

Dark Tourism: Is There a Bright Side?

John Jackson

Abstract: Although it is hardly a new concept, Dark Tourism - the practice of people visiting places associated with death, disaster, misery, suffering and destruction has grown in popularity particularly since the mid twentieth century as more and more places have become accessible. The reasons for this popularity have yet to be categorically defined, as has the motivation of the visitors. Tarlow (2005) defines dark tourism as such: “those events which are more than just tragedies in history, but rather touch our lives not merely from the emotional perspective, but also impact our politics and social policies.”

This paper aims to examine the motives for visiting dark tourism sites and investigate and present the benefits gained ethically, morally and emotionally through studying and ultimately, gaining an understanding of visitors' personal connections through their experiences.

Keywords: dark tourism, death and disaster, historical sites, education, culture

要約

ダークツーリズム～これはもはや新しい概念ではない。死、大災害、苦痛、破壊等の生じた場所を訪ねること～は、それらの場所へのアクセスが容易になるにつれ、20世紀の半ば以降、人気上昇している。その理由はまだ十分に明らかとはなっていないがこれはそこを訪れる人たちの動機についても言えることである。ターローはダークツーリズムを以下のように定義している：「歴史上の悲劇といえるもの以上の出来事で、単に感情面に影響を与えるだけでなく、政治・社会政策にも衝撃を与えるもの。」

この論文の目的はダークツーリズムの現場を訪れる目的を考察すること、そしてこれまでの研究により倫理的・道徳的・感情的に得られた成果を調査・発表することであり、さらにはそこを訪れる人々の経験を通じてダークツーリズムの現場とのつながりを理解することにある。

キーワード：ダークツーリズム、追悼の旅、史跡・教育・文化

Definition of Dark Tourism

Dark Tourism involves the act of visiting or traveling specifically to sites of death or to where events of a macabre nature have taken place. The term dark tourism was first introduced to mainstream academic scrutiny in an editorial by Malcolm Foley and John Lennon for the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* in 1996 and was further publicized and elaborated on in 2000 in their well-received book, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (Lennon and Foley, 2000).

Among the numerous studies of this field, many researchers have sought to gain an understanding of the type of individuals who engage in these visits, the political and social impacts and the attraction of the darker side of tourism sites (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005; Beech, 2009; Lennon & Foley,

2000; Sharpley, 2009; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Walter, 2009). These studies have also focused on the importance of developing a more ideological approach to the phenomenon of dark tourism in order to further our understanding of its concept and its rise in popularity.

Seaton and Lennon (2004) maintain there are more questions than answers in regard to dark tourism. Similarly, Reader (2003, p. 2) suggests “the dynamics through which people are drawn to sites redolent with images of death . . . and the manner in which they are induced to behave there . . . [means] that the topic calls out for discussion”.

Perhaps the most distinctive and collective aspects of engaging in dark tourism are that the locations and sites offer extremely emotional experiences for visitors (Shackley, 2001). Indeed Miles (2002) also contends that in order to be successful, attractions promoting dark tourism are required to provide highly emotional experiences that engender a strong sense of empathy among visitors. Generally, experiences at dark tourism sites tend to evoke a sense of emotional negativity within visitors, including feelings of horror, sadness, fear, depression, sympathy, and often, a need for justice or vengeance.

