

# The use of forests for the purpose of tourism: the case of Belek Tourism Center in Turkey

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## Abstract

The main aim of this article is to examine and review the usage of forests for the purpose of tourism in Turkey with the case study of Antalya-Belek. The use and conversion of forest lands is central to tourism development. Land use change is responsible for the majority of the negative environmental impacts of tourism on natural resources. Worldwide, forests and coastal zones are converted for the construction of tourist facilities. The rapid emergence of mass tourism development in Turkey, encouraged without considering protection and sustainable use of natural and cultural resources, has resulted in serious problems in forest areas. This paper is particularly concerned with land use change in forests (or deforestation) created by the allocation of forest lands to build tourist facilities. In Belek, a tourism center located in Antalya province's coastal areas and the fastest growing destination of the country, all tourist facilities have been established in forest lands under the status of conservation forest. Today, the Belek Conservation Forest is under severe pressure from tourism.

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## 1. Introduction

Forestry and tourism are two fields which have received much international attention in recent years. The underlying causes of this attention in the two fields differ from each other. Forestry draws attention due to its functions in supplying products and services needed by society, whereas the reasons that bring tourism to the agenda are that it is one of the fastest growing sectors and its economic, socio-cultural and environmental effects are increasingly recognized. While tourism has become an undeniable fact of modern life as an important means to stimulate economic growth, its negative environmental effects are discussed by environmentalists, researchers, and natural resource managers, especially in the fields of forestry, agriculture, and wildlife.

Overall, tourism causes heavy consumption of natural resources and produces wastes, hence, its potential for damaging and destroying the environment. Many researchers (e.g. Baker, 1997; Briassoulis, 2002; Butler, 1990; Cater, 1993; Gonzales and Leon, 2001; Goodall and Stabler, 1994; Gössling, 2001; Sasidharan et al., 2002; Sun and Walsh, 1998) stated that tourism development has, inadvertently, produced negative environmental effects (or environmental problems) at tourist destinations, particularly in developing countries, thereby altering the ecological resources of host destinations. In fact, close observation of a tourism-dependent region suggests that activities related to it impact the local environment (Alavalapati and Adamowicz, 2000). For instance, increases in tourist arrivals and construction of tourist facilities have led to destruction of mangroves and salt ponds, and pollution problems in the Caribbean (Potter, 1996); lowering of the groundwater table in Zanzibar (Gössling, 2001); the damage of coral reefs in Kenya, Madagascar, and the Seychelles; an increase in deforestation, forest felling and fires in the Himalayas (Nepal, 2000), and forest fires and extinction of plant species in Mediterranean forests (UNEP, 1992). Some authors emphasized that tourism development led to changes in land cover and land use, and thus increased rates of deforestation to

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build tourism infrastructure, especially on coastal areas (Gössling, 2002; Holden, 2003; Kaya and Smardon, 2000). Uncontrolled development of infrastructures and tourist-related urbanization (especially large-scale facilities and second homes) can lead to irreversible deterioration or loss of ecosystems (sand dunes, wetlands, forests and so forth) in the Mediterranean coastline, the world's primary tourist destination (UNEP, 1999). According to the United Nations Environment Programme—UNEP (2003), forests often suffer negative impacts of tourism in the form of deforestation caused by the use of land for accommodation and other infrastructure provision, and the use of building materials.

On the other hand, in many regions, forests have become an increasingly important factor in creating and maintaining the tourism product. First of all, they constitute tourism's natural capital and raw material. Forests as a key touristic and recreational resource are an integral component of the tourism product together with accommodation, transport facilities and service infrastructure. In addition, it is widely recognized that the dominance of natural attractions plays a significant role in tourism destination competitiveness (Mihalic, 2000; Deng et al., 2002; Priskin, 2001; Font, 2000; Kuijper, 2003). In this context, the importance of forests for recreation and tourism has been well-recognized worldwide (Bostedt, 1995; Holgen et al., 2000; Sun and Walsh, 1998; Font and Tribe, 2000).

Meanwhile, managing natural resources and environmental components of the tourism product are becoming increasingly important for the protection of the natural environment and for the success of tourism destinations. The environmental indicators and criteria used in several initiatives such as ecolabeling schemes, environmental certification and awards, and environmental quality indices are currently being utilized by the tourism industry as managerial tools for the quality and competitiveness of the tourism product (Gonzales and Leon, 2001; Sasidharan et al., 2002). The initiatives circumscribed by the international environmental NGOs are mainly intended to curb tourism's negative environmental impacts on the natural resource base of tourism destinations by emphasizing the need for tourism enterprises to comply with environmental regulations and policies. Given the complexity of environments and ecosystems, indicators provide a useful tool to highlight environmental conditions and trends for policy purposes (Niemeijer, 2002). However, as explained by Hughes (2002), a relative paucity of facts and figures have been reported on the environmental performance of tourism through environmental indicators compared to the voluminous data regarding its economic performance. In addition, since the environmental problem is mostly concerned with volumes, the concept of carrying capacity, as a management instrument, has played a very important role in the debate about how best to determine environmental impacts and maximum stress levels on the natural environment (Hjalager, 1997).

It is therefore, necessary for forestry agencies and research to become much more engaged in the use of

forests for tourism and its impacts. To achieve sustainable forest management and to minimize or to eliminate the negative impacts of tourism on forested lands, it is necessary to have a sound knowledge of such use and impacts, and a good understanding of how tourism creates such impacts. Therefore, this paper focuses on the negative environmental impacts of tourism on forests, with an emphasis on deforestation caused by the allocation of forest lands for tourism. In this context, the use of forests for the purposes of tourism was classified into two categories: (a) the allocation of forest lands for tourism to build tourist facilities and (b) the provision of opportunities for nature-based tourism and recreation activities taking place in forests and undertaken by tourists without building tourist facilities. The paper is particularly concerned with the allocation of forest lands for tourism and its consequences, as it essentially generates ongoing problems leading to clearing forest land or degradation of forest ecosystems.

Tourism is one of the most rapidly growing sectors in Turkey, similar to many parts of the world. Except for the years of general economic problems, wars in the world and natural disasters within the country, tourist numbers and incomes from tourism have grown rapidly. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2001) statistics, both for tourist arrivals and tourism receipts, Turkey has shown faster growth than the average of the world and Europe in the period 1991–2000, and in the last decade its market share has increased by the largest amount in the tourism sector worldwide.

In 1970, Turkey attracted 724,000 tourists and generated receipts of US\$51 million. Tourist arrivals reached a record 1,288,000 and tourism receipts climbed to US\$326 million in 1980 with average annual increases of 7.9 and 27.9%, respectively, over the previous decade. Both arrivals and receipts continued to increase during the 1980–1990 and 1990–2000 periods. The greatest growth rate was seen in the 1980–1990 period, with annual increases of 14.4 and 29.7% for arrivals and receipts, respectively (Table 1). Licensed bed capacity has increased from approximately 50,000–700,000 during the last two decades. At the end of 2001, Turkey was ranked 17th of the most visited countries in the world and in 13th place for tourism receipts. The arrivals and the receipts reached a peak in 2002 with a record number of 13,247,000 tourists and total receipts of US\$9.01 billion, showing annual increases of 18.5 and 22.0%, respectively. In 2002, Turkey led Europe in terms of annual

Table 1  
Tourist arrivals and tourism receipts in Turkey

Years	Tourist arrivals	Average annual change (%)	Tourism receipts (million \$)	Average annual change (%)
1970	724,000		51	
1980	1,288,000	7.9	326	27.9
1990	5,389,000	14.4	2705	29.7
2000	10,412,000	11.4	7636	13.9

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