



# The Hague International Model United Nations

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**Forum:** General Assembly 2

**Issue:** Measures to reduce tourism congestion in natural and cultural sites

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## Introduction

The tourism or travel industry is a broad network of various segments that work together to support travel for leisure, both domestic and international. Its sectors include transport, travel services (such as travel agencies), food & beverages, and entertainment. Tourism is a massive industry that supports local systems and contributes to national economies. It is said to account for 9.1% (US\$9.9 trillion) of the global GDP.<sup>1</sup> There is a rising number of tourists, leading to a phenomenon known as overtourism which threatens the sustainability of natural and cultural sites. Degradation due to over-tourism is being faced by iconic landscapes and cities like Venice, the Taj Mahal, and the Great Barrier Reef. Environmental and socio-economic consequences arise from this concerning issue, requiring immediate attention by the international community.

The significance of addressing tourism congestion lies in preserving the heritage and ecosystems that define these sites while balancing economic benefits. Major issues include environmental damage, disturbances to local communities, and depletion of cultural resources.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Overtourism:**

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<sup>1</sup> "Travel without Leaving a Trace." *How to Tackle Overtourism | The UNESCO Courier*, [courier.unesco.org/en/articles/travel-without-leaving-trace](https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/travel-without-leaving-trace)

Overtourism refers to an excess number of visitors in an area, beyond what a locality can cope with.<sup>2</sup> It often affects residents, deteriorates the environment, and diminishes the local culture of the destination. Other consequences are overcrowding and erosion of famous natural and cultural sites.

### Sustainable Tourism:

According to UN Tourism, Sustainable tourism development is “*Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities*”<sup>3</sup> It is best measured using the Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (MST), which is a reference framework to measure the economic, environmental and social impacts of tourism and has been internationally agreed upon. It was made by UN Tourism in collaboration with the UN Statistics Division, the International Labour Organisation, leading countries etc.

### Carrying Capacity:

Carrying Capacity is the average population density that a given environment or habitat can carry and sustain. The population limit is dependent of factors such as food, water, shelter etc. Exceeding this capacity results in a shortage of essential resources, whereas a lesser population causes an underutilisation of resources.

### Cultural Erosion:

Cultural Erosion is essentially the process by which a culture loses its core elements - such as practices, beliefs and traditions - or starts to disappear over time, often due to new elements replacing them. This often results from commercialisation of natural and cultural sites for profit which in turn causes a loss of authenticity and pride in their heritage.

## Background Information

Tourism congestion is a pressing global issue as the number of international travellers rises, often increasing faster than the capacity of destinations to sustainably allocate my resources. This section will delve into the three key aspects of tourism congestion: it’s various causes and driving factors, the environmental impact it leaves behind, and other socio-economic and cultural consequences of the phenomenon.