Dark Tourism could also be described as a manner of “place-specific tourism” (Ashworth & Hartman, 2005, p. 4), whereby the experiences of individuals depend greatly on the specific characteristics of a site and the associations they suggest. Several researchers have therefore categorized dark tourism sites in relation to the characteristics that define them. Smith (1998) placed these characteristics into two fundamental categories: primary sites (for example, sites of celebrity deaths, massacres, former prisons and holocaust camps); and secondary sites (for example, locations and sites that commemorate death, disaster or tragedy). Furthermore, Miles (2002) suggested a “darker-lighter” paradigm exists which serves as a distinction between the forms of “dark” and “darker” tourism according to the lesser or greater extent of the morose or macabre *associated with* the site. For this reason it may be said that dark tourism sites represent “sites associated *with* death, disaster and depravity” whereas darker tourism sites are essentially “the sites *of* death, disaster and depravity” (Miles, 2002, p. 1175). Using this paradigm we could contend that the Jewish Museum in Berlin could be categorized as a dark tourism site because it is associated with the deaths of thousands of Jews in the holocaust, whereas the Dachau site in southern Germany, a former concentration camp and geographically authentic location would therefore come under the category of a darker tourism site. Using the paradigm created by Miles (2002), Stone (2006) expanded it by proposing a spectrum that classified dark tourism sites according to their perceived characteristics (see Figure 1). Using a scale of different degrees or “shades of darkness” beginning from darkest to lightest, Stone illustrated seven categories of “dark tourism suppliers,” ranging from “Dark Camps of Genocide” as the darkest to “Dark Fun Factories” as the lightest on the scale. A specific example of the darkest suppliers would point to genocide sites including those in Cambodia, Rwanda or East Timor. In contrast, examples of the lightest suppliers include sites such as the New London Dungeon attraction in England or the Soviet

oppression theme park “Stalin World” in Lithuania.

