# European researchers call for ‘closer by and slower’ tourism as UK clings to airport expansion



The relationship between tourism and economic growth is increasingly complex, especially as destinations grapple with the dual pressures of rising visitor numbers and environmental sustainability. European researchers advocate for a shift towards a “closer by and slower” approach, considering measures that balance economic prosperity with ecological protection. The UK, however, remains entrenched in a growth-focused paradigm, particularly regarding controversial expansions like that of Heathrow Airport. The government maintains that the economic benefits outweigh the environmental and social costs, but this perspective appears increasingly shortsighted.

Tourism is a significant contributor to global economic performance, accounting for roughly 10% of the global GDP and supporting around 357 million jobs worldwide. Despite this, the carbon footprint of tourism is substantial, with estimates suggesting that it contributes up to 8% of global CO2 emissions. As demand for travel continues to rise, these emissions are projected to escalate further, outpacing any benefits from technological advancements aimed at reducing carbon outputs, such as sustainable aviation fuel. In that light, the expansion of Heathrow—and similar developments at Gatwick and Luton—must be re-evaluated against the backdrop of the climate crisis.

Many popular tourism destinations are feeling the intense strain of overtourism, leading to resident protests over issues like overcrowding, strained infrastructure, and inflated property prices. Cities like Amsterdam have taken proactive measures by capping tourist overnight stays at 20 million and implementing a 12.5% tourist tax, along with stricter regulations on short-term rentals. These actions are designed to enhance local quality of life while mitigating the environmental impact of mass tourism. In contrast, other cities, such as Copenhagen, have opted to reward eco-friendly visitor behaviours, promoting sustainable travel without restricting visitor numbers. However, critics argue that these responses largely employ financial disincentives rather than addressing the root causes of tourism's environmental impact.

Amidst these disparities, there is an emerging discourse around “post-growth” tourism models. This concept encompasses various frameworks prioritising community wellbeing and environmental sustainability over mere economic expansion. Approaches such as “degrowth” and “doughnut economics” call for a rethinking of traditional growth metrics, suggesting that prosperity should be divorced from GDP increases. The notion of regenerative tourism—focusing on the revitalisation of ecosystems and local communities—could serve as a more sustainable alternative to the current tourism paradigm.

Many cities are beginning to implement policies that reflect these values. Greece, for example, has introduced a climate resilience tax alongside its tourism tax to support sustainability efforts. The aim is to generate revenue that can be reinvested in the very ecosystems that tourism often depletes. However, these measures are frequently stymied by overarching government policies that prioritise economic growth over environmental or social considerations. The ongoing expansion of airports like Amsterdam's Schiphol has not only contributed to noise and air pollution but also underscores the difficulty cities face in trying to align tourism management with resident wellbeing.

In light of these challenges, a paradigm shift towards promoting local tourism that emphasises sustainability and ethically responsible practices appears crucial. The focus might need to shift away from rapidly growing the tourism sector towards fostering enriching experiences that benefit both visitors and residents. This could mean prioritising nearby destinations and investing in low-carbon travel options, thereby alleviating the pressures on popular hotspots.

Ultimately, the discourse surrounding tourism and economic growth must evolve. It is essential to ensure that any economic benefits derived from tourism do not overshadow the equally important realms of ecological and societal health. Building a resilient future for travel and tourism requires a commitment to holistic practices that honour local communities and the environment—indicating a necessary pivot towards “closer by and slower” tourism that sustains both our planet and its inhabitants.

### Reference Map

1. Lead Article
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Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.tourismticker.com/2025/05/19/perspectives-can-govts-reconcile-tourism-impacts-with-a-strong-economic-growth-agenda/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.wttc.org/research/economic-impact/country-analysis/country-overview> - The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) provides comprehensive data on the economic impact of travel and tourism across 184 countries and 28 regions. Their latest research indicates that in 2024, the sector contributed $10.9 trillion to global GDP, representing 10% of the global economy. Additionally, the sector supported 357 million jobs worldwide, accounting for approximately 1 in 10 jobs globally. This underscores the significant role of tourism in driving economic growth and employment.
3. <https://www.wttc.org/research/economic-impact/> - WTTC's annual Economic Impact Research (EIR) offers insights into the economic and employment impact of travel and tourism globally. In 2024, the sector's contribution to global GDP was $10.9 trillion, accounting for 10% of the global economy. The sector also supported 357 million jobs worldwide, approximately 1 in 10 jobs. This highlights the substantial role of tourism in economic development and job creation.
4. <https://www.wttc.org/news/global-travel-and-tourism-is-strong-despite-economic-headwinds> - Despite economic uncertainties, the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) reports strong growth in the global travel and tourism sector. In 2025, international visitor spending is projected to reach a historic $2.1 trillion, surpassing the previous high of $1.9 trillion in 2019. The sector is expected to contribute an all-time high of $11.7 trillion to the global economy, accounting for 10.3% of global GDP. This demonstrates the resilience and continued importance of tourism in the global economy.
5. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/01/tourism-sustainable-development/> - The World Economic Forum discusses common misconceptions about tourism's role in sustainable development. In 2024, the sector is projected to contribute around 10% to global GDP, with expectations to reach 11.4% by 2034. This growth would outpace the global economy, highlighting tourism's potential to drive economic development. The article emphasizes the need for sustainable practices to ensure that tourism contributes positively to global well-being and environmental sustainability.
6. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/05/6-years-to-the-global-goals-heres-how-tourism-can-help-get-us-there/> - The World Economic Forum highlights the role of tourism in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2023, international tourists reached 89% of pre-pandemic levels, with 1.3 billion travelers and tourism exports valued at approximately $1.7 trillion. The article emphasizes the importance of adopting sustainable practices in tourism to address challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss, and advocates for inclusive governance and community engagement in tourism planning to support local identity and well-being.
7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tourism_in_South_Africa> - The Wikipedia page on tourism in South Africa provides detailed information on the sector's contribution to the country's economy. As of May 2025, tourism accounted for 3.3% of South Africa's GDP, up from 2.3% in 2019. The total nominal GDP of the South African economy in 2024 was R7.3 trillion, with the tourism industry contributing approximately R241 billion. This underscores the growing importance of tourism in South Africa's economic landscape.