### Causes and drivers of tourism:

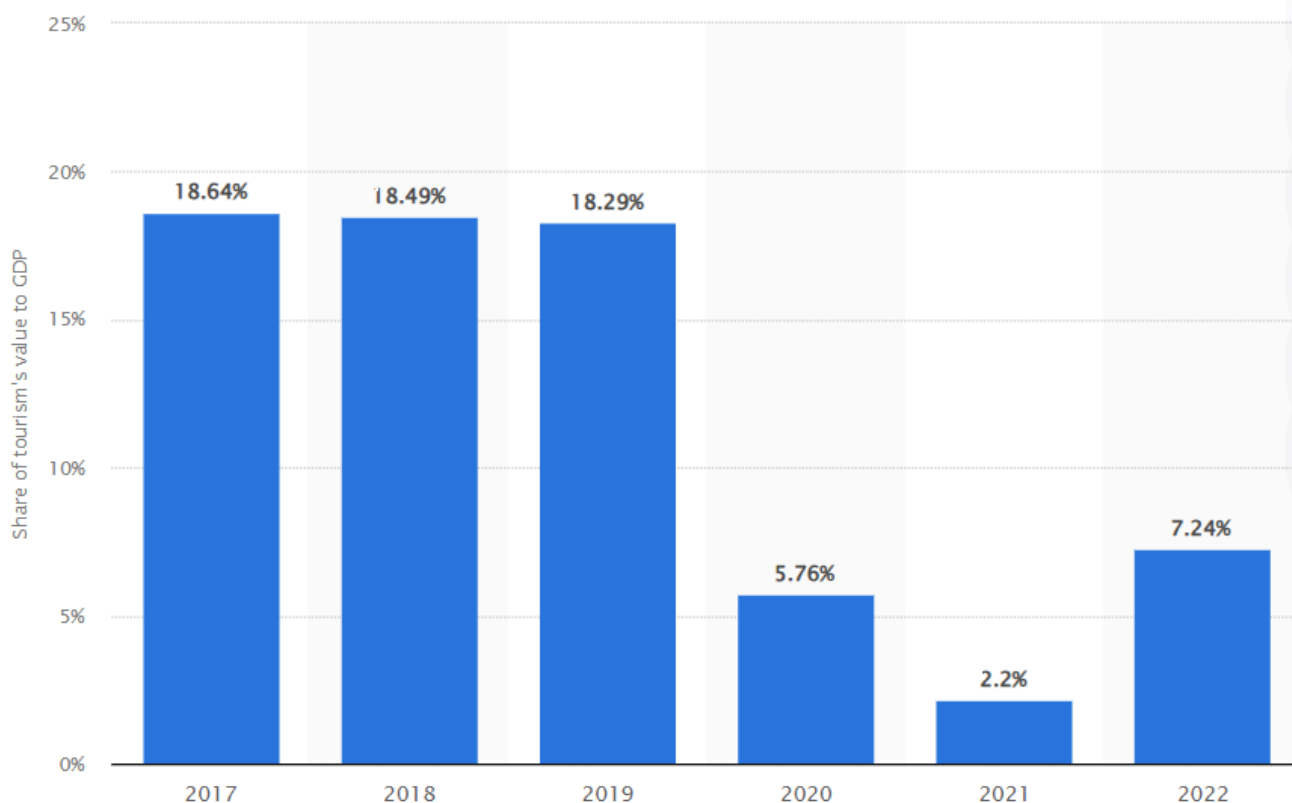
#### *Economic dependence and government encouragement:*

Tourism is a major source of income for multiple countries, and those that are developing

<sup>2</sup> “Travel without Leaving a Trace.” *How to Tackle Overtourism | The UNESCO Courier*, [courier.unesco.org/en/articles/travel-without-leaving-trace](https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/travel-without-leaving-trace)

<sup>3</sup> “Un Tourism: Bringing the World Closer.” *Sustainable Development*, [www.unwto.org/sustainable-development](https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development).

especially bank on tourism revenue to fund public services and drive economic growth. An example of this would be Thailand. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, an estimated 11.5% of the country’s GDP was derived from tourism.<sup>4</sup> The sector collapsed in 2020 when most borders around the world were closed, including Thailand’s own. As restrictions relaxed, the number of international tourists increased significantly, going from just 430000 in 2021 to 11.15 million in 2022.<sup>5</sup> However, this is not much compared to the 39.8 million in 2019, thus indicating that Thailand still has a long way to fully recover from the pandemic. This is also reflected in the graph below:<sup>6</sup>



**Share of tourism in the GDP of Thailand, 2017-2022.**

This dependence on tourism for any country often leads to prioritisation of tourist influx over other factors such as stability, sustainability and cultural integrity, making the government reluctant to impose restrictions on visitors. This in turn causes high tourist traffic, as well as the rampant infrastructural development that accompanies it, putting

<sup>4</sup> “Thailand’s Tourism Sector Drives Economic Recovery.” *IHS Markit*, 28 Mar. 2023, <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/mi/research-analysis/thailands-tourism-sector-drives-economic-recovery-mar23.html>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Published by Andreas Walderich, and Oct 8. “Thailand: Share of Tourism to GDP.” *Statista*, 8 Oct. 2024, [www.statista.com/statistics/1143467/thailand-share-of-tourism-to-gdp/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20the%20tourism%20industry.by%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic.](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1143467/thailand-share-of-tourism-to-gdp/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20the%20tourism%20industry.by%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic.)

further strain on the country's resources. Often, governments and travel agencies over-promote certain iconic tourist-loved locations with no focus on new ones, thus completely exploiting very specific natural and cultural sites.

