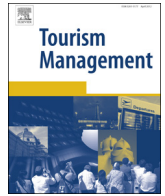




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Progress in Tourism Management

Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research: An uneasy relationship with heritage tourism



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This paper reviews 2 decades of academic research into dark tourism and thanatourism.
- It evaluates and critiques progress in six principle research themes.
- It identifies future directions and challenges for research.
- Clearly differentiating dark tourism and thanatourism from heritage tourism is problematic.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews academic research into dark tourism and thanatourism over the 1996–2016 period. The aims of this paper are threefold. First, it reviews the evolution of the concepts of dark tourism and thanatourism, highlighting similarities and differences between them. Second it evaluates progress in 6 key themes and debates. These are: issues of the definition and scope of the concepts; ethical issues associated with such forms of tourism; the political and ideological dimensions of dark tourism and thanatourism; the nature of demand for places of death and suffering; the management of such places; and the methods of research used for investigating such tourism. Third, research gaps and issues that demand fuller scrutiny are identified. The paper argues that two decades of research have not convincingly demonstrated that dark tourism and thanatourism are distinct forms of tourism, and in many ways they appear to be little different from heritage tourism.

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1. Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research: an uneasy relationship with heritage tourism

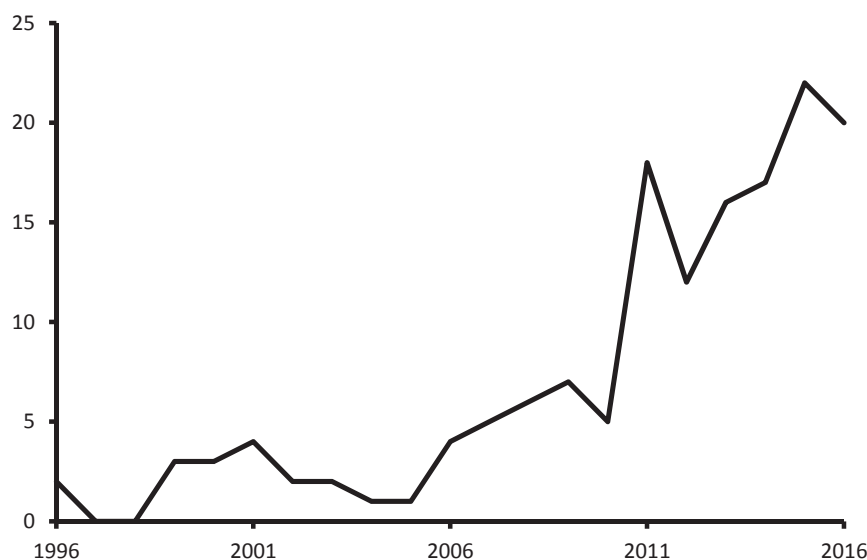
Two decades have passed since a collection of papers in the nascent *International Journal of Heritage Studies* proposed the closely-related concepts of dark tourism and thanatourism. Initially a marginal and rather off-beat curiosity pursued by a small number of dedicated scholars, the relationship between tourism and death has now become a mainstream research topic within tourism studies and tourism management. This is apparent in the steady increase in the number of papers in peer reviewed journals about dark tourism and, to a lesser extent, thanatourism (see Fig. 1). There has been a particular growth of interest since 2011. The tourism-death relationship is an increasingly popular theme for conferences, edited collections and monographs. It has also attracted the attention of scholars in a wide range of disciplines and fields beyond tourism studies/tourism management. Furthermore, dark tourism is firmly established in undergraduate and postgraduate curricula and is consequently a popular subject for student dissertations. It is also attracting a growing number of PhD researchers. An Institute for Dark Tourism Research has been established at the University of Central Lancashire (UK).

Dark tourism (although not thanatourism) also enjoys a high profile outside the academic environment. The topic has caught the attention of the media (Lennon, 2010; Seaton & Lennon, 2004) in a

way few other forms of tourism have achieved, and is a regular subject for newspaper/magazine articles and television programmes. Dark tourism also enjoys a substantial internet presence: a Google search for 'dark tourism' in December 2016 produced almost four million hits (although only 18,600 for 'thanatourism'). These include encyclopedia entries; guides to dark tourism places and destinations; blogs and commentaries about dark tourism in general (or about specific sites); and holidays themed around dark attractions and experiences. More broadly, dark tourism has also been the focus of a work of popular travel writing (Joly, 2011). While the tourism industry itself has been slower to embrace the term, some attractions and destinations have started to use it in their promotion (Lennon, 2010).

1.1. Aims and scope of this paper

Given the prominence that dark tourism (less so thanatourism) now enjoys within tourism studies/tourism management this is an opportune moment to evaluate progress over the past two decades of research. This is not the first paper to review research in dark tourism or thanatourism (see for example Ashworth & Isaac, 2015; Carrigan, 2014; Hartmann, 2014; Roberts & Stone, 2014; Seaton, 2009a; Sharpley, 2009a; Stone, 2013a; Wight, 2006). However this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive and critical review of dark tourism and thanatourism research over the 1996–2016



Note: includes only papers published in English-language peer-reviewed journals which engage (even if critically) with dark tourism or thanatourism

Fig. 1. Number of papers about dark tourism and thanatourism published annually (1996–2016).

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