Total revamp needed to secure the future of Aussie tourism

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A complete reset of Australia's tourism industry is necessary to ensure its future success, according to global tourism expert, Professor Marianna Sigala at the University of South Australia.

As debates continue about how and when to open Australia's state and territory borders, Prof Sigala says we must consider what we want Australia's future tourism industry to look like, with a clear lens on sustainability and well-being.

"There's no doubt Australia's tourism sector is suffering—we started the year in recovery following the devastating bushfires and then, before operators were even back on their feet, we were hit with the COVID-19 pandemic, and everything rapidly shut down," Prof Sigala says.

"Everyone is keen to re-active our tourism industry, but we must not default to 'business as usual'. A new restart rather than a recovery to the old normal is more reasonable.

"COVID-19 has led to profound changes on tourists' behaviour and expectations as well as on industry operations which are predicted to have long-lasting impacts. We need to take advantage of the slow-down to reflect, rethink and plan for improved practices and behaviours.

"This includes revisiting how tourism activities impact communities; respecting nature and surrounds to ensure we're enhancing and giving back to the areas and assets that draw tourists; and we need to do that

with a mindset that shows we are ready for a successful and sustainable future.

"A tourism resetting plan that encompasses responsible tourism, seasonality and climate change, and importantly, practices that benefit all stakeholder—operators, visitors and communities—and their tangible and intangible cultural assets, could position Australia as a world exemplar in re-imagining and leading new tourism management in the post COVID era."

Environmentally, the pandemic has had a positive impact. In India, COVID-19 has closed factories, to clear once-polluted skies; the Himalayan mountain range is now visible from some cities for the first time in years. In Venice, as canal traffic has come to a standstill, once-murky waters are also clear.

Closer to home, Australia had been making positive steps, even before the onset of COVID-19. In October last year, the iconic Uluru was permanently closed to climbers as a mark of respect to the traditional owners of the land.

Yet with recent calls from Northern Territory business groups to reopen the climb for the sake of tourism, Prof Sigala says we still have a lot to learn.

"While isolation has enabled physical environments a chance to recover from the lack of mass tourism, we must find a balance between caring for tourism assets—and the communities in which they reside –valorising them for supporting tourism activities within and around these locations," Prof Sigala says.

"When we commoditise and commercialse a cultural asset, we risk transforming it into an attraction driven by visitation defined by

[economic growth](link).

"The trade-off between economic and other values is our current mindset, and this needs to shift."

The World Tourism Organization estimates that international tourist arrivals could drop to 78 percent, which translates to a drop of up to 1.1 billion international arrivals and a loss of US$ 1.2 trillion (nearly A$1.9 trillion) in export revenues from tourism, representing the largest decline in the history of the industry.

Under these dire conditions, survival of the industry must still include sustainability planning and development.

"Sustainability management should not be viewed as an expense to be managed, but as an investment for the future," Prof Sigala says

"Australia must continue to implement activities to keep customers, tourism staff and businesses engaged and ready for when travel restrictions lift.

"We need to communicate to the wider and international community that we are not in hibernation, but rather we are upgrading, innovating and introducing sustainable changes in our tourism offerings and operations that enhance the well-being of tourists and our communities.

"When tourists come back, we should be welcoming them to a better, more ethical and more sustainable tourism industry."

Provided by University of South Australia

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