

BLOG POST September 26th 2024

Overtourism: from facts to action?

Authors

Angelo Sciacca

Associate Researcher, Blue tourism

Julien Rochette

Director, Ocean programme

🕒 Reading time: 4 min



[Barcelona](#) is set to ban short-term apartment rentals for tourists by 2028, [Greece](#) is introducing a tax on cruise passengers disembarking on certain islands during peak season, [Marseille](#) is regulating access to its calanques... In recent months, a growing number of destinations have implemented measures to mitigate the economic, social, and environmental impacts of overtourism. While most of these initiatives are local in scope, they highlight the need to broaden the discussion and integrate tourism challenges more prominently into international and regional cooperation efforts.

Every summer, the debate about tourism's role in our societies resurfaces. Media showcase images of overcrowded beaches and tourist attractions, often highlighting the [protests](#) of local populations who feel they benefit very little from the influx of visitors. The tourism sector is remarkably resilient and has largely rebounded from the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. In 2023, tourism contributed 9.1% of the global GDP, both directly and indirectly—a 23% increase from 2022; and 2024 is expected to set [new records](#). The [cruise sector](#), a major market segment, also

rebounded in 2023, with 31.7 million passengers, 7% above 2019 levels. Projections suggest that this number could reach 40 million by 2027.

Coastal regions are particularly impacted by this ongoing growth in tourism. In the [Mediterranean](#), which accounts for about one-third of international tourism, warning signs are becoming increasingly apparent. Tourism exerts pressure on already fragile natural ecosystems and, in some cases, has sparked strong protests from local communities vulnerable to the destabilization of key sectors, especially housing. Similarly, in the [Caribbean](#), communities highlight threats to their natural and cultural heritage, the monopolization of prime beachfront land for hotel development, and the exclusion of small and micro businesses from the tourism value chain—issues that leave them with little to gain from the sector's growth. These negative effects are also emerging in regions that are beginning to open up to tourism, such as the [Western Indian Ocean](#).

On paper however, tourism policies have seen a significant shift in recent years. Traditional national strategies focused on growth and mass tourism are increasingly being replaced or supplemented by sustainability-driven approaches.¹ But these new directions are being formalized and implemented in varying ways and at different paces, depending on the country and destination. Moreover, the necessary transformation towards greater sustainability requires associated robust political and economic strategies, which are often lacking government support. Finally, the use of the blue economy concept, the mantra of many governments, still tends to prioritize development issues to the detriment of those linked to sustainability. As a result, tangible changes in the field are slow to emerge, with only little local success standing out.

In this context, there would be many advantages to integrating tourism-related issues more firmly into the ocean governance agenda, which currently largely excludes them.² This is particularly relevant for the [cruise tourism sector](#), which requires supra-state regulatory mechanisms to mitigate its impacts and promote greater sustainability. More broadly, such integration would allow for the development of transnational policies—on a regional scale, for example - helping to prevent the harmful effects of competition between States and destinations, which often leads to insufficient attention being paid to sustainability requirements.

In this context, the Third United Nations Conference on the Oceans (UNOC3), to be held in June 2025, offers an opportunity to be seized. Co-chaired by France, a leading tourist destination, and Costa Rica, known for its nature-based tourism model, the conference aims to “accelerate action and mobilize all stakeholders for the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans”. In line with this mandate, the conference could serve as a launching platform for reconciling the agendas of tourism and marine and coastal conservation. One possible initiative could be embodied, for example, by the creation of a coalition of stakeholders committed to tackling these challenges, marking the start of a more significant alignment between these two agendas.

The negative impacts of tourism are increasingly recognized as a societal concern. Addressing this complex issue is challenging, as it intersects with various sectoral policies and stakeholders at both global and local levels. While the Third United Nations Conference on the Ocean is neither intended nor equipped to resolve the problem in its entirety, it can still contribute, alongside ongoing initiatives, to creating a political momentum and preparing us to address future challenges.

¹ This has been supported by some intergovernmental organizations, such as the UN Tourism or the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that contributed to the development of policy initiatives and related indicators on sustainability.

² For example, there was no mention of tourism in the final declaration of the 2022 UN Ocean Conference. Moreover, despite the sector's importance in the ocean sphere, the Second World Ocean Assessment does not dedicate a full chapter to tourism, but only some limited developments. Additionally, although most marine regions suffer from tourism impacts on marine and coastal zones, no dedicated agreement has yet

been adopted and tourism is not a topic generally addressed by regional seas conventions and action plans.

-
- OCEAN
- TOURISME DURABLE
- MEDITERRANEAN SEA
- CARIBBEAN
- INDIAN OCEAN
- NÉGOCIATIONS INTERNATIONALES OCÉAN