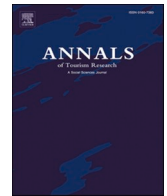




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## Research Note

## Tourism development from disaster capitalism

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## ABSTRACT

This research note focuses on the impact of tourism development from disaster capitalism as expressed by post-disaster land grabs and forced population displacement. Case studies highlighted are India, Thailand and Sri Lanka following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami; Honduras after Hurricane Mitch in 1998; and Barbuda following Hurricane Irma in 2017, demonstrating how disaster capitalism continues to be in play. The examples draw on disaster research to show how tourism development from disaster capitalism leads to more disasters. Long-standing disaster research can assist tourism researchers in identifying how to counter harmful post-disaster tourism development.

## Introduction

Major, recurring problems in post-disaster reconstruction indicate how rebuilding for residents is not necessarily the goal of all those who control the process (Cohen, 2011; Gould & Lewis, 2018; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2005; Timms, 2011). The goal of reconstruction can instead be extractive, grabbing of resources and exploiting disaster-affected people. Klein (2005, 2018) popularized the term “disaster capitalism” to refer to the affluent and powerful within society exploiting a disaster to consolidate and amplify their own power and resources, usually at the expense of the most disaster-affected people. Disaster capitalism occurs post-disaster in a disaster-affected location, as distinct from other expropriation and exploitation. The tourism industry is often complicit, helping the reconstruction industry to take land from people under the guise of providing post-disaster aid (Cohen, 2011; Timms, 2011). The homes and land of disaster-affected populations, such as those located on highly desirable coastal areas, can be transformed into lucrative tourism destinations (Cohen, 2011), illustrating tourism development from disaster capitalism (Fletcher, 2019).

Before any such transformation can occur, residents are often removed from the land or forced into inadequate accommodation and jobs, with Cohen (2011) outlining two forms of land grabbing for tourism development from disaster capitalism. First, predatory land grab involves private individuals or organizations who either buy the land immediately after a disaster, while those affected are still under duress, or else simply evict people from their land by registering, often fraudulently, land ownership claims. Second, strategic land grab involves the local or national government evicting residents from their land either by decree or under the guise of rehabilitation with the goal of tourism development. Based on these two forms, this research note outlines different situations of tourism development from disaster capitalism and then illustrates how shoddy and inequitable relief and reconstruction, including arbitrary relocation, creates recurring disasters and thus continuing disaster capitalism.

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## Case studies

Table 1 outlines some illustrative examples of tourism-relevant post-disaster land grabs.

A more recent example is from Barbuda, after Hurricane Irma in 2017 destroyed 90% of the island's infrastructure (Gould & Lewis, 2018). Two days after Irma hit, Prime Minister Gaston Browne ordered the mandatory evacuation of all 1800 residents, declaring the island uninhabitable (Gould & Lewis, 2018; Gruenbaum, 2018). Residents were transported to their country's other island, Antigua, and many Barbudans believed that the forced evacuation only served to hamper the process of rebuilding and presented an opportunity for the government and private tourism interests to engage in a massive land grab (Gould & Lewis, 2018; Gruenbaum, 2018). Despite the *Barbuda Land Act* of 2007 stating "All land in Barbuda shall be owned in common by the people of Barbuda" (p. 5) and "No land in Barbuda shall be sold" (p. 6), days after Irma, the Prime Minister, even before rolling out plans to rebuild, revised Barbuda's land tenure system (Gruenbaum, 2018). Barbudans have declared this move unconstitutional since the new system successfully passed in the country's legislative house before the public was even aware of it (Gould & Lewis, 2018; Gruenbaum, 2018).

Antigua and Barbuda's government has repeatedly denied accusations of disaster capitalism, but has engaged in such tactics by declaring damaged areas uninhabitable and refusing access to survivors while simultaneously supporting tourism development in those areas. Just days after the disaster, actor Robert De Niro promised to help the island rebuild by proposing a \$200-million resort through his hospitality group, Nobu (Gould & Lewis, 2018; Gruenbaum, 2018). Though they claim building the resort is a noble effort on their part to help Barbudans rebuild post-Irma, they proposed the same development two years before Irma struck but were refused by the Barbudans (Gruenbaum, 2018). Many other private entities have a keen interest in buying plots of land in Barbuda for developing enclaves for tourists and expats, despite the government declaring the entire island uninhabitable and refusing entry to Barbudans (Gould & Lewis, 2018; Gruenbaum, 2018).

The emergence of tourism development from disaster capitalism based on the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic remains to be seen. Extensive numbers of small, locally owned tourism businesses are not expected to survive without assistance. Rather than loans or grants, forced purchase or post-bankruptcy auctions could be their fate, with larger and richer companies using the pandemic to take over them.

