an unsustainable industry.⁸ If these impacts are left to worsen, the area will experience overtourism — a marked degradation of local life due to tourism.⁹ Residents of the City of Asheville are reporting impacts in line with those of overtourism, suggesting a need to transition toward more sustainable and regenerative tourism practices. Within this context, the goal of my research was to: 1) evaluate the impacts of tourism on Asheville, 2) determine if Asheville is experiencing overtourism, and 3)

propose recommendations to address the social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism in Asheville and Buncombe County.

2. What is Tourism?

Tourism is the act of traveling in pursuit of relaxation or exploration as a leisure activity.¹⁰ Tourism is usually associated with beaches, cruises, amusement parks, natural and historic areas, or recreational opportunities, but there are truly limitless ways to be a tourist. While the intent of travel has changed over time, people still crave the exciting sights and experiences that only travel to a new destination can provide. Throughout the mid-1900s, work ideologies were shifting and allowing workers more time for leisure, and the production of commercial airlines gave the average person a reliable way to travel long-distance. Thanks to this increased leisure time and technological advancement, the tourism industry saw a huge jump in willingness of working-class people to travel both domestically and internationally.¹¹ In 1980, around 200 million people traveled internationally.¹² Only 40 years later in 2018, that number had grown seven-fold to 1.4 billion international travelers, not including the immeasurable numbers of other tourists who traveled domestically.^{13, 14}

In order to support this sheer volume of tourists, the travel industry needs a lot of hands. From departure to destination, tourism utilizes and supports dozens of industries such as transportation, banking, marketing, lodging and hospitality, food service, retail, entertainment, and recreation.¹⁵ In 2018, tourism supported one out of every ten jobs worldwide, totalling 319 million, and one out of five jobs created in the last five years.¹⁶ Because of this high growth rate and wide-reaching involvement, sometimes across countries, tourism has become a valuable contributor to local, national, and world economies. In that same year, 2018, tourism generated \$8.8 trillion and accounted for 10% of the global gross domestic product.¹⁷ As one of the world’s top employers and an important source of economic development, the tourism industry holds a great amount of power in the world economy.

3. Tourism in Asheville

The City of Asheville has a rich history of tourism and has welcomed its benefits for over a century.¹⁸ The nearly impassable mountains surrounding the city were originally a large physical barrier to economic development, but their potential as a tourist destination was quickly realized. Their tourism value improved further once the Buncombe County Turnpike was completed in 1827 and connected Western North Carolina to other cities and states across the southeast.¹⁹ Since then, Asheville has served as the “Gateway to the Mountains” and “Land of the Sky” and provided refuge from bustling city life and scorching southern summers. As time passed and tourism continued to grow, magnificent feats of modern architecture, a commercial airport, scenic roadways, parks, and schools of the arts were built upon these mountains to highlight and serve the area’s unique community (Figure 1).²⁰

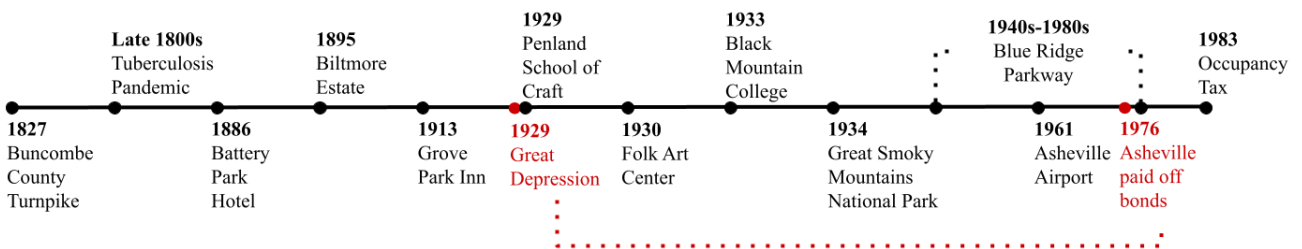


Figure 1. Timeline of major tourism events in Asheville, NC.^{19, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 20, 29, 40}

3.1 Health Tourism

Beginning in the late 1700s, the greater Asheville area earned the reputation of a healing mountain retreat known for its moderate climate and fresh air.²¹ Dubbed “health tourism” – travel in pursuit of medical care – this legacy grew with the heightening of the tuberculosis pandemic at the turn of the 19th century as respiratory patients flooded Asheville’s growing number of boarding houses and sanitariums.²² Although this influx of ill tourists would soon

strike tensions with promoters interested in drawing a more affluent clientele, the health tourism industry is where Asheville made its name.²³

3.2 Cultural Tourism

In 1886, the first luxury hotel, the Battery Park Hotel, opened in downtown Asheville and featured modern accommodations to draw in affluent northern investors, one of whom was George Vanderbilt.²⁴ Nine years later, Vanderbilt opened his 175,000-square-foot mansion, the Biltmore Estate, to friends and family.²⁵ The regality of the Biltmore Estate caught the attention of Americans and further drove tourism development and high-end hotels including the Grove Park Inn, which cost an average of \$30 per night — approximately \$815 in today's money — and attracted the likes of Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and Woodrow Wilson.²⁶ As quickly as the architectural boom began, it all came to a halt as Asheville and the country faced the start of the Great Depression. Asheville was believed to have the highest debt per capita of any city in the U.S. at a whopping \$28,000 per person at today's value.²⁷ In an effort to alleviate economic pressure, the 35-bedroom, 43-bath Biltmore Estate opened to the public for the first time in 1930 to increase the possibility of tourism in the area.²⁸ Despite this huge debt load, Asheville vowed to pay it all back — a decision that loomed over the city for nearly 50 years. During this period of stagnation, Asheville could not invest in urban renewal like many other cities.²⁹ Fortunately, this meant the city kept the unique Art Deco architecture of the 1920s for which it is now renowned.