### *Marketing and social media influence:*

The increase in accessibility to information from around the world has definitely impacted the tourism industry, especially with regard to visitor distribution. Social media platforms have seen an exponential rise in 'travel influencers' who spread the word, increase hype and inform their audiences of places to visit around the world. Viral posts showing picturesque landmarks and lesser-known locations lead to a sudden surge in tourist footfall. The sudden popularity is often quite difficult to manage, leading to hurried and suboptimal allocation of resources. In fact, according to a survey of 2,008 millennials conducted by WeSwap, 31% said that posting holiday pictures is as important as the holiday itself, and 29% would not choose a holiday destination if they were not able to post on social media there.<sup>7</sup> This underscores the sheer impact social media has on tourism and consequently tourism congestion.

## Environmental Impact

Natural sites such as national parks, forests, coastal areas etc. bear the brunt of tourism-related activities. The impact of tourism congestion on natural wonders are far-reaching as they threaten biodiversity, landscape, the ecological role of the site and the stability of ecosystems. A very visible effect is soil erosion that occurs as a result of overcrowding. For example, popular hiking trails on hills and mountains such as the Swiss alps are degrading by the constant trampling of thousands of visitors, which leads to disrupted vegetation and destabilisation of the geographical structure.

Another pressing issue is water contamination. This results from littering as well as construction of tourist facilities such as resorts and theme parks that lead to entrance of untreated sewage and waste into rivers and lakes. A prime example of this is Lake Baikal in Russia. Over the past ten years, mass tourism has increased dramatically, drawing up to 2 million visitors to Baikal.<sup>8</sup> Many of the guesthouses that have sprung up in Lake Baikal's shallow bays and coves are unlawfully constructed and do not adhere to local rules. Due to their lack of contemporary wastewater systems, these heavily used, antiquated facilities leak nutrients into the warm shallow seas, which causes algal mats to form. These algae, which were essentially nonexistent ten years ago, are now the predominant biomass in the shallow littoral zone of the lake and pose a threat to other indigenous species that are essential to the Baikal ecosystem.<sup>9</sup> The location and timing of the algae blooms'

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<sup>7</sup> Haines, Gavin. "A Third of Millennials Say Posting Pictures on Social Media Is as Important as the Holiday Itself." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 23 Aug. 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/news/millennials-social-media-holidays/>.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, Kate Pride. "Tourism and Climate Change Threaten Lake Baikal, a Unique Global Treasure." *Advanced Science News*, 27 Apr. 2021, <https://www.advancedsciencenews.com/tourism-and-climate-change-threaten-lake-baikal-a-unique-global-treasure/>

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

emergence indicate a clear connection to Baikal tourism.

This also relates to marine ecosystems being at risk around the world. Coral reefs attract thousands of tourists each year for various activities such as snorkelling, diving, boating etc. Human activity has caused portions of the coral in Australia's Great Barrier Reef, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to bleach and break. Coral formations become more fragile as a result of divers unintentionally touching them and boats dumping anchors. Furthermore, growth of cruise tourism exacerbates these problems because cruise ships release pollutants and interfere with marine species' migratory habits.

Tourism-related transportation have a significant contribution to climate change, which then amplifies the threat to natural sites. Another grave consequence of tourism-congestion is wildlife disturbance. With the growing number of off-road vehicles, safari tourism etc, it affects individual species and destabilises ecosystems.

These environmental problems' combined effects highlight how urgently sustainable tourist practices are needed. Comprehensive regulations that control tourist numbers, improve trash management, and support environmentally friendly infrastructure are necessary to preserve natural sites. The environmental impact of tourism can be reduced and these priceless ecosystems preserved for future generations by taking steps like imposing access limitations, creating buffer zones, and providing incentives for responsible travel.

### Socio-economic and cultural consequences:

Significant socioeconomic and cultural problems are imposed on host communities and heritage sites by tourism congestion. Beyond just physical damage, the effects include community displacing and significant cultural identity loss. These impacts frequently jeopardize the quality of life for locals and threaten the long-term sustainability of tourism.

