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DARK TOURISM: HISTORY, CULTURAL HERITAGE, AND VISITOR MOTIVATIONS

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Abstract: Dark tourism is a form of tourism that involves visiting sites associated with death, war, disaster and other tragic events (former concentration camps, war memorials, disaster sites, memorial museums etc). The motivation for visiting these sites is varied: some are there to learn about history, some to remember the victims and many are simply there to understand the past. The article looks at the history and development of dark tourism, the reasons why people visit such sites, its educational value and the problems it can cause. It concludes that dark tourism can be a valuable tool in terms of education, cultural understanding and heritage preservation but such sites must be managed with great care and sensitivity to the victims and their families. The provision of accurate historical context, the promotion of responsible visitor behaviour and the need for ethical tourism management are all key points.

Keywords: dark tourism, history, cultural heritage, historical memory, visitor motivation, tourism management, education, memorial sites, ethical tourism, sustainable tourism.

Introduction

Tourism is of course a major part of the modern world. Whilst many people will go to the beach, the big cities or to various recreational destinations, there is a significant number of people who visit places which are in some way associated with war, disaster, death and so on. This is what is known as dark tourism.

Dark tourism is different from normal leisure tourism in that it's concerned with the difficult and often traumatic aspects of human history. The destinations can be battlefields, former concentration camps, prisons, memorial museums and disaster sites. It's a form of tourism which enables people to reflect on the past and to gain some understanding of what it was like to have lived through those terrible times.

The term "dark tourism" was established in the academic literature in the 1990s. John Lennon and Malcolm Foley were the key figures in the development of the field. Their work looked at why people go to places of death and disaster and what impact such places have on our understanding of history (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Lennon & Foley, 2000).

Dark tourism is clearly a significant area of study in contemporary tourism. It can be of immense value in terms of historical education, in ensuring that the victims

of tragic events are not forgotten and in the preservation of heritage sites. It can also be of benefit to the local economy. On the other hand it does present a number of ethical and management issues. Tour operators and site managers have a responsibility to present the tragic events in a sensitive manner and to respect the victims, the survivors and their families. Commercial interests must never be allowed to trump remembrance, historical truth and the educational value of the experience.

This looks at the educational, cultural and economic value of dark tourism, looks at the reasons why people go, and considers the ethical issues which tourism organisations face. It's particularly useful for tourism students and future managers as it shows that tourism isn't just about entertainment and recreation; it can be a vehicle for promoting historical awareness and cultural understanding.

Literature Review

The practice of visiting sites of death and disaster is by no means new. People have always been drawn to battlefields, cemeteries, historical prisons and disaster sites. Dark tourism as a distinct subject of academic study only really emerged in the late 20th century.

John Lennon and Malcolm Foley are the two main researchers in this area. In their book Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster (2000) they look at the relationship between tourism and death/disaster. Philip Stone has also made a significant contribution to the field in that he has looked at the way in which destinations present death and disaster to the visitor.His work suggests that dark tourism is a very broad phenomenon and encompasses a very wide range of sites and experiences, from those which are essentially educational and commemorative through to those which may be quite commercial in the visitor experience (Stone, 2006).

Dark tourism destinations are very much the same in fact. Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland is a former Nazi concentration and extermination camp which is now a museum and memorial, the whole purpose of which is to teach about the Holocaust and to remember the victims. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Japan is another example of a dark tourism site, one which is there to educate you about the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945 and the importance of peace. These are just two examples of the educational and memorial function that dark tourism sites can have.

Why do people go to dark tourism sites?

People go to dark tourism sites for all sorts of reasons. One of the principal reasons is to learn. They may be looking for a more direct and tangible way of learning about a period in history than is available through books or films. The actual buildings, the photographs, the documents, the personal effects can all be a very powerful way of learning about what happened and what the consequences were. Remembrance is another key motivation. People go to memorials to pay their respects to the victims and to remember those who have suffered. That can be particularly important for people whose families and communities have been directly affected by war or disaster.

Curiosity can also play a part in visitor decision making. People may be interested in finding out what actually happened at a site and why it became a historically significant place. That doesn't necessarily mean they are drawn to the suffering per se, it may simply be that they are interested in the history.

Personal and family links can be very important too. Some people will go to a place where a relative once lived or fought or was involved in some way. It's a way of getting a better understanding of their family history and of their own cultural identity. The media also have an influence on dark tourism. Films, documentaries, books and social media all expose the public to certain sites and can in turn encourage people to visit them. People come to the museum with all sorts of historical knowledge. The museum and the tour guide therefore need to be able to provide clear, correct and accessible information to a wide range of people.

The Role of Dark Tourism in Education

Education is one of the key functions of many dark tourism sites. Historical museums and memorial sites are prime examples of places where you can learn about war, political violence and disaster and its impact on individuals and society. Classroom learning is of course important, but there's a very different dimension to visiting a real site. You can actually see the buildings, the photographs, the documents and the objects which are linked to the past. That can be a very useful thing in terms of making the past come alive and can be a very powerful experience. Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park is a good example of this in that it enables you to get a real sense of the impact of the atomic bombing and the importance of peace. Auschwitz-Birkenau is another good example in that it provides a very tangible link to the Holocaust, to the issue of discrimination and the dangers of extremist political ideologies.

Dark tourism can also be a catalyst for critical thought. You can be made to think about why those events happened in the first place, what impact they had and what we can learn from them. It can be a very powerful way of learning about history as well as about human rights, about tolerance and about peace.

Ethical Problems in Dark Tourism Despite the educational and cultural value of dark tourism there are a number of ethical issues. The foremost of these is respect for the victims and survivors and their families. Any site connected with death and suffering needs to be treated with sensitivity. A big issue is the commercialisation of tragedy.

Some of the organisations involved may be more interested in the advertising, the entertainment and the souvenirs than in actually explaining the history of the event. That could easily turn a site of considerable historical significance into a rather ordinary tourist attraction and would be deeply offensive to visitors and the local population.

Visitor behaviour is another issue. You've got the potential for some visitors to take inappropriate photos, make offensive comments and just generally ignore the rules of the site. It's important that tourism organisations clearly communicate visitor guidelines and explain why it is important to behave in a respectful manner.

Historical accuracy is paramount. Museums and tour guides must not distort the facts or present unproven assertions as fact. All information should be based on reliable evidence and presented in the correct historical context.

Local communities should also be involved in the tourism planning process. They may have a personal or family connection to the events being celebrated and so their views should be taken into account when it comes to the management of the site and the way in which the history is presented.

These issues can be overcome via staff training, clear visitor guidance, working with historians and the production of appropriate educational material. With the right approach dark tourism can be an effective way of educating visitors whilst at the same time helping to preserve the heritage and the people associated with it.

Conclusion

Dark tourism is a significant element of modern tourism as it links travel with history, cultural heritage, education and remembrance. Visiting sites associated with war, disaster and other tragic events can be a very powerful way of understanding the past and the impact that such events have had on people and on society.

This article has highlighted a number of potential benefits of dark tourism. It can enhance historical awareness, help to preserve the memory of the victims, assist in the conservation of heritage and it can be a significant contributor to the local economy.

However dark tourism does come with a raft of responsibilities. The commercialisation of tragedy, the potential for inappropriate visitor behaviour and the dissemination of inaccurate historical information can all have a damaging effect on the significance and value of a memorial. Tourism organisations therefore have a duty to ensure that they are operating in a responsible manner.

Dark tourism shouldn't be seen just as a way of pulling in the tourist trade or making money. When managed ethically, it can support public education, encourage reflection, preserve cultural heritage, and help future generations understand important lessons from the past.

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