The primary forests embrace the ancient Mayan temples, exhibiting an authentic union of nature and culture—except there were no forests around the temples when they were in operation.

What Is Really Real?

A New Vision of Authenticity and Its Role in Interpretation and Alternative Tourism

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Authenticity Is a Perception, Especially Important for Alternative Tourism

Many people think that authenticity is an absolute either-or quality: That diamond is real or fake. That gun was really Pancho Villa's or not. That's a real Mayan site or a theme park. But in fact, visitors perceive how authentic something or some place is based on their own personal background, expectations of what they think they will encounter, and particular qualities of that place or object. Thus some objects seem clearly authentic: Palenque National Park, a painting by Matisse, a grey whale in the Sea of Cortez. Some objects seem clearly inauthentic: a Mayan temple built of concrete in a theme park, non-alcoholic beer, a plastic gun. Some objects' possible authenticity simply confuse or provoke debate: Disney World, a colonial mansion partially rebuilt with modern materials, a

recreated Mayan ball game at Xcaret theme park outside of Cancún.

According to Gilmore and Pine in *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (2007), authenticity is the latest consumer sensibility that has evolved over concerns for availability of raw materials, then price of goods, then quality of services. And while authenticity influences consumer choice in most industries, it has grown extremely important for tourists who seek the new and the real among a vast, churning sea of mass offerings.

Authenticity Is the Heartbeat of a Visitor Experience Based in Heritage

Anyone who offers tourism products must manage authenticity, since the perception of heritage is the experiential heartbeat of a trip. If authenticity were only an objective quality, managers would only have to verify that objects were real, such as art museums do before purchasing a

painting. But if in fact tourists form conclusions about how authentic an object or place is based on what they expect to find, what they know and value, then managers have a much grander charge.

For example, I visited the World Heritage Site, Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests in Kenya, which consists of guarded sacred forests. The indigenous people only allow a few visitors in, and those visitors must obey all sacred rites. The local shaman guided several of us on this exclusive trip, shirtless and with a traditional skirt. He directed us to take off our shoes as we approached the burial ground. We could not stay more than half an hour. We encountered no other tourists, no trash, and no wear and tear from foreign shoes. Almost no visitor facilities interrupted the natural landscape. The indigenous still communed with the spirits here for which I sensed the place to be highly authentic.

When we sat to rest on the way back, the shaman continued some meters down the trail. When he thought himself out of our sight, he shoved his hand into a fold in his skirt and fished out an object which he then stuffed into his ear. Was that a…a…*cell phone?* I was shocked. I hadn't ever imagined to see high technology here. After calming myself, I realized that he had every right, only it had not fit my expectations. Now had the shaman been familiar with authenticity, then quite likely he would have absolutely moved out of sight before exposing his cell phone and damaging my precious visitor experience.

Visitors Sum Their Perception of Authenticity across Five Genres

So what constitutes *authentic* if no single measure exists? Gilmore and Pine offer five genres upon which visitors subconsciously base their perception:

- Natural: "that which exists in natural state in or of the earth, remaining untouched by human hands; not artificial or synthetic"

- Original: "that which possesses originality in design, being the first of its kind, never before seen by human eyes; not a copy or imitation"

- Exceptional: "that which is done exceptionally well, executed individually and extraordinarily by someone demonstrating human care; not unfeelingly or disingenuously performed"

- Referential: "that which refers to some other context, drawing inspiration from human history, and tapping into our shared memories and longings; not derivative or trivial"

- Influential: "that which exerts influence on other entities, calling human beings to a higher goal and providing a foretaste of a better way; not inconsequential or without meaning"

For Kaya, qualities that enhanced authenticity included forest surroundings (natural), shamanic garb (original, referential), simple burial ground (exceptional), tribal desire to protect its culture (influential), UNESCO World Heritage designation (influential), etc. The most outstanding distraction was that insidious cell phone.

A visitor, then, observes the scenario's details and adds up the positive believable qualities and subtracts the unbelievable or distracting ones. The sum determines the visitor's decision to accept or reject authenticity. If the sum is

Had the shaman been concerned with authenticity, he would have kept his modern device out of sight.

very positive, the visitor accepts quickly and intensely, if the sum is only mildly positive, the acceptance might come more slowly with less emotional impact.

The manager's tool that most influences perception is interpretation. Through interpretation, a heritage site can indicate a place's natural qualities, how original are the objects, how exceptional the work has been done; connect the heritage to past figures and periods (referential); and make apparent new ideas and opportunities to improve the visitor experience, as well as any strategies to conserve heritage (influential). In

short, interpretation is the single-most important tool to influence all forms of authenticity.

But once the visitor has accepted a place's authenticity, he then tacitly allows his imagination to activate and enter the place's story. In this state, the visitor identifies with its characters, transports to another time and place, adopts assumptions and beliefs of those who lived there. In that state, the visitor might experience fear, terror, or awe. Is this not what happens when we watch a movie or read a book that we find captivating? We accept the authenticity of the story, enter it, and experience emotions, based on details the writer or director has meticulously laid out. But if the movie is bad, we reject its authenticity because of bad acting, anachronisms, contradicting internal rules, stupid stunts, or just plain boredom—we refuse to activate our imagination and enter the story. The writer or director has failed us.

