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Essentialist Representations and Adaptation to Climate Change

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**Appropriate Session Topic:** Tourism and Climate Change

**Please Review:** First for an oral presentation and second for display as an illustrated paper presentation (option b).
Introduction
Tourism depends on natural resources such as jungles, forests, mountains, rivers, lakes, beaches, coastlines as well as the vistas offered by many of these landscapes (Gössling and Hall 2006). Natural landscapes are in many ways crucial to the “attraction potential of most destinations” (Gössling and Hall 2006:1). Consequently, tourism officials utilize representational strategies to construct idealized promotional discourses, of these natural landscapes, with the goal of attracting tourists. This is attained through methods of “theming, re-visioning, re-imaging and the comprehensive application of marketing techniques” traditionally entailed in destination promotion (Hughes 1998:19). Such promotional measures not only produce and present places (Morgan 2004) but also often result in the construction of essentialist representations of stable, pristine and favorable environments. However, such representations are increasingly undermined and threatened by global climate change; a phenomenon with the potential to alter the biological and morphological structures of natural landscapes within relatively short periods of time.

Although destinations will be differentially affected, scholars claim that coastal and mountain landscapes, are at the greatest risk (WTO 2003). For instance, coastal tourism, may suffer grave damage from the effects of climate change through rising sea levels, higher storm surges, more extreme temperatures, and changes in precipitation patterns (Gössling and Hall 2006). Thus, representational strategies which highlight the fixity of tourism landscapes will be increasingly challenged by environmental degradation exacerbated by global climatic change.

The challenges global climate change brings to the representational strategies of the tourism industry are numerous yet few studies have linked these bodies of research. In fact, extant studies on tourism representations and inquiries on global climate change have evolved along separate parallel trajectories and as such have overlooked the much needed contribution that their convergence promises. Research on tourism representations has been instrumental in highlighting the ‘hyperrealness’ of tourism portrayals; scholars note that they “re-affirm stereotypes instead of breaking them down” (Andsager and Drzewiecka 2002:401). Tourism studies on global climate change focus on environmental impacts (Baldwin 2000; Craig-Smith, Tapper and Font 2006; Johnston 2006; Scott 2006); global issues (Hall 2006; Gössling 2006); and stakeholder perceptions of adaptation measures (Cederholm and Hultman 2006; Nothinger, Bürki and Elsasser 2006). Furthermore, they highlight the vulnerable and unstable elements that will characterize numerous natural landscapes. (Gössling and Hall 2006). A key argument within this body of work is that not only is nature constantly shifting but change is also continually occurring in the relationships between humans and nature (Manuel-Navarrete, Gómez, and Gallopín 2007). This statement has numerous implications for tourism representations because leisure landscapes are perceived of, and portrayed as, static and controllable. Thus, “the question here is what happens with touristically desirable natures when [they] are subjected to global environmental change” (Cederholm and Hultman 2006:294)? How do tourism promoters represent subjected natural landscapes for touristic consumption? Do their representations continue to portray images of once pristine environments that no longer exist simply to attract tourists? Or, do they portray the raw nature of the affected areas and concurrently transform the way in which tourists aesthetically perceive of natural landscapes? In the wake of global climate change, these are all questions that need to be addressed in order to extend the tourism literature on theories of representation. Given that many nature-based destinations, particularly those located in coastal and mountain regions will increasingly face the prospect of environmental and morphological changes, these representations will have to change to reflect their respective transformations. Notably, tourism providers have to understand that nature is susceptible to a
range of social constructions (Eder, 1996; Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Allan, Carter and Adams 2000), including those constructed by tourists. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how tourism providers, specifically hoteliers, are adapting to biophysical changes in the natural landscape through their representational strategies. Specifically, how are at-risk coastal landscapes discursively constructed through promotional material? Playacar, a popular coastal tourism enclave adjacent to Playa del Carmen, Mexico is the site on which this inquiry is based. The area has suffered severe environmental impacts which have altered the natural dynamics of sediment distribution and, as a result, impaired the capacity of the beach-related ecosystem to weather the effects of tropical storms. These changes have had adverse impacts on the coastal landscapes and have led to drastic beach erosion, leaving the morphology of the beach in a dire state. Experts predict that these changes are merely a beginning of what could potentially become an environmental disaster exasperated by global climate change (Zhang, Douglas and Leatherman 2004).