**Table 1**  
Examples of tourism-relevant disaster capitalism through land grabbing.

| Context   | Disaster  | Affected populations  | Form of land grabbing | Development goals and tactics used   |
|-----------|---|---|-----------------------|--|
| Thailand  | Indian Ocean tsunami, 2004                                  | Residents of Khao Lak                                       | Predatory             | <b>Goal:</b> Development of a golf resort.<br><b>Tactics:</b> (1) Obtained (fraudulently) deeds to the land, claiming rightful ownership; (2) Claimed residents were illegal squatters; (3) Installed fences, no trespassing signs, and a security guard one day post-tsunami; (4) Restricted residents access from retrieving their possessions or to claim the bodies of their dead relatives  |
| Thailand  | Indian Ocean tsunami, 2004                                  | Residents of Ko Lanta – known as the Moken or "Sea Gypsies" | Strategic             | <b>Goal:</b> Develop coastal area as tourist destination<br><b>Tactics:</b> (1) Released tourism development plans just days after the disaster; (2) Defined a buffer zone 30 m from the sea; (3) Prohibited residential construction and fishing within buffer zone; (4) Post-tsunami emergency relief and assistance conditional on relocation; (5) Questioned the citizenship and thus land rights of the Mokens  |
| Sri Lanka | Indian Ocean tsunami, 2004                                  | Residents of Arugam Bay                                     | Predatory             | <b>Goal:</b> Develop coastal area as luxury tourist destination<br><b>Tactics:</b> (1) Defined a "buffer zone" around affected areas and designated it as unsafe; (2) Banned residents from returning or reconstructing village infrastructure; (3) Used violence and/or threats of violence if residents returned or tried to rebuild; (4) Released the <i>Arugam Bay Resources Development Plan: Reconstruction Towards Prosperity</i> , which proposed tourism development and plans for resident relocation. |
| India     | Indian Ocean tsunami, 2004                                  | Residents of Tamil Nadu                                     | Predatory & strategic | <b>Goal:</b> Tourism development<br><b>Tactics:</b> (1) Defined a "buffer zone" around affected areas and designated it as unsafe; (2) Restricted fishing and construction in newly defined "buffer zones"; (3) Post-tsunami emergency relief and assistance conditional on residents relinquishing rights to their land and relocating; (4) High-pressure-to-sell tactics including intimidation, use of violence or threats of violence  |
| Honduras  | Hurricane Mitch, 1998;<br><br>Manuel Zelaya ousted ou, 2009 | Afro-Indigenous Garifunas                                   | Predatory & strategic | <b>Goal:</b> Position Honduras as a premier eco-tourism destination<br><b>Tactics:</b> (1) Restrictions on fishing and construction in newly labelled "buffer zones"; (2) High-pressure-to-sell tactics through intimidation, use of violence or threats of violence; (3) Refusal to recognize their indigenous status; (4) Claiming the Garifunas have taken over privately-owned lands and as such, have no rights to the land they occupy; and (5) Forceful removal   |

(Summarized from Brondo, 2013; Cohen, 2011; Loperena, 2017; Paz, 2005; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2005; Robinson & Jarvie, 2008; Rice & Haynes, 2005; Timms, 2011)

## Tourism development moving beyond disaster capitalism

The case studies demonstrate for the tourism industry the long-standing disaster research conclusions that existing reconstruction and development approaches too often deepen existing inequities, leading to even more disasters (e.g. Davis & Alexander, 2015; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2005). Similarly, disaster research from its beginnings evidenced how hazards rarely cause disasters, but long before recovery and reconstruction are needed, vulnerabilities do (Hewitt, 1983, 1997; Lewis, 1999; Wisner et al., 2004). Then, post-disaster human actions and inactions sometimes support disaster capitalism, so disaster-affected communities are made to be even more vulnerable through continuing poverty, inequity, and lack of opportunities. This perpetuates vulnerabilities and hence disasters.

To illustrate with Barbuda, the hurricane wrecked the island, not because of the wind speed or flooding, but because the infrastructure and society were not prepared to deal with known hazards. The disaster was the vulnerabilities preventing people from preparing for the hurricane and its impacts. Then, the disaster continued through excluding Barbudans from post-hurricane work, seeking to take control of their land, and reconstructing the island according to external, money-driven interests rather than helping the disaster-affected people. This latter part of the disaster, driven by the tourism industry and with the most long-term impacts, was not correlated to the hurricane parameters and was not caused by the environmental hazard.

Rather than supporting disaster capitalism, tourism decision-makers, researchers, and industries have the opportunity to prevent the creation and perpetuation of vulnerability (and hence disasters) from post-disaster exploitation. Yet immediate reconstruction in the same place in the same way as before is far from a post-disaster panacea, since it simply rebuilds the conditions which created the disaster in the first place (Davis & Alexander, 2015). Tourism development from disaster capitalism often worsens situations, forcing disaster-affected populations to lose their property, land, and livelihoods. Ripple effects might include increased dependency on tourism for livelihoods, profits leaving the local area, and placing tourists and tourism workers in harm's way.

Rather than supporting and promoting inequity through tourism, long-standing disaster-related research, policy, and practice can be applied in tourism development to ensure that recovery and reconstruction do not re-create the same conditions which led to the disaster—or even create new, even worse situations. Those involved in tourism should make themselves aware of previous disaster-related lessons to support reducing vulnerable conditions instead of policies that create and exacerbate vulnerabilities. Examples are protecting the land rights of citizens; promoting appropriate building, land use, and zoning regulations; and ensuring that people—including visitors to a location—understand the hazards they could experience and have the opportunities to deal with the hazards. These lessons could be applied now to avoid problems emerging as Covid-19-related lockdowns are eased, especially if health-related changes (e.g. fewer open buffets) are implemented as a consequence of the pandemic.

Predatory behaviour of tourism interests in disaster-affected areas should be challenged and stopped. Literature identifies inequities that disaster capitalism creates and exacerbates, but could better show how the tourism industry could avoid disaster capitalism creating disasters through tourism. Tourism researchers have roles in proposing, critiquing, and advocating how tourism might support disaster recovery and long-term disaster prevention; for instance, through respectful disaster tourism, disaster prevention tourism, or supporting local, self-owned businesses. Meanwhile, further research could develop disaster capitalism frameworks to identify, analyse, and call out tourism-related contributions. Such steps are necessary to counter disaster capitalism linked to harmful tourism development.

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