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**To cite this article:** Asunción Blanco-Romero, Macià Blázquez-Salom & Robert Fletcher (29 Aug 2023): Fair vs. fake touristic degrowth, Tourism Recreation Research, DOI: [10.1080/02508281.2023.2248578](https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2023.2248578)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2023.2248578>



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Published online: 29 Aug 2023.



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RESEARCH NOTE



## Fair vs. fake touristic degrowth

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### ABSTRACT

This contribution aims to advance consideration of the potential and pitfalls entailed in discussions of degrowth within tourism development. Many mass tourist destinations suffer from saturation impacting local working conditions, access to housing and the collective enjoyment of public goods, among the many common drawbacks of so-called 'overtourism'. Yet proposals to address the negative impacts of mass tourism can become contradictory or even counterproductive. In one manifestation of this dynamic, prominent industry actors increasingly claim to have embraced the agenda of touristic degrowth by focusing on what is euphemistically termed 'quality tourism' (fewer tourists who spend more money), which in reality designates elite travel by the most powerful and wealthy social classes. But just as recession is not degrowth, neither can such elitization be considered genuine touristic degrowth, because it does not address the industry's general eco-social overreach via measures to promote social and environmental justice as degrowth advocates. It could thus instead be labelled 'fake' degrowth. By contrast, *fair* degrowth is defined by a decrease in the flow of energy and materials per capita, in a planned and democratic way, to contribute to equitable redistribution of resource use and access.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 May 2023  
Accepted 9 August 2023

### KEYWORDS

Growth; degrowth;  
overtourism; luxury tourism;  
quality tourism



There is no good and moral idea that capital cannot appropriate and turn into something hideous.

David Harvey (November 20, 2021)

## Introduction

Many mass tourist destinations suffer from saturation, due to intensification of the commodification and commercialisation of local culture, heritage, and natural resources (Mowforth & Munt, 2016). This often leads to the detriment of local working conditions, access to housing and the collective enjoyment of public goods, among the many common drawbacks of so-called 'overtourism' (Milano et al., 2019). This manifestation of uneven geographical development thus exhibits some symptoms of the 'polycrisis' combining climate change with energy and social inequality among other pressing socio-ecological issues. Safeguarding the global commons for all people now and into the future requires taking in consideration safe and just planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2023). The indulgent waste of

energy and materials by the mass tourism industry is at odds with this aim, contributing to the very ecological unsustainability that the industry ostensibly intends to combat via the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out in the United Nations 2030 Agenda. One response to these dilemmas comprises mounting calls for pursuit of 'degrowth' in future tourism planning (see Blázquez-Salom et al., [in press](#); Fletcher et al., 2019), a proposal that has recently been the subject of lively debate in this journal (Butcher, 2021, 2022; Higgins-Desbiolles & Everingham, 2022). In this spirit, indeed, the UN Secretary General himself asserted that recovery from the COVID-19 crisis should lead to a substantially different economy (Objective 8), describing tourism as 'a powerful tool for community progress and reduction of inequality' in this effort (Objective 10) (Guterres, 2020). However, the proposals contained in the 2030 Agenda for tourism reform continue to be based mainly on continued economic growth, the development of infrastructure and attraction of foreign investment (Objective 9) (UNWTO, 2015).

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This demonstrates how proposals to address the negative impacts of mass tourism can become contradictory or even counterproductive. In one manifestation of this contradictory dynamic, prominent industry actors increasingly claim to have embraced the agenda of touristic degrowth by focusing on what is euphemistically termed ‘quality tourism’ (fewer tourists who spend more money), which in reality designates elite travel by the most powerful and wealthy social classes (see e.g. <https://essentiallymallorca.com/>; <https://www.ibizaluxurydestination.com/en/>; <https://www.exclusivemenorca.com/>). But just as recession is not degrowth (Hickel, 2021), neither can such elitization be considered genuine touristic degrowth, because it does not address the industry’s general eco-social overreach via measures to promote social and environmental justice as degrowth advocates. It could thus instead be labelled ‘fake’ degrowth because it threatens to actually aggravate eco-social crises by distracting attention from the logic of growth and accumulation by dispossession at the root of many negative tourism impacts. By contrast, *fair* degrowth is defined by a decrease in the flow of energy and materials per capita, in a planned and democratic way, to contribute to equitable redistribution of resource use and access. This research note aims to clarify what pursuit of degrowth understood in a holistic sense with social justice at its centre would actually entail for tourism planning going forward.