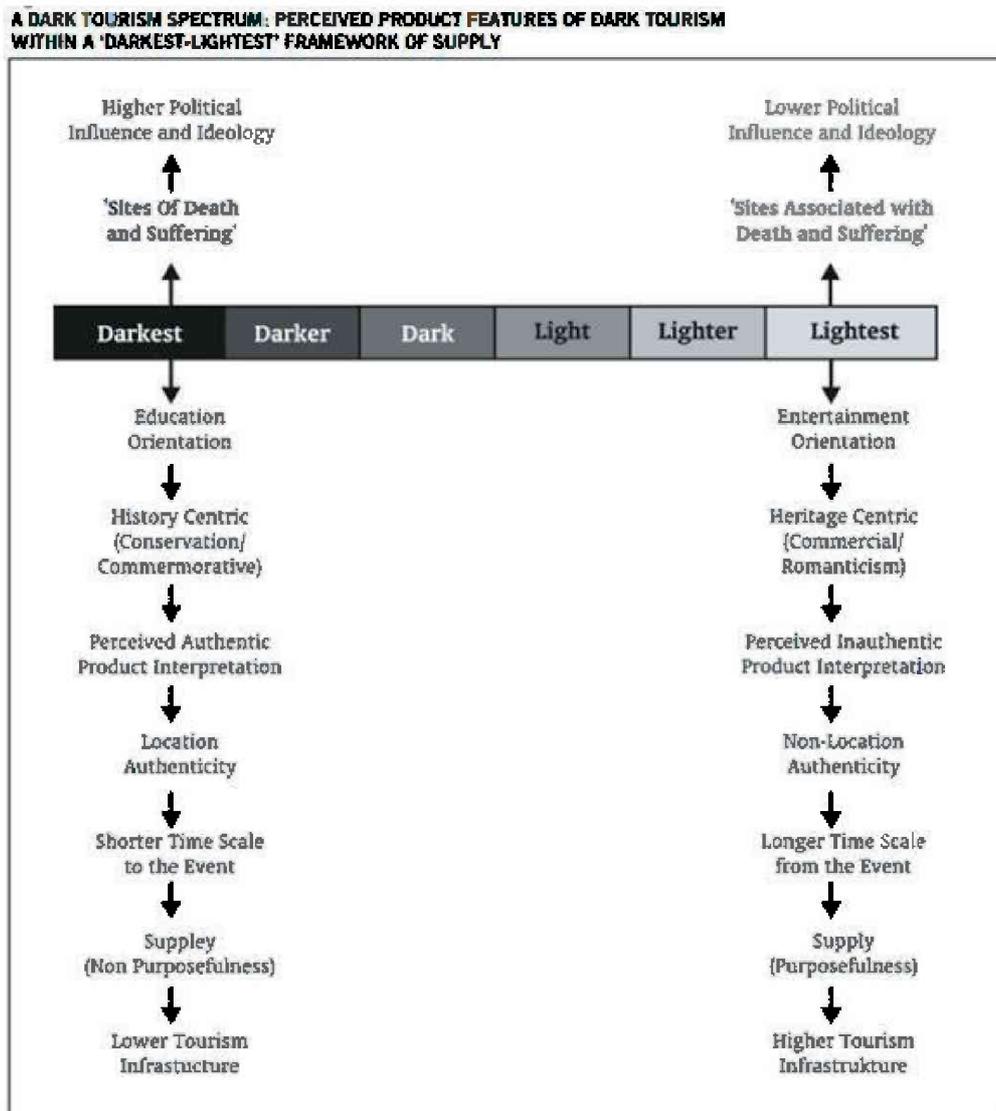


Figure 1: A dark tourism spectrum proposed by Stone (2006)

Despite the distinctive characteristics that dark tourism sites possess, it has also been recognized that similarities in individual’s motivation exist in visitor experiences regardless of the type of site. The following section aims to examine the qualities in dark tourism that tourists find attractive and seeks to find a common basis of interest and motivation in visitation.

What is the attraction of dark tourism sites?

The “horror experience” is regarded as one of the key reasons for the visitation of dark tourism locations, particularly those sites directly related to atrocity or barbarity. Ashworth and Hartmann (2005) maintain that because of the considerable amount of television and movie depictions invoking fear and horror in consumers, relating atrocity as history at a given site is equally as entertaining as

any media portrayal – for precisely the same reasons and moral overtones. In fact, polls and surveys have indicated that in many cases, a strong sense of moral or personal duty was a driving factor in the visitation of these sites. Another key reason was the emotional experience that visitors gained from these encounters and consequently benefited from.

Notable examples are Gallipoli in Turkey and the battleground of Gettysburg in the USA, which constitutes one of the bloodiest and most brutal campaigns in the American Civil War. Thompson (2004, p. xii) provides an extensive travel guide to the “25 Best World War II Sites” and notes “a battlefield where thousands died isn’t necessarily a *good* place but it’s often an important one.” Slade (2003, p. 782) further reflects on this importance and suggests that Gallipoli, the battlefield where Australia and New Zealand suffered massive casualties during World War I, was where both countries, respectively, have their “*de facto* psychological and cultural origins.” Chronis (2005) also observes that sites like Gettysburg are capable of being embraced by both tourists and facilitators alike, to morally wrestle with, define and strengthen national identity and embrace a sense of patriotism.

On the other hand, there are numerous locations that hold a certain fascination which one could argue is neither morally nor ethically beneficial but rather morbidly entertaining. These include the assassination site of John F. Kennedy and sites of celebrity deaths, such as those of James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Buddy Holly, Jim Morrison, and in more recent times, Elvis Presley, John Lennon and Princess Diana. Birthplaces of people that are synonymous with death are also frequently visited and include those of Adolph Hitler, Idi Amin and “Vlad The Impaler” (Dracula). The hometowns and/or former residences of mass murderers, dictators or other organizers and perpetrators of genocide are also heavily visited sites. These types of tourism locations have also been labeled as sites of Morbid Tourism, Black Spot Tourism or Grief Tourism. More specifically, Bristow and Newman (2004) propose the label “Fright Tourism,” for “a manner of dark tourism in which individuals receive a tangible shock or an enormous thrill from viewing or participating in an experience.” Is this form of morbid attraction beneficial in any way? Perhaps this observation from Dann (1998, p. 61,) best summarizes our desire to engage in these particular “negative” types of dark tourism. He states that “dicing with death” – that is, seeking experiences or “holidays in hell” that challenge tourists or heighten their own sense of mortality – may be considered one reason for participating in dark tourism. In an October 2013 interview with Will Coldwell for the newspaper *The Guardian*, Mark Watson, executive director of ethical travel education group, Tourism Concern, stated there is no definitive answer or conclusion as to whether dark tourism is ethically or morally right or wrong. “People go for a huge variety of reasons, so it’s difficult to accurately or categorically assess their motivations,” he explains. “At places like Auschwitz and the Rwandan Genocide Memorial, people go to fully understand what happened and are genuinely affected by it.” In addition to these locations, popular sites providing similar motivations and emotional outcomes include the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia; a former high school used by the Khmer Rouge to mercilessly torture and

