

# Tourism and the (Un)Expected: A Research Note

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*Abstract: This research note attempts to introduce the reader to the recent notion of 'Last Chance Tourism'. Whilst the idea of travelling to places of destruction or devastation is not new to tourism studies, 'Last Chance Tourism' is being particularly associated with destinations already impacted or projected to be impacted by adverse affects of climate change. The note recognises latest studies in the field and puts forth a number of directions for future research in the Pacific region.*

*Key Words: last chance tourism; climate change; low-lying islands; Pacific region*

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Introducing Last Chance Tourism: Alongside the global climate change discourse, travelling to destinations ceasing to exist in their original form has gained in popularity in recent years (Hall, 2010; Lemelin, Dawson, Stewart, Maher, & Lück, 2010). Different terms have emerged to describe this new 'travel trend', like 'doom tourism', 'the tourism of doom', 'climate change voyeurism', 'climate tourism', 'extinction tourism', or 'last chance tourism', to name but a few (Eijgelaar, Thaper, & Peeters, 2010; Farbotko, 2010; Kendle, 2008; Lemelin, et al., 2010). Explanations though of what such travel constitutes are scarce. Generally, last chance tourism, to which will be referred to herein, is described: as travel to destinations in which the pristine natural environment is to disappear (Dawson, Stewart, Lemelin, & Scott, 2010), as an exclusive travel experience delimited in space and time (Hall, 2010), as a new and somewhat abstract way of an eco-touristic experience (Eijgelaar, et al., 2010), or as yet another "niche tourism market where tourists explicitly seek vanishing landscapes or seascapes, and/or disappearing natural and/or social heritage" (Lemelin, et al. 2010, 478). On the other hand, it has been highlighted that last chance tourism may not necessarily be a 'new trend', but rather a "modern-day version of an old human impulse - to behold an untrammled frontier. Except this time around, instead of being the first to climb a mountain or behold a glacier-fed lake, voyagers [...] are eager to be the ones to see things last" (Expedition News, 2008). This research note offers a brief overview of last chance tourism and its role in tourism development within destinations impacted by climate change to date.



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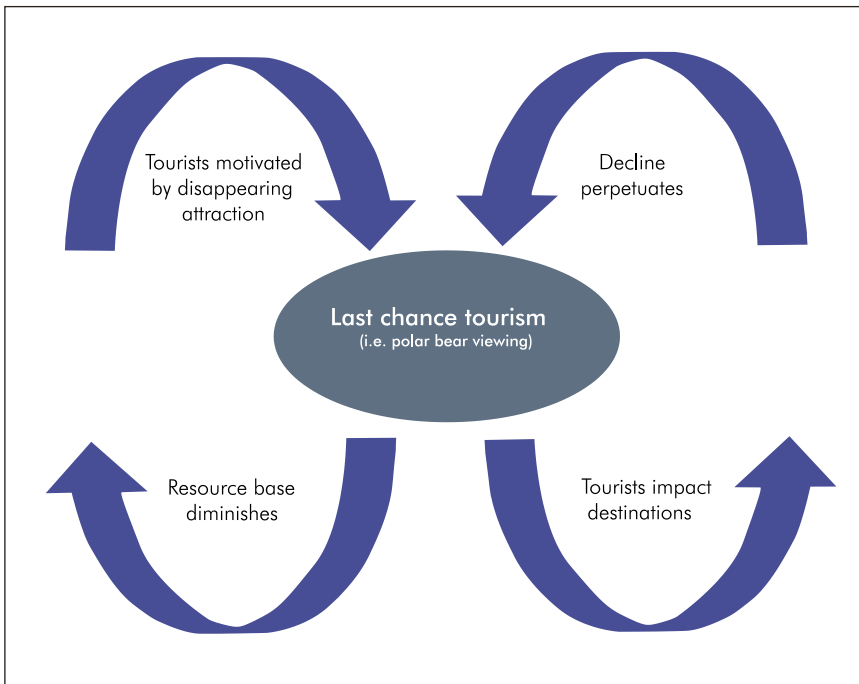


Fig. 1: Perpetuation of Last Chance Tourism in a Context of Ongoing Environmental Change

