

Political economy of conservation: analysing the effects of economic domination of the cruise ship industry on conservation through the use of space on Cozumel, Mexico

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Geography

The island of Cozumel, located in the Caribbean Sea, is a popular cruise ship destination. In 2017, Cozumel welcomed 4.1 million cruise passengers and 1,240 cruise ships making it the busiest cruise destination in the Caribbean and the world's largest global cruise market. This recent growth in visitors is seen as a success as it contributes to the further expansion of the island's economy. But the oligopolistic domination of the cruise ship tourism industry tends to reinforce an unequal system of wealth repartition and prevents local communities to act beyond the spectrum of mass tourism. This strongly influences the local political, economic and environmental decision-making, as well as the socio-cultural life on the island. Cozumel has five declared protected areas, covering about 50% of the land surface, and 92% of the coastal and marine area. But the continuous growth of cruise ship tourism on the island puts great demographic pressure on the protected areas, in particular on the Reef National Park.

This thesis analyzes the effects of economic domination of the cruise ship tourism industry on conservation and the way they are expressed through the use of space on Cozumel, by the study of semi-structured interviews conducted with local representatives. The analysis of the data indicates a strong economic dependence of the local community towards the cruise ship industry and the economic domination of the cruise ship corporations over the conservation authorities and local economy is visible through the use of space and the economic control of key territories on the island. The situation is problematic for the conservation authorities, who lack the resources to implement new policies and to have regulations applied in the parks. The conservation authorities, in hope to plan a more effective conservation, have developed a new management plan of the protected areas of the island, which shows considerably smaller areas of preservation than the original delimitations of the parks, mainly in the Reef National Park. The cruise ship tourism industry therefore exerts direct and indirect environmental damages through their use of the Piers and Plazas.

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