

Survey: Tourists' long-term plans more uncertain under climate change

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North Carolina State University researchers found in a new [study](#) that while many tourists visiting a mountain destination in southern Mexico wouldn't change their near-term plans to visit due to climate change,

more than two-thirds said they would or might change their plans by 2060 under more drastically changed conditions.

In addition, researchers also found that 70% of those surveyed would change the length of their stay in response to [climate change](#) by 2060, and some indicated they'd shift the timing of their visit. The findings, published in a special edition of *Tourism and Hospitality*, suggest that climate change could impact not only the total number of tourists visiting a place, but also the timing and duration—factors that could be important for tourism-related staffing and revenue.

"In other studies, we've seen that for some tourists, their attachment to a place will mean they'll come back, even as climactic and environmental conditions change," said study co-author Erin Seekamp, Goodnight Distinguished Professor in Coastal Resilience and Sustainability at NC State. "But there are a lot of people who are uncertain. That's something the [tourism industry](#) needs to heed with caution. That uncertainty means you could potentially lose a substantial amount of your clientele. Alternatively, it could mean there are shifts toward tourism in other seasons."

In the study, researchers surveyed 188 tourists who traveled to a region in the Sierra Norte mountains of southern Mexico, known for cloud forests and rich culture. There are eight Indigenous communities in the area called the Pueblos Mancomunados in the southern state of Oaxaca. Tourists enjoy not only nature-based activities like hiking and bird watching, but also cultural tours and festivals.

While other studies have looked at how climate change could impact tourism to beach and ski-related tourism, researchers wanted to understand whether it would cause shifts in different mountain destinations, and specifically in Latin America.

In surveys handed out at festivals, popular attractions and restaurants throughout the Pueblos Mancomunados, researchers asked tourists about their travel plans under two different climate change scenarios: a scenario with more modest changes by 2030, and another scenario with more dramatic shifts in temperature, precipitation, risk of wildfire, decreases in cloud forest coverage, and lower biodiversity by 2060.

They found that most tourists wouldn't change their plans in the near term, with 36% answering "yes" or "maybe" to a question about whether they would change their travel plans under the first scenario. However, by 2060, more than two-thirds said they would change their plans. Researchers didn't see any significant differences in how long tourists planned to stay in the near term. But 70% of tourists said they would shorten their trips in 2060. They also found that visitors who said they would or might change their plans in either scenario, many would shift the timing of their visit.

"Our study found that in the longer term, more people might feel that a place is less desirable to visit," Seekamp said. "But what our study doesn't really capture is more severe change that could happen any time. Tourism-dependent communities need to have plans in place to sustain their economies—and to ensure their way of life and heritage values can continue."

Seekamp said some tourists may continue traveling, even under less-than-ideal conditions, as researchers have seen with "last chance" tourism trends, while other tourists may be unlikely to change their plans if they've already invested in a trip. But the findings suggest there are people who would change their plans, and researchers need to do more work to understand the nuances behind their thinking. Such research can help businesses, like the Indigenously owned Expediciones Sierra Norte in the Pueblos Mancomunados of Oaxaca, think about what change might look like, and how it could impact them.

"Indigenously owned and managed tourism businesses could consider a variety of different strategies to bolster their adaptive capacity in the face of a changing climate," said the study's lead author Ginger Deason, a former doctoral student at NC State. "Considering timing of tourists' travel and developing new [tourism](#) products to appeal to the domestic market are two good strategies."

The work is published in the journal *Tourism and Hospitality*.

More information: Ginger Deason et al, Tourist Perceptions of Climate Change Impacts on Mountain Ecotourism in Southern Mexico, *Tourism and Hospitality* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/tourhosp4030028](https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp4030028)

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