3.3 Arts and Nature-based Tourism

Another bright spot in Asheville's depression era was its investment in arts and nature. Throughout the 1930s, Asheville became a hub for arts and crafts through the establishment of the Penland School of Craft, Folk Art Center, and Black Mountain College. The Penland School of Craft was created by "Miss Lucy" Morgan and provided a space for experiential art education through offering community classes.³⁰ Shortly after Penland was created, the Folk Art Center was established in 1930 with the vision of helping people "value the design and function of traditional and modern crafts".³¹ In 1933, the Black Mountain College was founded as a liberal arts institution and allowed students and staff to participate in campus operations and create art.³² All of these artistic ventures served as community centers where locals could work creatively together, as well as tourist destinations that brought money into the area.

Two other features that arose from the Depression era are the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Both projects were borne from the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) that sought to put people to work during the Depression. Officially dedicated in 1934 by Franklin D. Roosevelt, GSMNP represented a new opportunity for tourism in the region by bringing in motorists and preserving the natural landscape for future generations.³³ One year after the dedication of the park, a new opportunity — the Blue Ridge Parkway — broke ground.³⁴ The Blue Ridge Parkway is a park-to-park (GSMNP to Shenandoah) scenic connector project for leisure motorists. After much pressure from Asheville city residents and government, the parkway was set to pass through the city of Asheville which would create another point of entrance to the area.

The City of Asheville's investment in the arts and natural resources throughout the mid-1900s despite severe economic turmoil has paid off. All of the above mentioned areas are still more or less in use today. In 2021, nearly 16 million people drove the parkway and 14 million visited GSMNP (Figure 2).^{35, 36} The Penland School of Craft still offers a wide range of classes to all ages and is a hub for community collaboration.³⁷ The Folk Art Center is now one of the most popular destinations on the parkway.³⁸ Although Black Mountain College closed in 1957, there is a museum and art center in downtown Asheville that carries on the legacy of the college and advances community transformation.³⁹

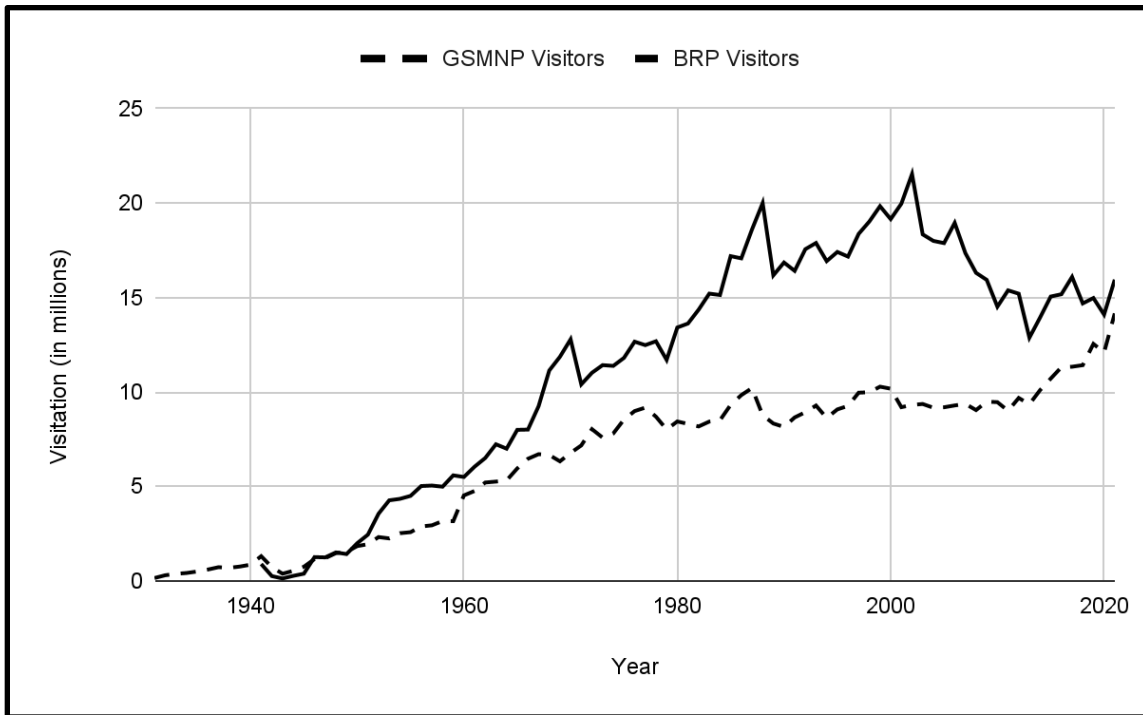


Figure 2. Line graph of annual visitation to the Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP) and Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) since their respective establishments in 1941 and 1931.^{35, 36}

3.4 Tourism Structure and Tax in Asheville

In 1983, the NC General Assembly passed House Bill 426 to establish a 2% occupancy tax on lodging and a public body in four counties, including the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, to oversee the collection and distribution of the revenue.⁴⁰ The Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (BCTDA) is a governmental destination marketing organization that promotes economic development in Buncombe County through tourism.⁴¹ Within the BCTDA is the Explore Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) that handles marketing and public relations to increase tourism and revenue.