#### *Physical damage to Heritage Sites:*

Excessive foot traffic and overcrowding contribute to the physical deterioration of cultural landmarks. An example of this is the Angkor Wat in Columbia, a 900 year old heritage site. It attracts millions of visitors on a yearly basis, which makes it a challenge to preserve the structure. The tourist congestion here is eroding the stone floor and steps as well as causing damage to the intricate carvings on the walls.<sup>10</sup> In Rome, the Colosseum faces significant challenges as tourists vandalise the structure, carving their own initials or other symbols on the walls. When identified, the vandals are charged with fines however catching it happen in the first place and ensuring that

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<sup>10</sup> KaitlynBra. "What Is Overtourism and Why Is It a Problem?" *Sustainable Travel International*, Sustainable Travel International, 26 Aug. 2024, [sustainabletravel.org/what-is-overtourism/#:~:text=One%20example%20is%20Cambodia's%20900.climbing%20damage%20the%20intricate%20carvings.](https://sustainabletravel.org/what-is-overtourism/#:~:text=One%20example%20is%20Cambodia's%20900.climbing%20damage%20the%20intricate%20carvings.)

it does not repeat is an issue.<sup>11</sup>

### *Cultural degradation and commercialisation of culture:*

Tourism congestion has significant socio-economic and cultural challenges on host communities. The impact encompasses community uprooting, cultural identity loss, and a decline in social cohesiveness. These impacts often impair the quality of life for locals and threaten the long-term sustainability of tourism. It also leads to the commercialisation of culture, when traditional art, ceremonies and rituals are modified to cater to tourists and their expectations, shifting the focus from cultural appreciation to profit maximisation. For example, Balinese culture is heavily commercialised now, given its popularity as a tourist destination. Barong and Kecak, which are traditional dances that are supposed to be performed in sacred contexts, are now staged as entertainment and recreational activities for tourists, which brings up questions about the degradation of cultural authenticity.<sup>12</sup> Tourism congestion may also lead to community displacement as the expansion of tourism infrastructure may displace local communities. Often, the increase in short-term rentals taken by tourists has increased prices and left less space for the locals themselves. Large-scale development requiring much land may disrupt the livelihoods of the previous inhabitants especially if the land was used for agricultural purposes (means of sustenance for farmers). It also reduces the quality of living by increasing traffic and strain on public goods such as transport and other resources. The locals there may also have to adopt languages spoken by tourists to communicate with and cater to them, thus accelerating the loss of linguistic diversity. Even the income generated by the tourist may not properly compensate, with some local communities gaining only small fractions of the tourism revenue which may not be evenly distributed. This leads to economic disparities and resentment among locals.

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

**United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO):** The UNWTO is a specialised agency of the United Nations. It is responsible for the promotion of sustainable and universally accessible tourism, as well as the value of tourism in the context of economic growth, development and sustainability. Its work is based on 5 pillars:<sup>13</sup>

1. Leading the digital transformation in the tourism sector

<sup>11</sup> Matassa, Caralynn. "Why Can't Tourists Simply Stop Defacing Rome's Colosseum?" *Business Insider*, Business Insider, <https://www.businessinsider.com/italy-colosseum-keeps-getting-defaced-media-attention-isnt-helping-2023-7>.

<sup>12</sup> *Balinese Culture 2024: Balancing Tradition and Modernization*, <https://www.bukitvista.com/round-table-talk/balinese-culture-preservation#:~:text=Tourism%20has%20brought%20prosperity%20to.now%20primarily%20staged%20for%20tourists>.

<sup>13</sup> "Un Tourism: Bringing the World Closer." <https://www.unwto.org/who-we-are>

2. Promoting investments and entrepreneurship within the industry to make it more competitive
3. Creating better jobs and providing related training
4. Promoting safe travel
5. Protecting cultural and natural heritage to economically and socially support communities.

It is also responsible for creating the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, which is a set of principles designed to guide important stakeholders in the industry.

