

## Tourism development can become 'devil's bargain'

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) - Tourism development in towns like Sun Valley, Idaho, is a "devil's bargain" that profoundly changes the communities for which it is successful, as much or more than the traditional industries it often replaces in the West, academic experts say.

However, whether those changes are for good or ill depends on the values of the communities themselves and how they develop for visitors.

Hal Rothman, a history professor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas who has studied the impact of tourism on communities, says tourism changes the nature of places and the people who live there. He said it's a perfect example of "killing the goose that laid the golden egg."

But Patrick Long, a business professor at the University of Colorado, said tourism can be a positive means for developing rural Western communities and promoting economic revitalization.

Both spoke at a conference "Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West," presented by the Center of the American West at Boulder.

Rothman said tourism "is neither good nor bad. But it is a complicated industry that people don't look at very clearly."

Successful development of a tourist economy inevitably changes the communities in which it occurs, he said. Tourism is like a community holding a mirror up to itself and then deciding what it wants to be.

"You manufacture that place for tourists," he said. "Over time, you change yourself."

As a community draws paying visitors, it gradually changes its concept of itself and its own values, creating the kind of town that appeals to tourists.

"It doesn't matter whether you embrace gaming or cultural tourism or recreation," he said. "When tourism succeeds ... it becomes too important to be left to the locals," thus disenfranchising the local population. "I think tourism is among the most colonial of colonial economies."

Ironically, the community asset that best serves a tourist economy is a sense of malleability.

"The more a place has a strong sense of identity," he said, "the less chance of success it has in tourism."

This is because it will be unwilling to make the changes in the community that the tourists demand.

Rothman's prime example of the trend is Sun Valley. When the resort was originally developed by the railroad, people who lived and worked there felt empowered and had a sense of community.

When the resort was sold in the 1960s and the new owner came in with his own ideas and the money to implement them, the longtime residents felt disenfranchised and frustrated.

"People who have an investment in the community are against the newcomers, who physically take over the place. Longevity is an important ingredient of how communities see themselves."

Nonetheless, Rothman concedes, "Tourism is in many ways the future of the West."

It is the best available economic development strategy under a wide variety of circumstances, he said. His home state of Nevada, for instance, has a large gold mining industry, but the number of people employed in the industry is negligible, because of the new technologies that have been brought to the industry.

"Mining is inconsequential in the Nevada economy," he said. "Mining isn't coming back as a labor-intensive strategy. I think the same is true of agriculture and ranching."

One illusion that Nevada does offer is a prototype tourist development: Las Vegas.

But other communities cannot expect to duplicate Las Vegas, he said. People now not only come to Las Vegas to gamble, but "people come to rubberneck to see what the spectacle is about."

Las Vegas' strong unions, relatively high wages for unskilled jobs, and large tips to service workers are almost certainly not reproducible in other economies.

University of Colorado business Professor Patrick Long argued that tourism "can be important if well planned and weaved into the cultural and economic fabric of the community. Tourism is viewed by some as a doomsday economic experiment."

Long quoted the late author Edward Abbey, who wrote that "tourism is always and everywhere a dubious, fraudulent, distasteful activity."

Tourist development in rural communities that only want "a small piece of the tourism pie" can offer a way to get some economic development, preserve local history and culture and beautify the community.

Long cited the experience of Burlington, Colo., a town of about 3,000 people along I-70 near the Colorado-Kansas border. The community built an Old Town and featured a nationally revered carousel.

"Rural areas have history and cultural resources on which to base tourism development," he said.

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