1 An introduction to last chance tourism

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The last chance to consume, collect, or photograph rare or exotic specimens is not a new phenomenon in leisure and tourism. Indeed, as Bowman and Pezzulo (2010) and Urry (2004) noted, many of the earliest tourist destinations were ‘often considered “places to die for” in the sense that one “must see” them before one dies’ (Bowman and Pezzulo 2010: 191). Places, contends Urry (2004), also die, ‘insofar as they either are exhausted in terms of their capacity to offer the experiences today’s tourists want or else they become inhospitable to life due to earthquakes, volcanic activity, pollution, hurricanes, decay, and so forth’ (Urry cited in Bowman and Pezzulo 2010: 190). Yet, unlike these past experiences which were often confined to one species, one site, or one geographical region, last chance tourism provides the opportunity to witness the demise of ecosystems, to behold the extinction of an entire species from its natural habitat. Tourism of this nature is for all intents and purposes a chance to observe ecocide first-hand. Critics have also labelled last chance tourism as a short-term marketing ploy aimed at selling more guidebooks or increasing profits from destinations in potential demise. The ethics and motivations underlying this form of travel is what makes last chance tourism so interesting, particularly at a time when global climate-induced anthropogenic changes are proceeding at an alarming rate. After all, who would want to be the last individual to witness the tumble of the final glacier in Antarctica or Greenland; to observe the last breath of an emaciated polar bear in Churchill, Canada; to step on the last ice of Mt. Kilimanjaro? According to various researchers, including a number of authors featured in this book, many tourists concerned with vanishing destinations such as the Great Barrier Reef or disappearing wildlife such as mountain gorillas and polar bears are purchasing these last chance experiences (Agnew and Viner 2001; Amos 2001; Becken and Hay 2007; Hall and Higham 2005). As Nuttall (2010) noted during one of his excursions to Antarctica, the need to participate in last chance tourism should come as no surprise since visitors ‘are made to feel that they are travelling in an environment that is itself at risk... under threat of disappearing, as the ice melts and yet another ice shelf collapses’ (p. 210). In other instances, travellers are advised to visit such national parks as Glacier, Joshua and Biscayne and Virgin Island in the USA, before the glaciers, the trees, and the coral reefs are gone (Shapley 2011).

Since the 1990s, the mainstream literature, and increasingly travel blogs and other forms of modern media, have alerted the public to last chance issues. More
recently, a special issue of *Newsweek* (2010) listed 100 places ‘to remember before they disappear’, the book 100 Places to Remember Before they Disappear (Drew 2011) and the accompanying website of the same name, ‘features 100 photographs from one hundred different places around the world at risk of disappearing’ (100 Places.Com, 2011). Perhaps the most influential text was Douglas Adams and Mark Carwardine’s (1991) *Last Chance to See* and later, Carwardine’s (2009) *Last chance to see: in the footsteps of Douglas Adams*. The books inspired a BBC television production and a specialized tour entitled ‘Last Chance to See Collection’ offered by Bales Worldwide in 2009 (Easier Inc. 2011). Other books include: Addison’s (2008) *Disappearing world: 101 of the Earth’s most extraordinary and endangered places*; Garbutt’s (2007) *100 Animals to See Before they Die*; Lisagor and Hansen’s (2008) *Disappearing Destinations: 37 places in peril and what can be done to help save them*; and Travis’s (2009) *Frommer’s 500 Places to See Before They Disappear*.

