

## COMMENTS ON

### “Cuba’s Tourism Industry” by Suddaby and “Impact of the Helms-Burton Law on Cuban Tourism” by Lucio and Crespo

Artimus Keiffer

The movement of people is a major focus of study in Human Geography. Why movement takes place, where it is to, and when it happens are questions that geographers ask about cultural phenomena such as religious pilgrimages, sporting events, civil conflicts, economic and political changes, and tourism. In relation to the latter, which is today’s topic of discussion, we ask why people leave their points of usual habitation to go to certain places to vacation and, out of a myriad of possible destinations, why.

Tourism has become the largest growing industry in the world. Many less-developed countries have taken advantage of their lack of an industrial landscape, persistent cultural traditions and unspoiled natural areas and are increasing their GNP by enticing visits from people from all parts of the world. As a result, some benefits have been derived for local residents of tourist destinations for the short term. Other benefits have come in the form of varying degrees of sustainable development, instituted for long-term economic growth. These policies are not always in the best interests of the people who live in certain areas, and are not always instituted with proper management techniques, means of enforcement or adequately funded.

The Caribbean, as a whole, has enjoyed an increased number of tourists, partially because of climatic conditions, available resort facilities and lower population densities. Tourist destinations are also affected by low pricing, all-inclusive amenities and relative isolation from the local populace.

#### TOURISM IN CUBA

As part of the Caribbean tourism market, Cuba has enjoyed considerable success in attracting tourists from Europe and Canada during its “special period”; the transition from a quota system to a global economic market. It has done this without even tapping the closest and largest market—the United States. As Mr. Suddaby points out:

Cuba has tremendous diversity in its tourism product, offering a considerable variety of traditional sun/sea/sand experiences with historical and cultural attractions, sporting activities and forms of adventure tourism. The country is substantial in size, geographically close to the North American market, relatively crime free, and has a well educated workforce.

Cuba, admittedly, is unique even with the increase of tourism. The island already leads most other less-developed countries in quality of life and standard of living categories. This is indicated by, and not limited to, such measures as literacy rate, employment rate, number of doctors per 1000 people, low birth rates and death rates and caloric intake. Also, Cuba’s population of 12 million residents is 60% African and is spread more or less uniformly across its land mass. It has a well trained military force, free access to educational and medical benefits, and most Cubans have adequate housing with decent, potable water and containerized sewage disposal. The shape of the island, its east-west positioning and its proximity to specific water and air currents helps dissipate vari-

ous externalized source-point pollutants. Culturally, the island has distinct African-European influence and, because of its political and economic doctrine, there is a limited amount of both racism and sexism.

Being unique presents some endemic problems that affect its position in the tourism market such as: infrastructure maintenance, an economic embargo enforced by the United States, and the availability of capital to invest in long-term growth. As a result, these problems trickle down to the development of the tourism industry itself. This is manifested in the availability of tourist facilities, accessibility to tourism by Cubans, and, more specifically, the diverting of funds from human needs to development of the tourism industry.

As is pointed out, to maintain a supply for the demand, Cuba needs to double the number of hotel rooms available in the near future, and upgrade existing ones and meet projected increases in the number of tourists, their length of stay and their daily expenditures. Also, many misconceptions about conditions in Cuba exist and these need to be overcome through a well-funded marketing and advertising campaign if the “new” tourist is to be attracted.

The infrastructure itself needs major improvements to cope with continued development. Transportation, energy, water, sewage and solid waste disposal, to name a few, are in need of expansion or upgrade. With the Cuban economy still recovering from the fall of the its chief facilitator, the USSR, these improvements are slow in coming and being done in a piecemeal fashion.

### HELMS-BURTON IMPACT

The economic embargo, supplemented by the Helms-Burton Law, has not had a tremendous affect on the overall quality of life in Cuba. Although certain products, such as medicine, foodstuffs and computers are rare, sufficient supplies of most durable and non-durable goods are imported from other countries, who, en masse, have ignored the provisions of Helms-Burton. As Messrs. Lucio and Crespo point out:

The fans and foes of the law have made extraordinary efforts to exaggerate the consequences or effects of the

law.....and distort, through their interpretation, the real extent of the law.

And they add:

in spite of the risk that the law might represent, for them it is good business sense to continue operating and investing in tourism in Cuba.....enacting laws that are intended to protect their nationals against the effect of the U.S. law.

The availability of capital to finance the tourist industry's expansion, maintain vital infrastructure, and keep the Cubans healthy and happy is a major issue, one that is necessarily complex in nature. Many U.S. companies would enjoy investing in our own “backyard” if the embargo were lifted and free trade was resumed. Since the future of trade and tourism between the U.S. and Cuba is an unknown variable, only possible projections can be offered as to how the entire Caribbean would be affected were the embargo lifted.

### SUMMARIZING THE TWO PAPERS

Basing their assumptions on data from the Cuban Ministry of Tourism, both papers suggest that increased tourism, along with increased construction of tourist facilities will continue to have a major impact on the Cuban economy. Both authors also suggest that the lifting of the embargo will do much to make the tourism industry in Cuba a viable source of income and will provide profits and other benefits for the Cuban people. Again, both authors agree that despite the current problems in the Cuban economy, tourism is a good investment and will provide the basis for future economic development and growth in related industries.