The original 2% occupancy tax rate has since increased to 3% in 1985, 4% in 2001, and 6% in 2015 to provide increased funds as tourism grew.⁴² In the year of the most recent increase (2015-16), 3.6 million overnight visitors⁴³ generated \$16 million in occupancy tax.⁴⁴ Of this 6% tax, 75% goes back into tourism development and promotion; the remaining 25% goes into the Tourism Product Development Fund (TPDF).⁴⁵ Founded in 2001 with a 1% tax increase and expanded in 2015, the TPDF has funded 39 community improvement projects totaling \$44 million.⁴⁶

3.5 Tourism in Asheville Today

3.5.1 statistics

The greater Asheville area of Buncombe County attracted 11.9 million visitors in 2019 – its peak before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁷ This number is up by 15% from 2015, and nearly doubled (41% increase) since the first reported volume statistic in 2005 (Figure 3).^{48, 49} Along with this increase in visitation came an increase in tourism-based revenue. Between 2015 and 2019 when visitation volume increased by 15%, visitor spending increased by 23% and totaled \$2.2 billion.⁵⁰ About one-quarter of this spending goes into food, another quarter into lodging, a fifth into retail, and a tenth into both recreation and transportation.⁵¹

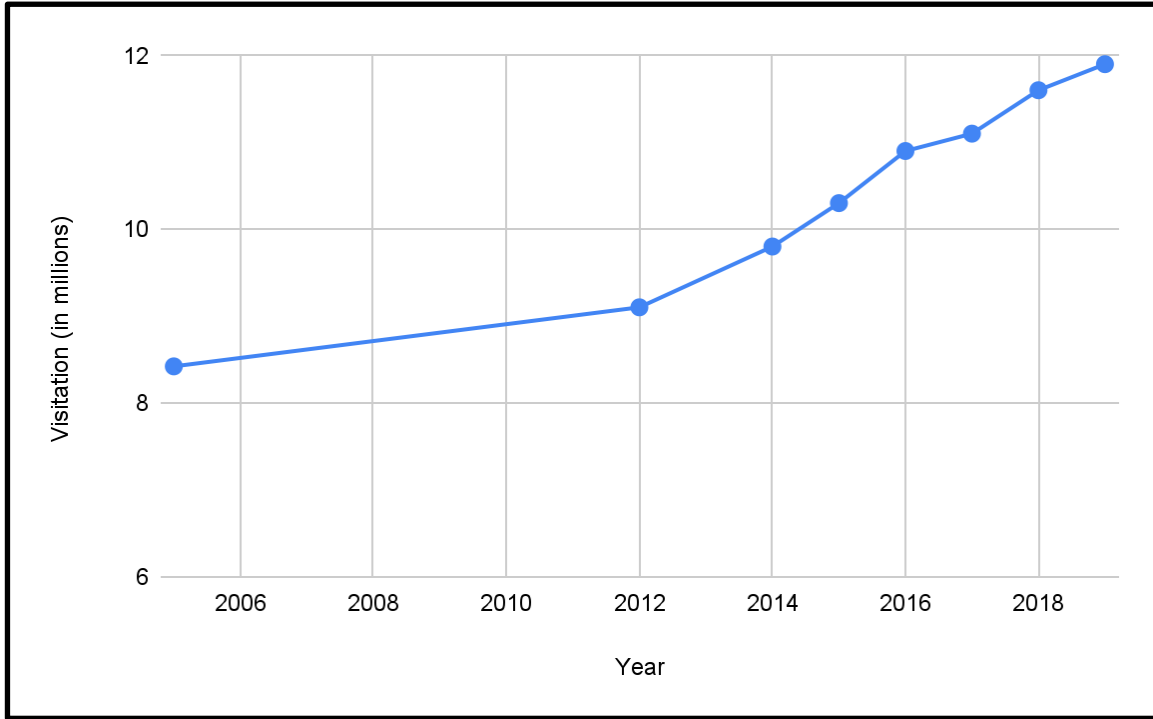


Figure 3. Line graph of annual visitation (in millions) to Buncombe County. ^{52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59}

3.5.2 attractions

Over the years, Asheville has earned countless designations on “Top 10” lists including, most recently, “Best Cities to Travel Solo”, “Perfect Weekend Getaways”, and “Best Cities in the World for Beer-drinkers”.⁶⁰ In 2009, Asheville was first awarded the title “Beer City USA” and has been a frequent winner ever since.⁶¹ The brewery tourism scene in Asheville has taken off over the last decade resulting in the highest number of breweries per capita of any U.S. city.⁶² In addition to beverages, Asheville is also famed for its culinary pursuits.⁶³ In the way of health and relaxation, the city still provides many spas, retreats, and wellness opportunities reminiscent of historic health tourism.⁶⁴ Finally, Asheville has continued its legacy of arts and nature-based tourism through offering guided tours, sightseeing, educational centers, and museums to learn about and experience the area’s unique natural and cultural resources.⁶⁵

4. Global Impacts of Tourism

While tourism can bring a wealth of opportunities, revenue, and growth, it can also present challenges for the host community. Tourism-dependent locations are reliant on that flow of people to continue providing economic support. This reliance on unpredictable, external income can lead to a “tourist first” mentality; their trip must be perfect so they continue to invest in the area.⁶⁶ Without happy tourists, there will no longer be tourism. This mentality manifests in many ways throughout the economy, environment, and community, and the resulting impacts can become pervasive if left unchecked. Tourism is not as simple as marketing campaigns and putting heads in beds. From the influx of people and the need for more and better infrastructure to the subtle changes in local wellbeing, the hosting community must be prepared for the costs of entering the alluring world of tourism. Although tourism impacts each community uniquely, the typical impacts of tourism present themselves in three broad areas: the economy, the environment, and the community’s social dynamics.

4.1 Economic Impacts

Tourism, an effective economy-builder, can also work against the local economy when not incorporated thoughtfully. In an ideal world, the invitation of tourism into a community would come after establishing the needed infrastructure, making connections between local industries (the suppliers) and those groups catering to tourists (the consumers), and gaining local input. Unfortunately, this cannot be an option for many nations dealing first with debt, civil unrest, and foreign investors to satisfy. Many Caribbean countries, for example, are lacking the infrastructure and development plans to grow sustainably and nurture their economy.⁶⁷ In the rush to quickly create the infrastructure needed for tourism, development planning is lost in the whirlwind, the local people are not consulted, and foreign-owned businesses are put in place to fill the gaps and move the project forward.