The notion of last chance tourism has prompted a wider range of popular publications announcing, and thereby somewhat advertising, the ‘last must-see’ places before it may be ‘too late’ to witness them in their yet unspoiled or almost unspoiled condition (Kendle, 2008; Lemelin, et al., 2010). In this regard, the Polar regions have been paid particular attention to in recent years. Declining glaciers and polar bear populations have become iconic representations of climate change and its impacts. At the same time, the fact of their decrease has stimulated an increase in travel. Dawson et al. (2010) illustrate effects and causes of the appeal of a diminishing resource base in their

model of ‘perpetuation of last chance tourism in a context of ongoing environmental change’ (Fig. 1). As is evident from this, the controversy of amplifying the negative effects by contributing to further degradation of the environment through own travels makes last chance tourism a highly questionable opportunity for long-term sustainable development (Dawson, et al., 2010). Moreover, scholars emphasise the ethical implications that come along with the ‘exhibition’ of and the ‘gaze’ at destinations and their environments. Nature and local populations are increasingly being ‘objectified’ (Farbotko, 2010; Lemelin, et al., 2010). The debatable longevity and morality

of a ‘climate change product’ have resulted in different responses within the industry (Lemelin, et al., 2010). In 2008, Frew examined tour operators’ web pages for advertisement or information provision referring to last chance tourism and to adverse affects of climate change in Greenland, at the Great Barrier Reef, and at Mount Kilimanjaro. She found that only few operators actively cover these aspects to market their destination products. On the other hand, besides providing an economic opportunity particularly for peripheral destinations, last chance tourism is said to also present an opportunity to visitors to reflect upon own contributions to climate change and upon own environmental behaviors. Accordingly, some operators started to include discussion groups, workshops, or specific lectures, relating to climate change and its meaning for the destination to be travelled to, into their tour packages (Eijgelaar, et al., 2010; Frew, 2008). However, Dawson et al.’s (2010) study of polar bear viewers to Manitoba as well as Lemelin et al.’s (2010) examination of Antarctic cruise ship passengers have shown that awareness and understanding of causes of climate change among consumers are yet very modest

### Last Chance Tourism and the Pacific Region

Besides the Polar regions, low-lying island nations have been highlighted for their vulnerability towards climate change impacts. Albeit the recognition of these to be severely affected by sea-level rise, coastal erosion, water and food scarcity, flooding, or coral bleaching, so-called ‘struggles over representation’ of truths or non-truths of impacts have evolved. In this regard, the two Pacific small islands states Kiribati and Tuvalu have been frequently named within international ‘climate negotiations’ over adaptation and mitigation needs (e.g. Farbotko, 2005, 2010; Mortreux & Barnett, 2009). The rising attention paid to these two island nations worldwide has also led to their being increasingly linked with the notion of last chance tourism. Herein, it is particularly the media that has facilitated associations of destinations in decline, translating scientific assertions of the inevitability “that these [low-lying] nations will be destroyed by climate change during the course of this century” into a coherent mes-



Waves from the ‘King Tide’ cause destruction inside the house, Tarawa Island, Kiribati

sage for potential travelers: these places must be seen before they ‘disappear’ (Aung, Singh, & Prahad, 2009 203). With references to common climate change tropes relating to low-lying island states, such as ‘titanic states’ (the sinking or drowning islands), ‘high tide’, ‘dark clouds over paradise’ (the paradise projection) or the ‘coalmine canaries’ (the guinea pigs), the media has become a major promoter of last chance tourism (Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Farbotko, 2005; Lemelin, et al., 2010).

While the national tourist offices of Kiribati and Tuvalu do not necessarily explicitly seek to underline such representations, they are nevertheless aware of appealing effects these may have to potential visitors. Statements reflect both uncertainty and confidence in utilising last chance tourism for marketing purposes. The recently formulated Kiribati National Tourism Action Plan indicates, on the one hand, that “visitors to Kiribati should expect and experience that will make them reflect on their everyday lives” (GoK 2009, 19). On the other hand, last chance tourism is clearly considered an opportunity to underpin political messages when declaring that “tourism [can be used] to reinforce its [Kiribati’s] key international message relating to climate change and the rise of sea levels” (GoK 2009, 8).

In contrast to Kiribati, Tuvalu slightly more actively exploits climate change impacts as a promotional tool (Gay, 2011). In this regard, Farbotko (2010, 225) points out that Tuvalu has transformed “into a space of climate change tourism and renewable energy”, a space enriched by “interviews, photographs, newspaper and magazine articles, web pages, research papers and policy statements”. Statements made by the national tourist officer though are tentative. He remarks that “Tuvalu is looking to develop a niche eco-tourism industry [...and...] to balance tourism development with environmental sustainability” (Sami, 2010). The national tourist office is eager to promote ‘green tourism’ and carbon conscious travel without explicitly compromising the idea of the small island nation being an or rather one of the ‘icons of global warming’. In 2010, Tuvalu had arranged the first King Tide Festival<sup>1</sup> which is thought “to raise awareness of the effects of climate change on Tuvalu and [to] at-