### DISCUSSION

As an economic/cultural geographer and an environmentalist interested in Latin America, I would like to stress a very important issue that I feel is neither stated in the papers nor represented by the statistics, but was of concern to me in my three visits to Cuba in the past year. The question of how increased development will affect the day to day living of Cubans and how that development will impact the environment, not just in the short term, but also in the long-term economic and political position of the island.

## Comment: Cuba's Tourism Industry and Impact of the Helms-Burton Law on Cuban Tourism

Obviously, increased tourism will have an affect on how people view their own position in relation to the rest of the world. I have already seen in one year an increase in the amount of consumer items available to some Cubans. Others, who are exposed to amenities provided for tourists, such as cable TV and international publications, are exposed to other points of view in regards to both international events and how events in their own country are relayed to others. A good case in point is the recent bombings in Cuba. According to my reports from the island, life pretty much went on as usual, even though the bombings were reported throughout the Cuban media. Media in Miami, however, suggested severe chaos in the city as a result of terrorist group activities.

Another element is the sharing of already scarce commodities with an increased number of tourists. Even though conditions in most parts of Cuba are tolerable, and basic necessities are available, increased tourism means that the government will have to divert items intended for the general population to tourist areas. An example of this is the availability of red meat on the island. In tourist areas, a varied menu of various meat dishes is available, but in the countryside, it is against the law to slaughter an animal for its meat, especially cattle. Roadblocks are set up in rural locations to check vehicles heading for urban areas to see if they are transporting illegal meat products to the city.

As tourism increases, what becomes of the environment? How will solid waste, which is currently burned, and sewage, which is largely untreated, be dealt with when the volume is doubled? As tourists crisscross the island in rented cars, how many more residents will have to walk, bicycle or wait in line to ride a crowded bus to get to their destination? The largest oil field in the country is located in the bay behind Varadero. Tourists are not fond of seeing or smelling resource extraction activities and the resultant imprint on the landscape.

Capitalism, as I have seen, is slowly encroaching on the island. Over the last year 24-hour gas stations, auto dealers and hamburger stands are making themselves seen. More international companies are displaying their logos and "diplo" stores are opening to

sell the consumer goods demanded by successive waves of tourists from consumerized economies. In addition, more Cubans are opening and operating entrepreneurial efforts to help supplement their income. My favorite *parador* in La Habana is owned by an unemployed geologist; former dentists drive taxis; school teachers make sugar cane juice in roadside rests; and artisans must sell their pieces in competitive market squares. The legalizing of the American dollar has stimulated these activities, and how ironic this is that the very country that has economically blockaded the island supplies the only recognized usable currency.

All of this economic change is unequally distributed, yet another characteristic of capitalism. Working in the tourism industry is limited to those who have connections or who can speak a foreign language or who live in close proximity to a tourist area. In one respect, the limiting of regional employment opportunities to those who reside in the region has discouraged internal migration to areas where cash, in the form of tipping, is available. For instance, to work in Varadero, you must be from there or Matanzas or Cárdenas. All others need not apply.

Cuba is also different from other tourist destinations in its lack of crime and street begging. There are uniformed police on most corners and only recently has a rash of theft related incidents been reported. In the streets of Habana, many Cubans will tell you of their relative in the United States, but they will not ask you for money. Instead, they may just want to practice their English for when their visa is granted to go visit their relatives. Many elderly woman are delighted when I give them small bars of soap, a commodity that is rationed and not always available. Many children are excited when they receive a simple pen to do their homework.

### CONCLUSION

It is amazing to me, and an accolade for the Cuban people, as to how many do so much with so little. The perception of Cuba, especially by Americans, is that Cuba is a dirty, vile place, full of filth and pestilence. Personally, I feel the Helms-Burton Law is a double edged sword. On one hand, it limits the amount of consumer items available in the country,

especially the in the area of education, pharmaceuticals and other related technologies. On the other hand, if it were lifted tomorrow, how many Americans would see dollar signs in Cuba—the vintage cars, the native crafts, the cigars? Could we estimate that 500,000 people would invade Cuba immediately to strip them of items that could bring a small fortune in the United States? After the dust settles, what would be left? There would not be enough hotel rooms, food, energy, water and most other necessary items. Surely, some Cubans would be standing with a handful of cash, but what could they buy and where would they buy it?

The subject of tourism in Cuba is the topic of today's panel. As the industry expands, so must the facilities. As the facilities expand, more pressure is put on the

people and the environment. The economic sanctions imposed by the United States, in this author's opinion, allow Cuba's tourism industry to expand in a more controlled setting and also, at the same time, protect it from becoming strained beyond its capabilities. I can only hope that given the papers presented today, which, in an economic sense, make their point, that the people, whose economy this association is studying, are not reduced to mere numbers and statistics. It is my opinion, that the ideals of capitalism as an economic system, should be administered in small doses, so Cuba will not endure yet another invasion to its historic shores. It is worth being a tourist in Cuba just to witness how a society *not* consumed with consumerization can be healthy, wealthy and wise.