The insertion of foreign or non-local industry into the local economy creates leakage: the revenue from tourism that leaves the local economy and goes to businesses operated elsewhere.⁶⁸ Whether this money is lost through a foreign hotel, restaurant, or touring agency, every tourist dollar spent in externally owned businesses harms the local community. Not only do they take money from local businesses through displacement, but they also fill the market need and can sell for lower prices, thus forcing local businesses out of production. No longer able to supply their intended good or service, the local businesses are left to import the same goods at an additional tax.⁶⁹ These combined forces are enough to cripple a local economy if not checked and are not limited to developing nations. Anytime that tourism revenue is siphoned from the local economy, the host community receives all of the harm and none of the benefit.

4.2 Social Impacts

When the “tourist first” mentality is taken to the extreme, residents of the community are, by extension, lower ranking on the chain of importance.⁷⁰ When tourists are held at a higher position of power, local interests can become devalued and unrepresented through exclusion from decision-making processes, and some come to resent the tourists that have taken their land, resources, and voice. In addition to devaluing the local community in the eyes of the governing industries, tourists can both reject and alter local norms and behaviors.⁷¹ For example, in many tourism-dominated Caribbean communities, unknowing tourists donning beachwear and bare feet in public places draw scorn from the locals who understand the level of dress to be a marker of social status.⁷² Tourists who bring with them western ideals of indulgence and materialism are also thought to encourage locals to adopt these behaviors, all at once drawing public ire and changing their social culture.⁷³ Tourist behaviors are often justified for the sake of having a light-hearted vacation, but when tourists leave the hotel, they are stepping into a living community with pre-existing values and beliefs. Though it may seem like a simple week-long vacation to a tourist, it is impacting the daily lives of the residents.

4.3 Environmental Impacts

Just as tourism impacts each host area differently, tourism affects each environment differently depending on the pre-development ecosystem, the level and quality of infrastructure, the number of users, and the nature of tourism in the area. For example, marine tourist destinations present a whole new set of challenges not seen at terrestrial destinations and vice versa. That being said, there are a few general impacts of tourism on the environment that apply to most

destinations: degradation of natural resources, a reduction in biodiversity, and the incapacitation of ecosystem processes.⁷⁴

Even nature-based tourism, including adventure tourism, geotourism, wildlife tourism, and ecotourism, can cause unintended harm to the ecosystem. Because these subsectors inherently require travel to a natural location, many of the world's most fragile, biodiverse protected areas have become the center of tourists' attention.⁷⁵ This also includes visitation to witness habitats or species that are on the verge of extinction, called "last chance tourism," which "provides the opportunity to witness the demise of ecosystems, to behold the extinction of an entire species from its natural habitat".⁷⁶ While nature-based tourism does benefit conservation in some ways through validating a destination or park's existence and supporting its continued protection, tourism in any form can still be ecologically damaging, especially to habitats and species already near the brink of extinction. There is still an influx of people who need accommodations, resources, and things to do, all of which produce waste, emissions, pollution, and require energy to create. Additionally, tourism development and subsequent human use also coincide with the removal of vegetation, soil compaction, decreased core habitat, increased barriers to wildlife movement like roads and fences, and the possible introduction of non-native species (including domesticated cats and dogs) that outcompete native wildlife.

In addition to habitat degradation, wildlife can be impacted through the presence and behaviors of tourists. Some human visitation to an area can inflict direct harm to wildlife such as hunting or vehicular collisions, or indirect harm through altering natural behaviors and movements that may increase their vulnerability.⁷⁷ Tourist impacts on animal behavior vary widely across species, habitats, and even individuals, and are widely understudied. Generally, though, animals respond to human disturbance in a few ways: fleeing or total avoidance of an area or people; changes in physiology, and exhibition of alarmed, aggressive, or human-habituated behavior. For example, many large North American ungulates like moose, white-tailed deer, and elk avoid areas of human activity.⁷⁸ Many waterfowl will completely avoid lakes used for recreation, especially with motorized watercraft; some birds also display stress behaviors like alarm calling and decreased foraging.⁷⁹ Birds are particularly vulnerable to tourist disturbance due to their seasonal energetically demanding tasks like migration, mating, and nesting. Any disturbance that forces the bird to stop foraging for food, leave the nest, or burn energy to flee the area, can have serious consequences on the outcome of their survival and repopulation. Even well-intentioned birdwatchers and photographers have accidentally revealed the location of nest sites to eager predators. While conserving land for recreational use is overall better for the system than conversion to agriculture or development, tourism does have impacts on the local wildlife that can be fatal. The question now becomes: how do tourism and conservation help and hinder each other, and how can mutual benefit be maximized?

5. Measuring Tourism Impacts

As the full impacts of tourism across society, the economy, and the environment have been realized, several measurement schemes have been created to monitor the positive and negative impacts of tourism.

5.1 Measuring Economic Impacts

The economic impact of tourism is easily measured through calculating the generated revenue and monitoring the flow of money through, or out of, the economy. Ideally, tourism dollars are entering the local economy through spending at locally operated businesses and being reinvested into the community through rent, employee wages, operation costs, and more.⁸⁰ From there, the local consumers then go back to spend at locally operated businesses and continue a closed-circle cycle. This model is called the ripple effect, where external funding is provided but stays local and is spread throughout the system (Figure 4). The opposite effect is leakage, where tourism dollars are spent at externally operated businesses like chains and the money leaves the local system.⁸¹