**United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO):** UNESCO is another specialised agency of the United Nations. Its World Heritage program aims to identify, protect and preserve structures and sites of natural and cultural significance. The UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme<sup>14</sup> seeks to encourage greater knowledge, capability, and equitable participation from all stakeholders to support the development and management of sustainable tourism at World Heritage properties, safeguarding the properties and their Outstanding Universal Value. The program establishes a global framework for collaboration and sector-wide coordination in order to preserve cultural assets and promote sustainable economic growth. UNESCO is also responsible for the World Heritage Convention of 1972. States Parties' obligations to identify possible sites and to conserve and preserve them are outlined in the Convention. Each nation that signs the Convention commits to protecting its national history as well as the World history sites located on its soil. It outlines the guidelines for the management and use of the World Heritage Fund as well as the circumstances under which international financial aid may be given.<sup>15</sup>

Past UN Resolutions:

- International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development 2017, 15<sup>th</sup> December 1998 **(A/70/472)**
- Proclamation of 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1999 **(A/RES/53/200)**
- Report of the World Committee on Tourism Ethics, 30<sup>th</sup> November-3<sup>rd</sup> December 2021 **(A/RES/742 (XXIV))**

**The Italian Republic:** Italy is one of the most popular tourist destinations globally and hosted more than 57.3 million tourists in 2023.<sup>16</sup> In fact, 10.5% of the country's GDP depends on the tourism and travel industry.<sup>17</sup> Italy faces the problem of tourism congestion in specific places such as Venice, Florence, Rome etc. However, the rural areas are often left untouched, thus demonstrating a wide gap in tourism

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<sup>14</sup> Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. "World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme." *World Heritage Centre - World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme*, [whc.unesco.org/en/tourism/](https://whc.unesco.org/en/tourism/).

<sup>15</sup> Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. "The World Heritage Convention." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, [whc.unesco.org/en/convention/](https://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/)

<sup>16</sup> *Tourism in Italy Statistics 2024: Your Quick Travel Guide to the Beautiful Country*, [gowithguide.com/blog/tourism-in-italy-statistics-2024-your-quick-travel-guide-to-the-beautiful-country-5775](https://gowithguide.com/blog/tourism-in-italy-statistics-2024-your-quick-travel-guide-to-the-beautiful-country-5775).

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

distribution. In Venice 2023, 20 million people had visited, far exceeding the 50000 residents.<sup>18</sup> This resulted in serious overcrowding and then a fall in the quality of life and number of residents in the city. The Venetian government introduced caps on the number of tourist cruise ships that are able to access the city by redirecting larger ships to nearby industrial ports to minimise strain.

**The Republic of Peru:** Peru has implemented a thorough management plan to safeguard Machu Picchu, the historic Inca citadel. Timed admission tickets that assign visitors to specified time periods are used to enforce the daily cap of 5600 visits.<sup>19</sup> Strict paths have also been put in place by the authorities to reduce damage to the ancient structures at the site. Authorities have created alternate trekking routes and marketed neighbouring destinations to more equitably divide tourists in an effort to further reduce overcrowding. Conservation efforts have been strengthened in recent years by collaborations with UNESCO and local communities, and tourism-related income has been used to fund community initiatives and infrastructural improvements in the area.

**The Commonwealth of Australia:** To prevent environmental damage, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) regulates tourists within this UNESCO World Heritage Site.<sup>20</sup> Policies include monitoring water quality, placing quotas on tour companies, and limiting access to fragile reef areas. In order to educate visitors and operators about reef conservation, GBRMPA has also funded educational initiatives. Projects aimed at resilience and coral restoration are the focus of cooperation with research institutions. Notwithstanding these steps, climate change is still a major concern, and the Australian government is still pushing for international climate action and encouraging eco-friendly travel strategies that respect the reef's environment.

**The State of Japan:** Japan's "Smart Tourism" program uses cutting-edge technology to control visitor numbers and relieve pressure on well-known locations like Kyoto and Mount Fuji. In order to more equitably divide visitors, digital platforms offer real-time updates on crowd levels and suggest substitute attractions. Additionally, the government has built infrastructure in rural areas that receive little visitors, encouraging regional development. Airbnb-style rentals are now restricted in Kyoto, where "tourism taxes" have been implemented to pay for public services and conservation. In order to assure sustainable tourist development, Japan has adopted a comprehensive plan that combines technology innovation with legislative measures.

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<sup>18</sup> Jockims, Trevor Laurence. "With Daily Entrance Fee 'disney-Fication' of Venice, the World Hits Its Overtourism Tipping Point." *CNBC*, CNBC, 29 Apr. 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/04/28/in-disney-fication-of-venice-world-hits-its-overtourism-tipping-point.html>

<sup>19</sup> Team, *Voyagers Editorial*. "Machu Picchu 2025: Visitor Cap Set at 5,600 Daily." *Voyagers Travel*, Voyagers Travel Company, 13 Nov. 2024, <https://www.voyagers.travel/news/machu-picchu-top-peruvian-tourist-destination-sets-a-visitor-limit>

<sup>20</sup> "Our Latest Reef Health Update Is Now Available ." *Homepage | Reef Authority*, 19 Dec. 2024, [www2.gbrmpa.gov.au/](http://www2.gbrmpa.gov.au/).



## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
November 16th, 1972	The World Heritage Convention was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO on this day. It outlines the roles of Member States in identifying World Heritage sites as well as maintaining and preserving them. It also explains the usage of World Heritage Fund and what scenarios it may be used in. Countries are also obliged to report to the World Heritage Committees regularly by virtue of this convention. <sup>21</sup>
December 15th, 1998	Adoption of International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development 2017 resolution
February 22nd, 1999	Proclamation of 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism resolution
2002	2002 was the International Year of Ecotourism and stimulated action to promote ecotourism by UNWTO, UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) as well as national action by countries themselves. Multiple nations launched Committees for Ecotourism, held conferences and made policies around this agenda.
2017	2017 was the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. It focused on sustainable economic growth, social inclusiveness, resource efficiency and environmental protection, cultural values and mutual understanding.
2019	a whopping 1.5 billion tourist arrivals recorded globally by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation. <sup>22</sup>
November 30th-December 3rd 2021	Adoption of the Report of the World Committee on Tourism Ethics (A/RES/742 (XXIV)). It outlines the World Committee on Tourism Ethics' recommendations on various issues, promotion of the Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics etc.

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

**Regulatory measures:** Regulations have been put in place at many locations to reduce the number of tourists. Examples would include placing price tag on visiting famous structures. Although this tactic has been effective in limiting the number of visitors, it has come under fire for alienating middle-class tourists and fostering an exclusive travel industry. Similar problems surfaced in Venice, where restrictions on cruise ship trips and admission prices were implemented to protect the city's

<sup>21</sup> Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. "The World Heritage Convention." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, [whc.unesco.org/en/convention/](http://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/)

<sup>22</sup> "Un Tourism: Bringing the World Closer." *International Tourism Growth Continues to Outpace the Global Economy* | *UN Tourism*, 4 Dec. 2024, [www.unwto.org/international-tourism-growth-continues-to-outpace-the-economy](http://www.unwto.org/international-tourism-growth-continues-to-outpace-the-economy).

infrastructure. However, local companies that depend on mass tourism have opposed these measures, and enforcement is still uneven.

**Community based resources:** Regulations have been put in place at many locations to reduce the number of tourists. Examples would include placing price tag on visiting famous structures. Although this tactic has been effective in limiting the number of visitors, it has come under fire for alienating middle-class tourists and fostering an exclusive travel industry. Similar problems surfaced in Venice, where restrictions on cruise ship trips and admission prices were implemented to protect the city's infrastructure. However, local companies that depend on mass tourism have opposed these measures, and enforcement is still uneven.

## Possible Solutions

Governments must assume a proactive role when investing in infrastructure that benefits both, the locals and the Invisalign. One way of doing so is the development of cutting-edge public transportation systems that lower vehicle emissions and ease traffic congestion. Cities like Signapore have fantastic metro connectivity, we may learn from them as well. The implementation of smart city technologies, such as sensors and real-time monitoring, can help track tourist densities and guide urban planners in making data-driven decisions. The introduction of green infrastructure, such as parks and pedestrian zones, can further mitigate the impact of tourism congestion. Carrying capacity assessments should be incorporated into urban planning to ensure that tourist numbers do not exceed sustainable limits, including the creation of zoning regulations to manage the distribution of accommodations and attractions.

Governments and business stakeholders should work together to promote lesser-known locations in order to lessen the strain on well-known tourism attractions. Building infrastructure in unexplored and rural places can draw visitors away from populated locations. Another thing that may help with that is thematic tourism marketing. This may be a religious or cultural theme and ensures that people are also visiting millennials for what I know. We may also implement dynamic pricing methods, in which admission costs change according to demand, can help spread out visitor numbers throughout the year and lessen crowding during busy periods.

The above are just a few ideas to get you started! We expect innovative ideas and well-articulated reasonings!

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