The outcome from this attention is an emerging phenomenon in tourism known as last chance tourism (Dawson *et al.* 2010; Lemelin *et al.* 2010). Last chance tourism can be defined as when ‘tourists explicitly seek vanishing landscapes or seascapes, and/or disappearing natural and/or social heritage’ (Lemelin *et al.* 2010: 478). This includes the desire to observe, photograph and interact with animals that may be endangered, threatened or rare, and are increasingly being offered by operators in a number of destinations around the world (Ballantyne *et al.* 2009; Garbutt 2007; Newsome, Dowling and Moore 2005; Munn 1992). Similar to climate change tourism (Becken and Hay 2007; Hall *et al.* 2011; Jones and Phillips 2011; The World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme 2008), last chance tourism is often stimulated by the perception of change brought about through climate change, but unlike climate change tourism, last chance tourism is also about visiting destinations that may be in decline due to other anthropogenic factors, or even in some cases, visiting cultural sites, where decline may have nothing to do with climate change (i.e., globalization, modernization). By providing opportunities to see the living dead, or witness the demise of places, species, and people, last chance tourism can also be defined as the precursor to dark tourism (Lennon and Foley 2000; Seaton 2002). If dark tourism is the embodiment of loss, last chance tourism is not only the epithet, but the call to action. Indeed, it is an opportunity to learn and possibly reverse these changes before it is too late. It is a chance to enlighten the dark.

**Perceptions of rarity**

As various authors in this book allude, perceptions of rarity are fuelled and at times even manipulated by various interest groups including the scientific community, marketers, travel operators, researchers and journalists. Publicizing the vulnerability of certain threatened wildlife or destinations through wildlife documentaries or fundraising campaigns can be as Burns and Bibbins (2009) and Dawson *et al.* (2010) argue a ‘call to action’ to protect and preserve these endangered destinations. In the case of wildlife tourism, seeing an endangered
species in its natural habitat brings an emotional bond that is rarely acquired in a zoo (Garbutt 2007). Through direct in-situ experience, Garbutt (2007) suggests that visitors can develop an emotional bond, where individuals learn and want to help by becoming last chance to see ambassadors. The call to action can also result as a ‘call to visit’ these destinations, so to speak; to see them ‘before’ or ‘in case’ they disappear.

Courchamp et al. (2006) hypothesized that if consumers place disproportionate value on rare species, this could result in a cycle in which increased exploitation further reduces the population size, which in turn increases its value and ultimately leads to its extinction in the wild – a process they termed the ‘anthropogenic Allee effect’ (Hall et al. 2008: 75). The anthropogenic Allee effect and the extinction vortex is explained in the following fashion. When certain species acquire a rarity value, prices for scarce species can increase significantly even though continued exploitation can compromise the welfare of the attraction (Hall et al. 2006). Researchers call this latter occurrence a negative correlation, when the rarity of a product actually increases the demand for the said product (Vaillant 2010).

As the value of a rare item increases, more time, effort, or resources may be devoted to trying to acquire it, increasing the pressure on the species as it becomes rarer. The idea is that as long as someone will pay any price for the rarest of the rare, market price will cover (and exceed) the cost of harvesting the last specimen (Courchamp et al. 2006). Perceived rarity when associated to other anthropogenic stressors such as climate change, pollution or increasing visitation demands can result in the rapid demise or local extinction of certain species (Hall et al. 2008). Further complicating the protection of these features are cultural traditions, and how the acquisition, consumption, and/or ownership of these rare products conveys social prestige and status (e.g., the species bucket list). Indeed, listing in any form can be perceived as official verification that the area in question is a limited edition (Rivalan et al. 2007), as such, these lists are well suited to appeal to those travellers who ‘collect places’. In this case, the visitor is no more than the final consumer of goods to which they are delivered ‘just in time’ before that destination’s fate is sealed.

However, it does not have to be this way, since last chance tourism is not just a search for animals on the edge of extinction or for disappearing destinations or human populations threatened by acculturation, it can also be a celebration of conservationism. For across the world, thousands of individuals, including tourists, dedicate their time, often their lives in some of the harshest places on earth, in an effort to help species or rehabilitate habitats from the brink of extinction (Green 2008). In the case of the kakapo, orang-utan and mountain apes, these efforts have saved the animals from the brink of extinction in the wild. In his book Frommer’s 500 Places to See Before They Disappear, Travis (2009) suggested that indeed many positives can come from these last chance tourism experiences.