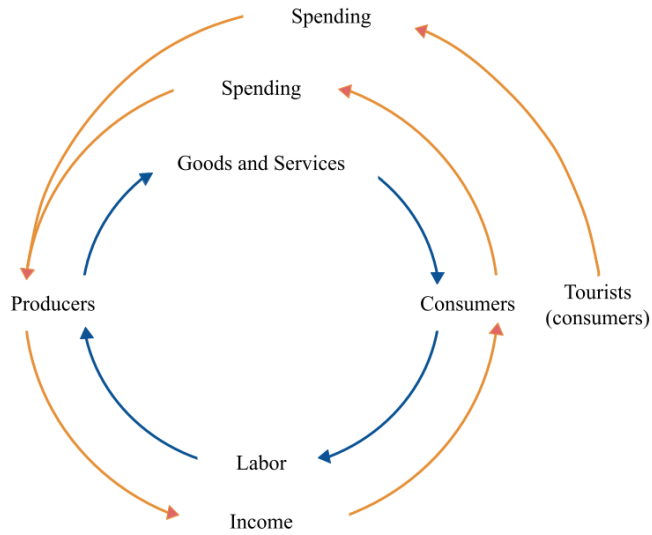


Figure 4. Model of the Ripple Effect of tourism dollars through a two-sector circular economy.⁸⁰

5.2 Measuring Social Impacts

One of the most prominent models of the social impacts of tourism is Doxey's Irritation Index, also known as Doxey's Irridex, which quantifies resident perceptions of tourism on a scale of positive (euphoria) to negative (antagonism) as the number of tourists increase in a given location.⁸² As resident perceptions shift downward to antagonism, there are a few tangible markers of each stage in a community (Figure 5).

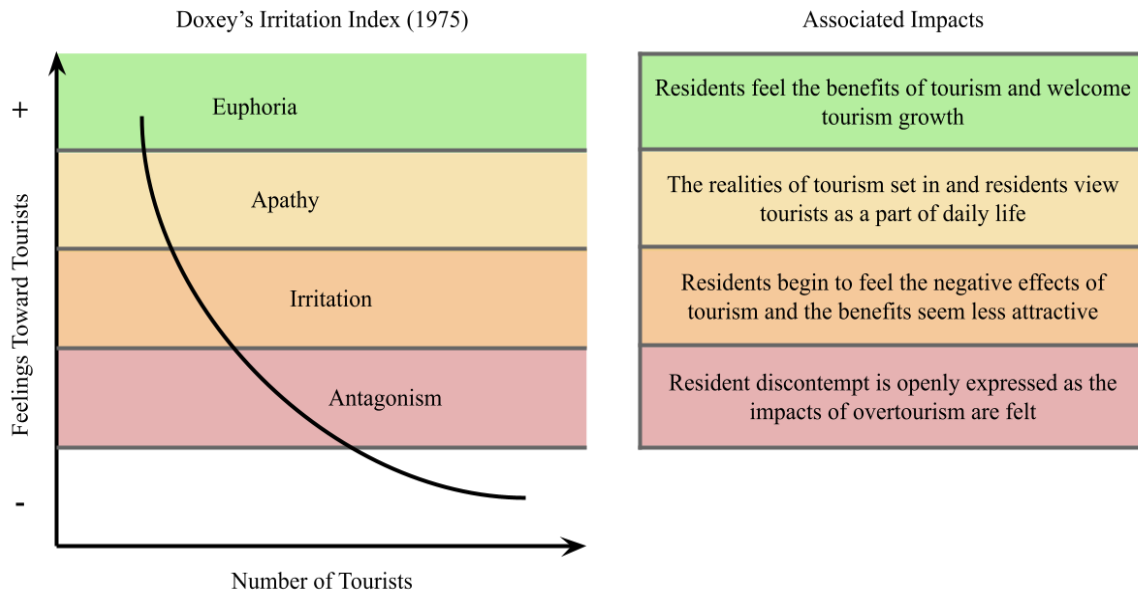


Figure 5. Stages of Doxey's Irritation Index and associated impacts of the stage.⁸²

5.3 Measuring Environmental Impacts

Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) is a monitoring scheme to help tourist destinations balance the dual, conflicting goals of a natural area – conservation and recreation.⁸³ Rather than solely focusing on tourism numbers, the LAC offers a way to tailor the model to each area through a series of six steps.⁸⁴ The first three steps involve recognizing the two goals that are in conflict (typically recreation and conservation), acknowledging that there must be an acceptable compromise between them, and identifying which goal inhibits the other. Next, standards are written to define the acceptable levels of compromise on each goal. Lastly, impacts are monitored and action can be taken if the standards are nearing limits of unacceptable change (i.e. visitor use can be restricted if the environment nears unacceptable levels). By utilizing LAC, the tourism destination can invite community stakeholder collaboration to define the standards before the damage is done.

6. Local Perceptions of Tourism in Asheville

6.1 Perceptions in 2019

In 2019, Explore Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau hired an external research group, Strategic Marketing & Research Insights (SMARInsights), to research local attitudes toward tourism.⁸⁵ The purpose of this research was to identify areas of public concern to address in a Tourism Management and Investment Plan (TMIP). The study created two sample groups, a simple random sample (n = 468) and an “opt-in” convenience sample (n ≈ 2,200). In a simple random sample, each person in the population has an equal chance to be selected, thus the survey has high external validity and the sample results can be generalized across the population. The researchers also wanted to invite broader community involvement, so they included the convenience “opt-in” sample group as a way to gain more information without sacrificing the external validity of the random group. They provided both groups with the same questionnaire to define the community perceptions of tourism. These results were then contextualized with national statistics on the same topic. SMARInsights found that the majority (77%) of locals believed tourism was good for the community (Figure 6).⁸⁶