murder over 20,000 prisoners, and the village of Hoi An in Vietnam, where U.S. soldiers massacred hundreds of women and children during the Vietnam War. Robben Island Prison Museum just off the coast of Capetown, South Africa was formerly a notorious prison housing political prisoners – most notably Nelson Mandela. It was here that Mandela served 18 of the 27 years of which he was sentenced. Despite the brutality and despair of its past history, this site now represents a powerful symbol of triumph over adversity, racism and repression.

Sites that are currently completed or near completion include one located in Thailand's Khao Lok National Park commemorating the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, one for the Haiti earthquake of early 2010 and another in the Chinese city of Chengdu in remembrance of the massive 2008 China earthquake. Of the three previously mentioned sites, it is worth noting that none were created with the sole intention of generating revenue through tourism. They do (and will) however, most certainly attract visitors purely on the premise of being widely promoted and publicized by the media (Seaton, 2009).

Following disaster or adversity, a surge in tourism has always been vital in the successful rebuilding of any site (Daams, 2007). Prior to the devastating earthquake and consequent tsunami in March 2011, the city of Rikuzentakata in northeastern Japan was a well-visited tourist site due to its pristine beaches and abundant pine forests. Following the earthquake, more than 18,000 people perished and whole communities were destroyed by the ensuing tidal wave.

Twelve months after this catastrophe, tour operators and travel agencies began promoting tourism to the immediate area to stimulate travel to this location and others throughout Japan as part of a rebuilding strategy to aid the nation both financially and emotionally. Furthermore, Travcoa, a major worldwide travel agency formed a partnership with the Japan National Tourism Organization in an effort to successfully promote and market this campaign.

In the case of Rikuzentakata and other locations affected by calamity such as the hurricane damaged city of New Orleans and the World Trade Center site of New York, it could be argued that dark tourism is providing emotional benefits to both the tourist and the community. This form of tourism is being used to educate as well as raise awareness, provide encouragement and increase revenue for re-building. By becoming more aware of the horrific events in our past, dark tourism is in fact, guiding us to a deeper, more sobering awareness of the world we all live in (Daams, 2007).

Conclusion

As stated earlier in this paper, the study of the ambiguous nature of dark tourism calls out for discussion. It forces the scholar to consider multiple facets and ask many questions. A number of these questions form the basis of this paper: what factors could possibly motivate us to spend our time and money visiting the locations of misery, death and destruction and are these motivations and intentions honorable? Are we seeking the tragic as a form of therapy or as an instrument of our superiority over

the less fortunate? Is participating in dark tourism a type of counter balance to our moral character or does it pacify our sense of guilt? What are the fundamental purposes of dark tourism sites?

It is the opinion of the author that with certain exceptions, the large majority of dark tourism sites and/or attractions throughout the world are established purely to educate, commemorate or promote reconciliation throughout peoples and communities. Indeed this need for commemoration or remembrance would appear to be a vital activity that humans need to connect us to our past. The desire to reflect on the past defines us in the present (Young, 1993). Remembrance helps us formulate an identity, learn from our mistakes and proceed into the future with a clearer vision. The author also maintains that it is of utmost importance that dark tourism sites are able to demonstrate and confirm that the intentions and objectives for their creation have been realized and justified through the outcome of visitation from the tourists' perspective.

As quoted by Jean-Pierre de Caussade,* '*So we follow our wandering paths, and the very darkness acts as our guide and doubts serve to reassure us.*'

*Jean Pierre de Caussade (7 March 1675 – 8 December 1751) was a French Jesuit priest and writer known for his work *Abandonment to Divine Providence*.

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