Methods
Interpretive textual analysis was undertaken in order to explore the discursive constructions offered by tourism promoters. The texts comprised local tourism brochures which exemplify the principal media through which tourism promoters construct and disseminate information. With roots in the hermeneutic tradition, textual analysis, also broadly referred to as cultural analysis or in-depth hermeneutics, moves beyond the denotative messages within texts to explore the connotative meanings (Fairclough 2003). In order to examine the representational strategies used by hoteliers in Playacar, brochures from 12 beachfront hotels (i.e., Playacar Palace, The Reef Playacar, Viva Wyndham Azteca, Occidental Allegro, Occidental Royal Hideway, Riu Playacar, Viva Wyndham Maya, Riu Palace Riviera Maya, Riu Palace Mexico, Riu Yucatan, Iberostar Quetzal and Sandos Gala Beach Resort) were obtained. One brochure from each hotel was analyzed. Each brochure had approximately four to five images; thus, a total of fifty-five images were analyzed. Brochures were collected between December 2007 and November 2008. The focus of the analysis was on the beach oriented images given their ability to illustrate how the area was framed by tourism promoters as a desirable location for tourists. Miles and Huberman’s (1994) coding procedure was utilized. The texts were repeatedly reviewed until emergent themes were identified (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). The brochure analysis revealed an emergent theme titled “Pristine Seaside”. Intercoder reliability was attained through the efforts of two independent coders who coded each unit of meaning based on the previously identified themes.

Findings: Constructions of A Pristine Seaside
The brochure portrayals of Playacar offered a pristine frame of the coastal landscape; there was no depiction of the eroded beach nor the geotubes and the dredging pipes that laced the shoreline. Pristine environments were symbolized through numerous scenes of enchanting coastal landscapes, expansive white sandy shorelines with wide beach crescents, luxuriant growth of palm trees, and depictions of vivacious colors against the backdrop of sun kissed turquoise water that melted into the clear blue skies. The beach was systematically represented as a picturesque, static, immaculate locale, consistent with the promotional frames of most costal tourism destinations (Goss 1993; d’Hauteserre 2006; Terkenli 2006). The adopted discursive representational frames were not unlike those evidenced in the pictorial analysis as both adhered to portrayals of a pristine beach environment. Various descriptors that denoted/connoted the over abundant pristine nature of the seaside were iteratively incorporated within the portrayal of the beach. The essence of the beach was captured through a variety of phrases with adjectives
such as beautiful, spectacular, wide, long, scenic, fascinating, to name a few. Exemplars of such promotional discourse entail excerpts such as the following: “A large line of palm trees encircles the stunning beach and provides for a shade spot, away from the Caribbean sun” (Riu Playacar brochure); beautiful white sandy beaches of the Mexican Caribbean” (Sandos Playacar brochure); “a spectacular strip of beach in the Mexican Caribbean” (Royal Hideaway brochure); “scenic views of the beautiful sandy white beaches of Playa del Carmen” (Playacar Palace brochure); “fascinating sandy beach of Playa del Carmen, surrounded by palm trees” (Riu Yucatan brochure).

Application of Results
This study has numerous implications for tourism destinations, particularly those that will face or are facing morphological landscape changes due to global climate change. First, as tourism providers adapt their representation strategies to account for morphological changes, they will have to consider a number of options. One option entails re-framing representational essentialisms (e.g., change in emphasis from beach to accommodations) in the hope that tourists will still be drawn to the site. This option requires removing the pristine and stable images of the natural landscape and replacing them with images that focus on physical attributes such as a big hotel swimming pool, luxurious hotel pubs and restaurants, and/or nearby shopping centers. Alternatively, tourism providers can ensure that the biophysical reality matches its constructed essentialism. Such adaptability measures might include replenishing the beach through dredging so that it mirrors the idealized representation. In this case, maintaining the essentialist approach in the advent of an impact implies stabilizing the natural environment to the desired and promoted essentialist images. Lastly, another approach might entail a non-essentialist representational strategy depicting the raw reality of environmental degradation while concurrently illustrating the adaptability measures in progress. A non-essentialist strategy implies creativity in terms of constructing adaptive representations that afford the affected landscapes with new meanings and uses. In other words, instead of concealing the measures being taken to replenish the beach, this approach entails acknowledging their existence and utilizing them as opportunities to draw different types of tourists. Obviously, each representational adaptability measure has implications for the tourist population; therefore, the preferred solution to the representational dilemma ought to account for tourists’ perceptions, particularly given that they co-construct tourism landscapes alongside tourism providers.

Conclusion
The findings indicated that hoteliers adopted essentialist frames of the environmentally degraded coastal landscape. Essentialist representations not only offer static portrayals but also objectify nature and imply a certain level of power to control nature. The advent of global climate change may force the tourism industry to adopt non-essentialist representational approaches that account for the fact that nature is in a state of flux, and that built and natural environments need to be designed/represented symbiotically, rather than as a superposition of the former over the latter. Non-essentialist adaptations to climate change will require creativity and flexibility to re-invent destinations while absorbing the negative impacts of biophysical changes. In the case of Playacar non-essentialist actions may include emphasizing alternative recreational activities. Further, the hotels’ promotions might focus on educating tourists about efforts taken by hoteliers to mitigate further environmental damage to the beach as well as, how tourists can minimize their carbon footprints. As a corollary this might result in the redefinition and recontextualization of the touristic experience by embracing the reality of human-nature interrelations.
References