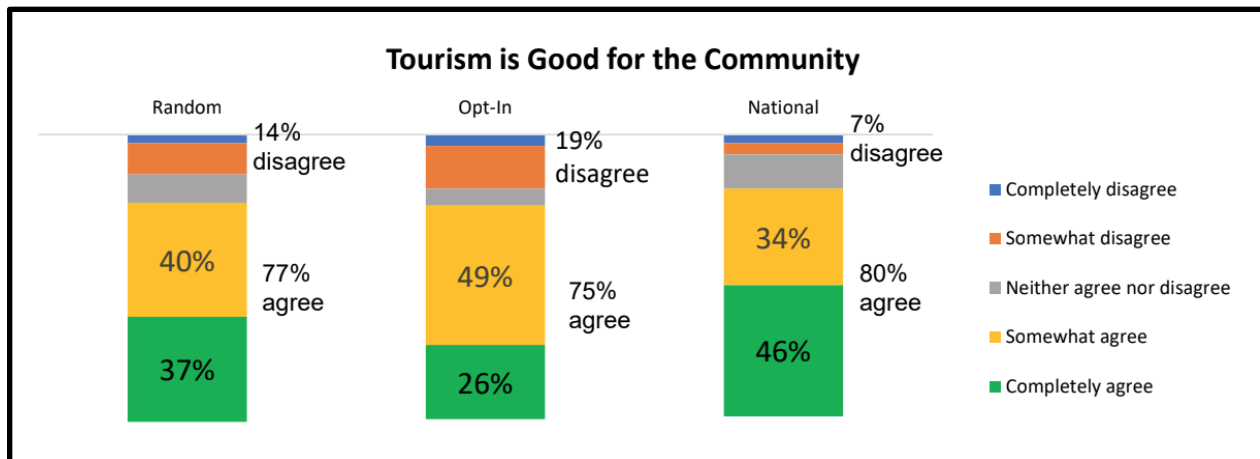


Figure 6. Asheville resident survey results on the statement “Tourism is good for the community” in 2019.⁸⁶

Among many positive impacts mentioned were economic support, increased dining and shopping options, and events for both locals and tourists. Some perceived negative impacts, however, were an increased cost of living, increased homelessness, and decreased access to desirable areas due to limited parking and overcrowding. Based on these responses, Asheville in 2019 was solidly in the “irritation” phase of Doxey’s model as they still acknowledged the benefits but began to feel frustration with tourists.⁸⁷ This survey did not measure economic leakage, however it did assess resident perceptions of tourism’s impact on small businesses – to which they agreed tourism was a benefactor.⁸⁸ Additionally, it did not question environmental concerns with the exception of the built, urban environment.

From the responses, six key areas of concern among the Asheville-Buncombe County public were identified and set to be addressed in the TMIP: 1) parking, 2) housing affordability and homelessness, 3) city cleanliness, 4) walkability, 5) public transportation, and 6) the impact of tourism on neighborhoods.⁸⁹ The TMIP group, a mix of BCTDA staff and dozens of local leaders, began work on a year-long plan to manage tourism in Asheville.⁹⁰ After reviewing feedback from the SMARInsights sentiment survey, they identified four guiding principles upon which to base their plan: 1) protect and celebrate authenticity, 2) embrace collaboration and partnership, 3) harness the benefits and manage growth, and 4) encourage and create connectivity.⁹¹ These goals were set to be achieved through promoting our unique cultural experiences including food, retail, and art, and collaborating on community projects.

6.2 Perceptions in 2022

In 2022, a follow-up attitudes survey was conducted by MMGY Travel Intelligence containing many of the same questions to monitor progress on the TMIP.⁹² Between 2019 and 2022, the BCTDA reported 6% increase in the percentage of locals who agreed to the statement, “tourism is good/beneficial for my community”, indicating that resident perceptions of tourism had improved (Figure 7).⁹³ However, only 69% of participants agreed that the benefits outweigh the costs. In addition to the costs of tourism mentioned in 2019, two new areas of concern were expressed that have not yet been addressed: tourism as a threat to the character of Asheville and to the environment. Based on the updated perceptions survey, it seems Asheville is creeping nearer to the antagonism phase as fewer people see the good in tourism. These residential concerns convey a new type of problem; one that is more than crowding and cost of living — one that suggests overtourism.

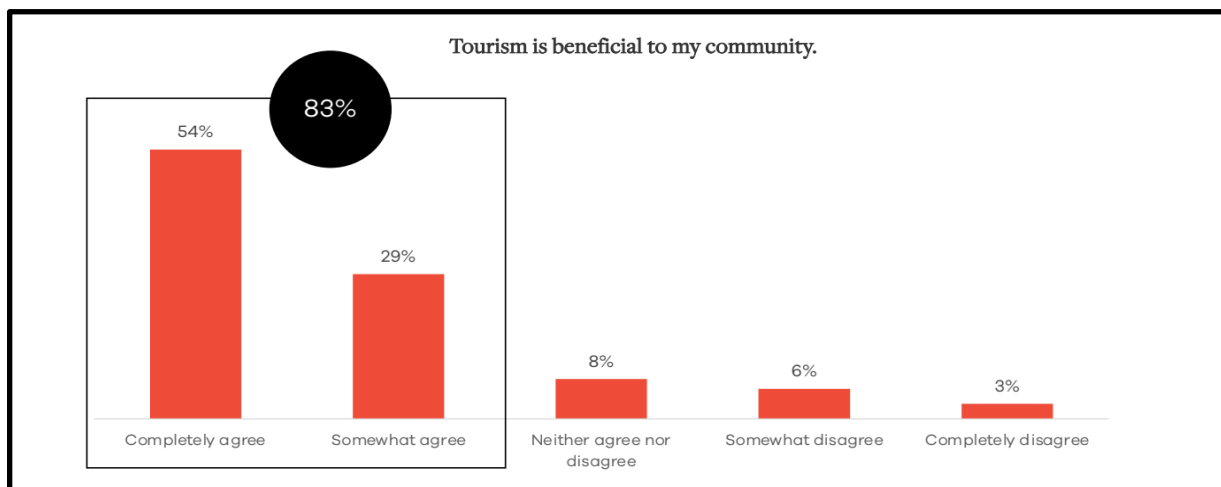


Figure 7. Asheville resident survey results on the statement “Tourism is beneficial to my community” in 2022.⁹³

7. Overtourism

Overtourism occurs when a destination is overwhelmed by tourists.⁹⁴ Overtourism is more than crowded streets and long lines at popular vistas. It is marked by the degradation of life in areas that once welcomed the cars, buses, and airplanes into their home. Now, tourists are everywhere and they are no longer so welcome. Overtourism is not defined by a set number of tourists per area, rather it is defined at the local level and subjective to the experiences of the community. While locals recognize the benefits of tourism, they also see an increase in the cost of living, a loss of community character, and decreased access to the areas they love. If not handled in time, these detriments can be hard to repair.