The same happens at heritage sites. I visited Tikal National Park in Guatemala with mountain-high temples peeking through a blanket of dense tropical forest. Small distractions include people speaking English with high-tech cameras, metal signs, and maintenance trucks—the positive qualities, however, largely overcome distractors and I allow myself to imagine how it must have been when Mayans populated this city. My experience rests on my ill-informed expectation that the city had always rested within a tropical forest. In fact, when the Mayans inhabited the city, they didn't leave any forests standing. Today's "primary" forests are mature secondary forests with species selected by the Mayans generations ago. But the question isn't whether or not these are real or fake primary forests, but whether or not I perceive them to be. And for most visitors, Tikal boasts a very convincing theater set.

Ethical Challenges to Managing Authenticity

But authenticity presents ethical challenges. First, managers must concern themselves about the ethics of how they treat the observers in

terms of the scenario. For example Venice is one of the most famous World Heritage Sites in the world. Its gondolas ply ancient channels lined by old buildings. It is authentic romance incarnate. Or is it?

Steen Eiler Rasmussen in *Experiencing Architecture* (1964) writes, "Venice itself looms like a mirage, a dream city in the ether. And this impression of unreality persists even to the very threshold." Gilmore and Pine note that the city is completely designed and maintained to attract tourists—the water level, the buildings, the gondolas—even at the expense of its own residents fleeing the city to escape the touristic onslaught.

This leads to the question, how much is too fake? When are managers actively deceiving visitors? The residents of Tombstone, Arizona, created just this problem. Their town, "The Town Too Tough to Die," was one of the best remaining historic western American towns and thus earned National Historic Landmark status. But they almost lost the status due to fake facades, anachronistic colors and bogus dates painted on newer buildings. A local hotelier complained that it looked more like a Hollywood set than an authentic historic Western town. Residents had gone too far to attract tourist dollars. Fortunately they have turned away from the duel to the death towards a happier middle ground that maintains the perception of authenticity without in the process destroying their own heritage.

But many times as tourism developers we find ourselves working with people, the observed. We feel compelled to increase the perception of authenticity by portraying people as they once were or at least how they are perceived to have once been. I did my master's thesis in the Pululahua Geobotanical Reserve, Ecuador's smallest protected area, just outside of Quito. Pululahua is an extinct volcanic crater lined with a lush high-mountain vegetation. At the bottom of the crater a poor farming village still exists, remnants of a plantation

Pululahua Geobotanical Reserve features a rural, low-tech agrarian community at the base of an extinct volcano. The steep walls of the crater support a luxuriant diversity of orchids and other mountainous vegetation at the same time inhibiting poor, aging farmers from getting their products to market. Is there a way to both meet their daily needs and preserve this authentic heritage of agricultural past?

ruled by a cruel master before the Agrarian Reform broke the estate up and parceled it out to the farmers. A conservation organization in Quito wanted to work with the protected area agency to create a historic ecotourism destination to conserve both the natural and cultural heritage of the crater as well as offer poor farmers a more lucrative alternative to their lifestyles marked by emigration of their youth and an increasingly old and sick population less and less capable of tilling the earth.

The conservation organization thought that by keeping the community with its current appearance, that is, no electric lines, almost no vehicles, no paved roads, old adobe houses interspersing corn and bean fields, it could become an attractive tourist destination. Since it sat right next to Mitad del Mundo, the location where visitors experience standing on the equator line (in fact, the monument itself is off the equator by more than a 100 meters, talking about authenticity), a ready source of visitation already existed.

The problem I dealt with in my thesis, nevertheless, was the community's dilemma of dignity.

Would locals have to sacrifice modern communications, conveniences, transportation, and possibly their own dignity in order to appear historic to ogling visitors? Would they not feel like zoo animals staring back through the bars of a cage? What was the psychological cost of increased or preserved perception of authenticity? While certainly community members themselves ultimately could decide what is in their best interest, often, development workers and conservationists impose their values through the allure of promises and political influence.

Perhaps the working resolution is a principle that echoes the words of famed American conservationist, Aldo Leopold, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

Thus, alternative tourism developers must be ever conscious of what visitors bring to a destination: expectations, knowledge, and values. They will base their expectations in even badly misinformed conceptions. DeLyser documents how visitors arrive at the Bodie State Historic Park or Ghost Town with an entire

mythology about the western United States, much of which is flat out false. Yet visitors expect to see those falsities in the setting and judge its authenticity accordingly. Sometimes managers oblige such as dressing up in uniforms from old western movies, sometimes they try to inform visitors that in fact most gold miners lived in flimsy shanties all long gone; and what visitors see today are the few remaining buildings owned by the rich, strong enough to resist time, which falsely reinforces the image of Old West towns commonly seen in movies and TV shows. In all cases, DeLyser states, "The fact that Bodie is seen by many as 'more authentic' [than other ghost towns] obscures the fact that its very authenticity is actively created in an ongoing manner by the Park's staff, and actively participated in by the visitors. These attributes of authenticity mask its constructed nature." And they also balance the ethical portrayal of heritage to the observers and the ethical portrayal of the observed.

If the visitors perceive an ethical violation, then the influential authenticity drops flat on the floor (aka, credibility).

Authenticity Must Be Actively Managed

Since even small details become qualities or distractors and because sites and expectations are always changing, managers must be constantly on the look out for authenticity distractions. At the same time, as they develop their sites, they also need to add more tourist facilities which very often distract from the experience. So every change in the landscape and the mindscape needs consideration in order to maximize the visitor experience opportunity in alternative tourism. Every person whether visitor, park employee, or local person are inevitably part of the show. Whether they willfully and knowingly participate, of course, depends on how managers ultimately manipulate the perception of authenticity.

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