### Misrepresenting degrowth

The first reference to the term degrowth (Gorz, 1972) appears in the context of the debate concerning biophysical constraints generated by the *Limits to Growth* report (Meadows et al., 1972). Georgescu-Roegen (1971) had already stated that economic process could not be exempted from the thermodynamic laws governing the rest of nature. His diagnosis thus concluded that economic activity cannot grow indefinitely and hence would have to eventually decrease to a sustainable level commensurate with the ratio of solar energy flow and the constraints of entropy. At the beginning of the 2000s, Serge Latouche (2003, p. 3) defined degrowth as ‘a necessity’ for advanced industrial societies to achieve progress, prosperity and social development given the impossibility of infinite growth (Latouche, 2007). The systemic crisis of 2008 reactivated the academic and social debate concerning degrowth (Schneider et al., 2010), with a proliferation of new publications and international conferences in subsequent years (e.g. D’Alisa et al., 2015; Hickel, 2020; Kallis et al., 2020).

The controversy that we propose to address herein refers to circumstances in which ostensive pursuit of degrowth in mass tourism destinations differs greatly from what is proposed by the ecosocialist thought grounding the overarching degrowth discussion. In a perverse rhetorical twist, via promotion of so-called ‘quality tourism,’ industry stakeholders increasingly distort degrowth’s meaning to elitize and restrict tourism based on the purchasing power of demand. Reducing tourism flows by merely making the product more expensive is not genuine degrowth; rather, it is segregation based on wealth and social class. Privileging the speculative investor and luxury tourist runs contrary to the minimalistic bioeconomic programme elaborated by Georgescu-Roegen (1976), instead merely indulging an extravagant way of life grounded in excessive per capita consumption of energy and materials. The divergence of ‘quality tourism’ from fair degrowth becomes even more pronounced if we define degrowth in terms of its contribution to the egalitarian improvement of social and ecological well-being via radical redistribution of wealth and resource access (Kallis, 2018, 2021).

### Fair degrowth applied to tourism

Faced with the uneven geographies of capital, degrowth is posed as an anti-capitalist political project, since degrowth is an ‘impossible theorem’ within a capitalist system that requires continuous growth for its survival (Foster et al., 2010). Rejection of the illusion of unlimited growth requires a planned reduction in the flow (throughput) of energy and resources leading the economy to a new balance within natural limits, one that reduces inequality and improves human well-being (Kallis, 2018; Latouche, 2009). Hickel clarifies that degrowth it is not simply a question of reducing GDP, but rather of reducing the processing of materials and energy, for which ‘degrowth proposes the inversion of the processes that underlie growth: it requires deaccumulation, decommodification and decolonization’ (2021, p. 1107), facilitating the possibility of ‘prosperity without growth’ (Foster et al., 2010), or what Latouche (2011) called a ‘society of frugal abundance’.

Degrowth thus proposes to liberate leisure time from its appropriation and commodification by capitalism as a form of consumerist ‘compensatory leisure’ facilitating the perpetuation of alienated labour (Fletcher & Neves, 2012). In a degrowth scenario, leisure would instead become time for life: loneliness, boredom and thinking, democracy; meetings and relationships; play, festivity and other autotelic activities; feeling alive enjoying nature and poetry; self-production, crafting and DIY; pursuing beauty and wisdom; or engaging in rebellion and