Based on the above local perceptions of tourism, it is clear that Asheville is experiencing some level of overtourism. On an economic and industrial level, the governmental approval of a city-wide hotel moratorium in 2019 was an early sign of overtourism.⁹⁵ As the moratorium was set to end in February 2021, a group of 60 protestors gathered in downtown to express their discontent with signs reading “Hotels Destroy AVL”, but to no avail; the moratorium was lifted two weeks later.^{96, 97} The environmental impacts were realized in July 2021 with the 2-year prohibition of camping on Max Patch, one of the region’s most popular camping spots, due to ecological damage.⁹⁸ Now the

concerns have been given voice in the most updated resident perceptions survey.⁹⁹ Finally, the social effects were felt as the City of Asheville topped a new list in 2021, “Worst places to live if you only care about money”, due to a low standard of living regardless of earned degree.¹⁰⁰ Asheville tourism is unsustainable. The City of Asheville and Buncombe County are recommended to take steps to address the impacts of overtourism.

8. Possible Solutions

8.1 Sustainable Tourism

Based around the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, economic, and social, sustainable tourism is a rising pattern in the industry. As the environmental movement in the U.S. has grown with concerns of climate change, some tourists are looking for more environmentally friendly ways to travel.¹⁰¹ From carbon offset airline programs to green hotel certifications, many participants in the tourism sector have taken credible steps toward reducing their footprint and attracting the sustainable-minded tourist. One example of a sustainable tourism plan in action is the 2021 Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism. The plan will: 1) measure emissions from tourism, 2) reduce emissions from the source, 3) protect ecosystems and sustain biodiversity, 4) work with stakeholders to advance action, and 5) provide resources to meet the objectives.¹⁰² These goals will work in tandem to cut global tourism emissions by half in 2030 with the broader objective of Net Zero (neutralizing all greenhouse gas emissions) by 2050. By specifically working within the tourism sector, this declaration hopes to address the rapidly rising emission levels associated with travel and pave the way for future transformations.

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) is a nonprofit organization that established criteria of sustainable tourism for sector participants, governing bodies, and tourists.¹⁰³ Any group involved in the tourism industry can express their support for the GSTC’s mission by signing on as an organizational member or by applying to be a certified sustainable destination. The Buncombe County TDA recently signed on as an organizational member, which grants the group access to leadership development and training opportunities, provides extra marketing, and increases global connectivity.^{104, 105} By joining the GSTC, the BCTDA has demonstrated an interest in sustainable tourism but has not yet taken the rigorous steps necessary to transform the industry and earn the official destination recognition. A few other membership signatories include Destination Vancouver, Ecotourism Kenya, Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., and Visit Finland.¹⁰⁶

8.2 Ecotourism

Ecotourism, a subsector of sustainable tourism, sets an even higher standard for travel through integrating educational and cultural principles. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation and education”.¹⁰⁷ The definition of ecotourism, however, is contested and many other interpretations exist involving aspects of political consciousness and human-rights advocacy.¹⁰⁸ Ecotourism’s high standards of travel hold enormous potential for green tourism efforts. Due to its lack of widely accepted definition, however, ecotourism also holds potential for greenwashing (aka “ecotourism lite”) by marketing but not committing to its environmental promises.¹⁰⁹

8.3 Regenerative Tourism

Yet another, more rigorous, subsector of sustainable tourism is regenerative tourism. This concept is new and gaining attention in the field. It is defined as a “transformational approach that aims to fulfill the potential of tourism places to flourish and create net positive effects through increasing the regenerative capacity of human societies and ecosystems”.¹¹⁰ Regenerative tourism commits to community improvement and net-positive tourism impacts, not just neutrality like sustainable tourism.¹¹¹ Regenerative tourism is based around seven overlapping principles (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison and Application of Principles of Regenerative Tourism

	Principles¹¹¹	Principles¹¹⁰	Brief Description	Possible Applications to Asheville
I	Diverse by nature	Draw from an ecological worldview	View the world as an interconnected, dynamic system in which humans participate and can change	1) Monitor impacts of tourism to community 2) Promote visitor awareness of local food and water resources
II	Holistic understanding, living-systems approach	Use living systems thinking	View tourism as a whole system made of smaller components that interact	3) Support local businesses and community connectivity
III	Transformational and Inspirational	Discover the unique potential of a regenerative tourism place	Plan around the unique story of the destination	1) Deeply learn and collaboratively promote cultural resources 2) Highlight unique ecosystem features
IV	Inclusive and equitable	Leverage the capability of tourism living systems to catalyze transformations	Unite similar groups to achieve transformational goals toward a more equitable community	1) Increase diversity in tourism leadership 2) BIPOC business incubator 3) More evenly distribute tourism tax dollars
V	Cultural stewardship	Adopt healing approaches that promote cultural revival and privilege perspectives of indigenous and marginalized peoples	Acknowledge and work to heal marginalized communities	1) Land acknowledgement and indigenous usage/reparations 2) Deeply learn and collaboratively promote cultural resources
VI	Environmentally responsible	Create regenerative places and communities	Create self-sustaining systems that yield net-positive results	1) Sustainability pledge and/or certification program 2) Promote visitor environmental education and social marketing 3) More evenly distribute tourism tax dollars
VII	Collaborative	Collaborate to evolve and enact regenerative tourism approaches	Create space for collaboration	Create a diverse Destination Stewardship Council and fund

9. Recommendations

As a city experiencing problems associated with overtourism, the City of Asheville is urged to incorporate the following aspects of sustainable and regenerative tourism to improve the visitor and resident experience.