I discovered more positive developments than I expected. Some of the destinations I have included in this book are already on the road to being saved, usually because they have been championed by preservationists with a will to make a difference. And even in cases where a site has been lost, or irrevocably damaged,
it often has become a rallying point for activists, inspiring them to fight on so that the same mistakes are not made again. Many of the case studies in this book are reasons for hope, not despair, and the more support we can lend them, the better (Travis 2009: vi).

From this perspective, last chance tourism pays homage to biodiversity and conservationism, and in general, ‘seeks to oppose the reduction of an environment (or a culture) to a novelty, curiosity, object or potential resource. Indeed, “last chance” tourists often carry a residual hope that they will not, after all, be the “last to see” and that some things might yet miraculously survive’ (Smith this volume). Instead of focusing on the negative, we want to inspire a message of hope in each chapter, whether this is through a better understanding of the visitors or the on-site operators or through regulatory mechanisms of some kind. Where conservation has embraced neoliberal global capitalism, then last chance to see is morbid; when last chance tourism plays a role in a rescue from the brink of extinction – it is inspiring.

Book overview

Through a multi-authored, multi-disciplinary volume featuring researchers in the fields of leisure, tourism, anthropology, geography and sociology this book attempts to address the nuances of managing sites in the Arctic and Antarctic, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia and China, and various animals such as mountain gorillas, polar bears, albatrosses and kakapos. Several chapters document studies attempting to understand visitor behaviour and attitudes, and in some cases responses to last chance tourism. Other chapters also remind us that last chance tourism is not simply relegated to ecological spheres; last chance tourism has had and will continue to impact local communities, and will demand adaptation at multiple scales.

The book is divided into three sections each with its focus and particular descriptions of the last chance tourism phenomenon. Section I, ‘Disappearing Landscapes/Seascapes and Vanishing Fauna’, provides an international overview of changing landscapes and seascapes, and threatened species and includes chapters that examine the physical aspects of last chance tourism in the Arctic, Antarctic and Alpine environments. Some of the most notable findings in these three chapters are the following. Johnston et al. suggest that when something disappears, something else appears, thus last chance tourism should be linked to first chance tourism. The role of climate-change ambassadors, according to Lamers et al., in Antarctic tourism is limited, yet other perhaps more effective interpretation strategies do exist. Contesting the notion of disappearing landscapes is Steiger et al. who report that while some skiing sites in the US and Europe will disappear, some will remain, and in fact are likely to thrive. Some of the most popular known species including orang-utans and mountain gorillas, various bird species and polar bears are discussed in the chapters by Newsome and Rodger, Hvenegaard and Stewart et al.

Section II, ‘Media and Marketing’, provides some of the earliest documentation of marketing and media research examining last chance tourism through
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case studies that focus on destinations in North America, Greenland, Africa and Australia, including the Great Barrier Reef, Mt Kilimanjaro and the Ilulissat Icefjord. Highlights from this section include the disconnect between research interests (i.e., scientists, conservation groups), media sources and local operators noted by Olsen et al. and Coghlan. A similar conclusion was reached by Frew who noted that although many operators highlight the vulnerability of certain destinations, few are actually using the concept of last chance tourism to specifically market their products.

Section III, ‘Ethics, Culture and Management’, discusses the social, ethical and political dimensions of these vanishing destinations in China, Northern Canada, New Zealand and, more specifically, national parks in Canada. These are some of the earliest discussions on the socio-cultural and political dimensions of last chance tourism. The legacy of colonialism in our approach to nature and other societies are discussed by Smith, and Lemelin and Baikie, while Shelton, and Lemieux and Eagles highlight how national initiatives can help to bring about change and conserve endangered species and preserve national parks in an era of global change.

The conclusion draws together the key themes and lessons that can be synthesized from the contributions in this volume and outlines various forms of management solutions that are currently being implemented to deal with last chance tourism.

In many ways, like Douglas Adams and Mark Carwardine, we want to celebrate conservationism and resiliency. Like these authors, we would like to re-examine these case studies in 20 years from now, and hope to use the famous quote from the poet and playwright Mark Twain, that the news of the demise of these areas and fauna, “was an exaggeration”.

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