dissent (Puche, 2010). Individual liberation from overwork due to reduction in working hours and job sharing would make it possible to focus on care, social reproduction and relationships (Aragón, 2022; Herrero, 2021), engage in a democratically determined, ritualised unproductive expenditure of community surpluses, such as spending on a collective feast, what has been called as *dépense* (D'Alisa et al., 2015). Such leisure in the public sphere is part of the enhancement of well-being envisioned by degrowth, and we can understand transforming tourism as a key component of this. One of the defining principles of degrowth is sharing the commons, which is also one of the central elements of the convivial conservation proposal (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). This post-capitalist approach to socio-environmental justice proposes to overcome the human-nature dichotomy by engaging with nonhuman nature in ways that are more democratic, local, mundane, daily, prolonged, committed and contextualised than the typical tourist holiday to a remote protected area. Following from this proposal, the notion of the commons can be defined in the domain of leisure as enjoyment of outdoor space guaranteed to everyone, regardless of their purchasing power (Kallis, 2018).

Degrowth in tourism has been demanded by parts of the populations that inhabit cities fashionable for urban getaway tourism (see e.g. Blanco-Romero, 2019; Valdivielso & Moranta, 2019). Residents have raised alarm when feeling displaced by the touristic commodification of their daily environment, which is in large part composed of common goods: housing, public roads, docks, squares, commercial premises, and so forth, but also less tangible phenomena such as culture, daily life, and urban experience, among other aspects of everyday life. In this regard, degrowth in tourism proposes decommmodification as a demand for social sustainability (see Table 1). But this demand is complemented by another

to redress the previously mentioned inequality and socio-spatial polarisation associated with the international tourism (Blanco-Romero, 2019). This transnationalization of mass tourism spurred by multinational corporations leads to social, labour, and environmental abuses as well as tax fraud (Artigues & Blázquez-Salom, 2019), which degrowth proposes to address through inspection, supervision, and public regulation. Given that international tourism is also associated with transmission of pathogens – such as COVID-19 – due to the hypermobility it promotes, as well as worsening of the climate emergency due to the industry's dependence on the consumption of fossil fuels, degrowth in tourism also entails promotion of proximity travel (Cañada & Izcarra, 2021), prioritising narrower travel circuits, underpinning local thriving through more localised tourism or focusing on public good outcomes from tourism including social tourism and youth education (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022). In this way, touristic degrowth can contribute to an overarching programme of contraction and planned convergence as well as consensual redistribution of the consumption of materials and energy (Fletcher et al., 2019) via both public regulation (Fletcher et al., 2023) and self-restraint (Kallis, 2021).

## Conclusions

Reforming tourism in pursuit of social and environmental justice manifests in a variety of short-term proposals, already extensively developed in social movements and in the academic literature addressing degrowth generally (Agrawal, 2003; Blázquez-Salom et al., *in press*; Hickel, 2020; Liegey & Nelson, 2020). These include improvement of working conditions, provision of universal basic income (UBI), ecological transition to reverse social and environmental crises, collective appropriation of surplus value to combat accumulation by dispossession, expansion of public services and collective self-organisation (in the form of worker owned cooperatives, for instance). But to truly transform tourism in pursuit of degrowth, we must complement these with longer-term and more radical efforts to cultivate post-capitalist 'spaces of hope' in tourism provision (Fletcher et al., 2023) that increase free time by enriching and decommodifying leisure, as one essential component of an overarching degrowth transition. This, we feel, constitutes a vital focus of future research and social action to move the discussion from fake to fair touristic degrowth.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Table 1.** Comparison of fake vs fair touristic degrowth.

Fake Degrowth	Fair Degrowth Leisure in the public sphere ( <i>dépense</i> )
Elite or luxury tourism	
Commodification	Decommodification
Exclusive enjoyment	Communal enjoyment
Individualised experience	Convivial connection (mundane, prolonged, contextualised ...)
Private well-being	Collective well-being
Elite control	Democratic planning
Resolve negative impacts (considered 'externalities' of an ostensibly isolated economic system) through market mechanisms and technological innovation	Politicize radical alternatives to political-economic contradictions through regulation and self- constraint

Source: authors' own elaboration.

## Funding

Fundings his work was supported by the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación [grant number PID2020-114186RB-C21]; by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033 and 'FEDER Una manera de hacer Europa' [grant number RTI2018-094844-B-C31].

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