9.1 Create a Destination Stewardship Council and Fund

A Destination Stewardship Council (DSC) offers a “community-centric approach to careful and responsible management of common-pool resources”.¹¹² The DSC should include diverse members to promote community collaboration across sectors and experiences. Rather than a marketing-centric approach, the DSC would monitor the impacts of tourism in the community. One such action to measure these impacts is an asset inventory to identify the impact of tourism on specific resources. From there, the group would develop and implement management plans to steward the identified resources. A possible addition to the DSC would be a stewardship fund to financially assist the work of the group. One of the first projects of the DSC could be the sustainability pledge outlined below.

9.2 Craft a Sustainability Pledge

The creation and endorsement of a sustainability pledge would increase awareness of Asheville’s pre-existing sustainability goals and encourage locals, tourists, and businesses alike to act in accordance. Although there are many examples in places like Iceland and Aspen, Colorado, one of the best examples from an area comparable to Asheville is the Sedona Cares Pledge.^{113, 114} Located on the main page of their website is a pledge consisting of nine phrases that outline visitor expectations to respect the local environment and culture.¹¹⁵ For example, they draw attention to their dry climate and encourage mindful water use, link their statements to the official Leave No Trace (LNT) website where visitors can find more in-depth information, and even define some social norms of the area.

A sustainability pledge for Asheville should be built collaboratively with a diverse (culturally, socially, academically, etc.) set of community members. It should celebrate the uniqueness of the culture and history through a land acknowledgement, tributes to the classic architecture and legacy of art, and commitment to equity. It should highlight the unique environment and outline region-specific dos and don’ts to encourage proper visitor behavior. Some “don’ts” could include moving stream rocks, taking what you find, feeding wildlife, hiking too close to cliffs and waterfalls, and littering. Lastly, a sustainability pledge should include the unspoken social norms of the area like shopping local and responsible public behavior. A proposed pledge is outlined below but should be revised in collaboration with community members (Figure 8).

SUSTAIN AVL

MY PLEDGE TO ASHEVILLE

WELCOME TO THE LAND OF THE SKY
As a sustainable tourism destination, we invite you help us fulfill our commitment by adopting the following pledge.

I PLEDGE TO

SUPPORT THE PEOPLE	SUPPORT THE PLACE	SUPPORT THE LOCAL ECONOMY
Nearly 100,000 people call Asheville home. While I am here, I pledge to act respectfully.	The City of Asheville exists on the ancestral land of the Cherokee. Known as <i>Togiyasdi</i> , the Cherokee stewarded this land and I pledge to treat it with due respect.	Asheville is known for its unique atmosphere. I pledge to experience the true Asheville by supporting local businesses.
1. I will respect the diversity, creativity, and identities of residents and visitors.	4. I will leave nature better than I found it.	7. I will seek experiences that are uniquely Asheville.
2. I will treat others with kindness.	5. I will respect the boundaries of trails and campsites and will not stack rocks when enjoying a stream.	8. I will support local businesses and restaurants.
3. I will drive with patience and exercise caution.	6. I will not feed or pursue animals.	9. I will be mindful of the connection between affordable housing and short-term rentals by only staying in permitted homestays.

Figure 8. Proposed sustainability pledge for Asheville

9.3 Engage Community Members

Involved in all of the above solutions are community members. If community members are excluded from the process of reinvesting tourism in the city, they will continue to report problems. In a way, this process has already begun with the perception surveys for 2019 and 2022. This engagement, though, should go both ways and not just recruit residents' opinions. By continuing to engage the community in the decision-making process, they will stay informed about tourism ventures, contribute a broader perspective, and help contextualize possible impacts of the proposed solutions. Although it may take longer to come to a consensus, the finalized product will represent the strongest possible outcome.

9.4 Utilize Visitor Education and Social Marketing

The City of Asheville and Buncombe County should provide or highlight visitor education opportunities to inform tourists of the area and encourage the adoption of responsible behaviors. There are many ways to achieve this goal through supporting programs, signage, or marketing materials. This goal could be met through the sustainability pledge if crafted in a way that outlines specific responsible tourist behaviors such as described above. This could also be achieved through highlighting pre-existing local guided tours to educate visitors about the area's history and environment. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the City was already utilizing education and social marketing through signage and the "Wear, Wait, and Wash" program (Figures 9 & 10).¹¹⁶ Similar materials and logos, such as the black bear mascot, could be continued into further visitor education signage downtown, on trails, in hotels, or in businesses.



Figures 9 & 10. Examples of social marketing with black bear mascot for COVID-19 pandemic in Asheville, NC.¹¹⁰

10. Conclusion

The demonstrated negative impacts of tourism in Asheville are a result of overtourism. To combat these impacts, the City is encouraged to facilitate a transition toward sustainable and regenerative tourism practices. By adopting a sustainability pledge, creating a destination stewardship council, engaging the community, and educating visitors, Asheville can combat these negative impacts and pave the way for sustainable tourism development. The City of Asheville has welcomed the benefits of tourism for well over a century and is a very highly recognized and recommended in the tourism industry.^{117, 118} In recent years, visitation to Asheville has skyrocketed and dwarfed our small population size leading to community degradation.^{119, 120, 121} Among the top concerns are tourism's threat to Asheville's character and environment, overcrowding, and a heightened cost of living.¹²² If we continue tourism using the current approach, the impacts of overtourism will worsen and residents will face the problems head-on. In order

to preserve the unique character of Asheville, its environment, and its economy, the City of Asheville must adapt to ensure the famed Asheville tourism industry can continue to thrive into the future.

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