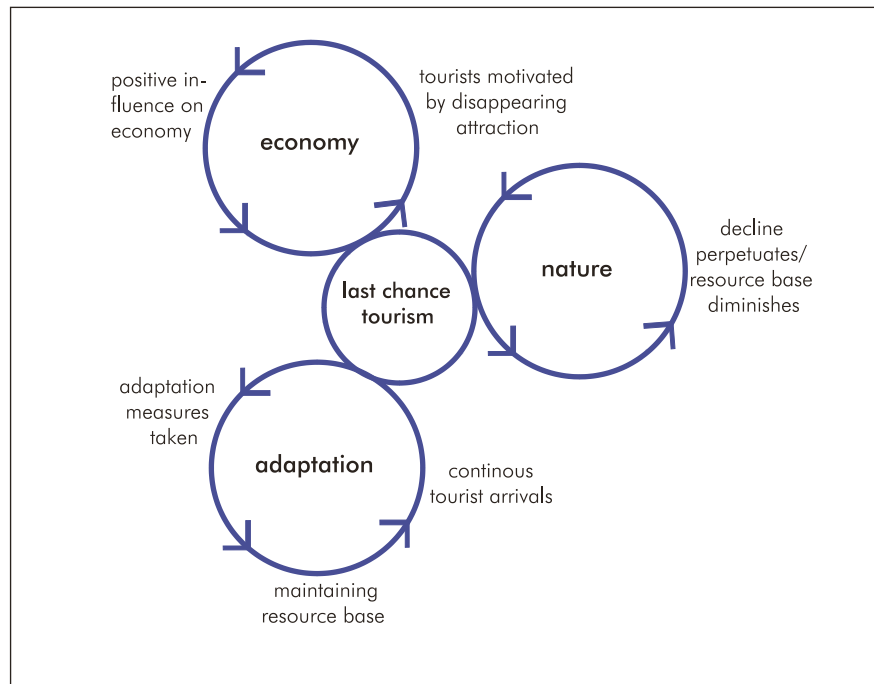


Fig. 2: Perpetuation of Adaptation in a Context of Last Chance Tourism

Source: Own Design after Dawson et al. 2010.

tract environmentally conscious travelers” (Gay, 2011; Sami, 2010).

Tuvalu and Kiribati seem overall restrained in their actions to fully display their island nations as last chance tourism destinations. However, this may only be comprehensible, since little is known about this ‘trend’ and its positive and negative consequences. Eventually, both island nations still highlight their “spectacular marine environment consisting of a vast expanse of ocean interspersed with atolls, magnificent lagoons, coral reefs and small islands” (e.g. TNTO, 2010).

### Future Directions

Travel to destinations impacted by climate change has become increasingly popular in recent years. Particularly the Polar north and south as well as tropical low-lying island nations, destinations in which adverse affects can ‘already’ be witnessed ‘first hand’, are associated with the last chance tourism notion. While particularly the media explicitly tell about vanishing natural features, or even about disappearing cultures, destinations themselves and tour operators are rather retentive in nourishing the last chance tourism idea. Particularly small island development states like Kiribati and Tuvalu are in a moral dilemma. Can and should economic growth which is based upon questionable ethical practice, be encouraged? Last chance tourism does indeed offer a potential solution for destinations suffering

from a chronic lack of natural resources. Actual economic outputs as well as ethical consequences (e.g. like local resident conscious), however, remain largely unexplored.

Studies may therefore further seek to examine on how last chance tourism is, in fact, understood and interpreted by stakeholders of tourism of effected destinations. These may include government and tourist office representatives, non-governmental organisations, aid donors, local populations and, indeed, local tourism businesses and visitors. In this regard, relationships among these stakeholders as well as their attitude towards tourism being based upon the last chance tourism notion should be brought into question. Likewise, it is unclear to what extent last chance tourism may be compatible with current tourism marketing of the islands and to what extent it could contribute to long-term sustainable tourism development at all. It may also be interesting to look at influences of last chance tourism on climate change-related adaption among local businesses (Fig. 2). Does ‘last chance’ promote thoughts of last opportunities to protect island resources or does it rather imply this to be the very ‘last economic opportunity’ before resources are to disappear?

Moreover, the role of the visitor could be further investigated. What are the pre-defined images held and how is climate change then experienced by on-site visitors? Does the experienced





have an influence on future visitor behavior and consumption? How is the 'last chance tourist' perceived by local business owners?

These are only few of the many questions to be explored. It is hoped to herewith encourage future examinations in this vast field. Last chance tourism is highly exciting for it challenges beliefs and pre-conceptions about impacts and causes of climate change held not only by visitors to islands like Kiribati or Tuvalu, but by consumer and supply side of destinations affected by the devastating consequences of climate change worldwide.

### Endnote

1) The first King Tide Festival was held in February 2010. The 6-day Festival is held during a time of the year when the highest annual tides occur in Tuvalu. While showcasing Tuvaluan traditions and culture, it is foremost to raise public awareness of impacts of climate change and their severe consequences for the island nation.

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