

African Studies Quarterly

Volume 8, Issue 3
Spring 2006

Tourism in the New South Africa: Social Responsibility and the Tourist Experience. Garth Allen and Frank Brennan. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004. 305 pp.

Social scientists, Garth Allen and Frank Brennan, have essentially created two interrelated books between the covers of *Tourism in the New South Africa: Social Responsibility and the Tourist Experience*. A social anthropologist and a political economist, the pair worked in South Africa from the mid-1990s to 2002. First, their joint effort is a hopeful yet cautionary tale concerning eco-tourism and development in the context of KwaZulu-Natal. Second, the authors lead readers on a winding path into the psyche of the international traveler, speculations on issues of international citizenship, and accountable tourist behavior. The text should interest scholars of South African studies, tourism studies, development studies, social anthropology, as well as political economy.

In the opening chapters, the authors present a highly detailed overview of South African tourism policy in the 1990s. Following the 1994 transition from apartheid, the state characterizes tourism as a panacea, fostering reconciliation, nation building, job creation, and economic growth. Additionally, Allen and Brennan present a more specific account of tourism development issues facing the northern region of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). Encompassing national parks, estuaries, and wildlife areas, as well as many rural African communities, KZN is a prime location for extracting examples of eco-tourism development and its impact on local groups.

The authors' primary goal is to contribute to the literature on community-based ecotourism. In their view, the current discourse, often understandably weighted towards issues of conservation and sustainability, could benefit from a tinge of "realism." They assert that development planners need to better recognize the "tangles of vested interests and the political factors" that complicate the web of decision makers, stakeholders, and affected parties. To this end, the authors summarize and evaluate case studies of contemporary programs, such as those at Dukuduku Forest, Phinda Resource Reserve, and Kosi Bay in KZN. They identify and characterize the key participants and the strengths and weaknesses of each program. Their scrutiny is aimed at constructing improved, viable models of interaction between national offices, the private sector, and individual communities. Importantly, they stress the need for both environmental and cultural specificity when designing programs.

To further expose "tangles", Allen and Brennan pinpoint a number of realistic impediments to sustainable development initiatives in South Africa's rural areas. One prevalent and pertinent issue is the participation of local African groups. To begin, South Africa's history of institutional injustice towards blacks lingers over African communities and impedes their trust of new programs. A recently publicized concern for the nation, there is continued debate over who—the government, individuals, or the community—is the final decision maker concerning land ownership and use. Similarly, the authors question the struggle between community and personal interests. They ask: Is the self-determination and individualism lauded under the new free-capitalist and democratic South Africa fundamentally at odds with the equally lauded goals of community action and empowerment? In sum, Allen and Brennan characterize KZN as "unfertile ground" for development until these factors, along with crime

and political and ethnic turbulence, are addressed.

Seemingly fragmented from the initial discussion of ecotourism, the second section of the text directs its focus to the socially responsible vacationer. In an interesting turn, the authors address the moral and ethic dimension of tourism, expressly through the dilemmas presented to international tourists. Allen and Brennan speculate whether tourists should modify their individual behavior as guests of another nation. (This issue is also addressed by E. Chambers 2005 among others). They raise many questions related to toleration and obligation. In the South African case: should visitors abide or react to social injustice such as racism in the host countries? They also question what prompts some tourist behaviors: Do tourists make purchases out of a sense of compassion or compulsion to “give back” to the community they visit?

Despite the highly theoretical and conjectural nature of this section, the text offers several ideas worthy of further dialogue. For instance, they discuss how interactions between tourism bodies can venture towards greater goals, such as conservation. In this vein, Allen and Brennan make the case for an international code of conduct for travelers. Their argument contains a hypothetical discussion of the archetypal, “Good Tourist,” someone who will have the initiative to learn customs and act respectfully in travel situations despite encountering dissimilar norms and values. Conversely, Allen and Brennan tender a few problematic examples. For instance, they postulate that rumors of crime and violence dissuade visits to South Africa or restrict tourists’ activities while in South African cities. Though a valid concern, the authors offer few crime-related statistics and no personalized information from interviews with victims or non-victims. Their argument rests on a fictional character who is debating the consequences of leaving his hotel room after dark to visit the Durban beachfront.

For this reader, the text holds some weak points. First of all, the personalities of this section, a hedonistic jet-setter (reminiscent of the “Ugly American”), the “Good Tourist”, and the timid traveler, composite characters alike, are perhaps too generalized. Throughout the text, there is little discussion of methodology or direct quotation of informants. The analysis could be improved with more remarks on their current interviews and observations or more thorough unpacking of vignettes. Finally, despite engaging with issues of ethnic group participation, they neglect a thorough discussion of the impacts of cultural tourism that couple eco-tourism initiatives and certainly collide with new South African tourism policies.

The strength of this work lies in the authors’ appreciation of the nuanced character of tourism. Tourism is a dialectical social process. Combined with development, it is a further complicated network of political-economic factors, environments, and stakeholder groups. Admittedly, Allen and Brennan’s work is exploratory and offers more avenues for future research than definitive answers concerning either ecotourism development or social responsibility. In conclusion, it is the connections linking the two sections of the text, such as that between the altruistic tourist and their potential impact on programs of ecology and conservation, or that between good governance and good citizenship, which will allow for successful development programs in the future.

Rachel Harvey
University of Florida

Reference

Chambers, Erve. “Can the Anthropology of Tourism Make Us Better Travelers?” *NAPA Bulletin* 23, (2005): 27-44.