GLOBAL WELLNESS INSTITUTE ™
EMPOWERING WELLNESS WORLDWIDE

RESETTING THE WORLD WITH WELLNESS:

Travel and Wonder

JUNE 10, 2020

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Ophelia Yeung & Katherine Johnston

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Resetting the World with Wellness

The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) is honored to participate in the Health and Wellness taskforce and working group that will assist the Vatican in crafting an integral response to the aftermath of COVID-19. Health and Wellness is a key pillar of response in this initiative, along with Ecology, Economy, and Security. In these difficult times, wellness can offer a vision for the future and can provide a roadmap for healing and growth. This series of white papers builds on GWI's comprehensive understanding of wellness as a concept and in practice; integrates facts, data, and best practices; employs interdisciplinary thinking; and recommends strategies that can help the world reset with a proactive wellness-based mindset. The series will propose a wellness reset for the world in a number of areas, including the built environment, workplace, mental wellness, and more.

About the Global Wellness Institute

The Global Wellness Institute (GWI), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, is considered the leading global research and educational resource for the global wellness industry and is known for introducing major industry initiatives and regional events that bring together leaders and visionaries to chart the future. GWI positively impacts global health and wellness by advocating for both public institutions and businesses that are working to help prevent disease, reduce stress, and enhance overall quality of life. Its mission is to empower wellness worldwide.

About the Authors

This white paper was prepared by Ophelia Yeung and Katherine Johnston, Senior Research Fellows at the Global Wellness Institute. Together, they have four decades of experience leading research and strategy development for businesses, universities, research institutions, and multilateral and government organizations under the auspices of SRI International, a Silicon Valley-based technology and innovation company. Since 2008, Ms. Yeung and Ms. Johnston have worked with the team at what has become the Global Wellness Institute to pioneer groundbreaking research on the global wellness economy.

COVID-19 travel stoppages have had devastating impacts.

Travel has been one of the hardest-hit activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it may be one of the last to recover. By the end of April 2020, 100% of the world's destinations (217 countries and regions) had travel restrictions in place, representing "the most severe restriction on travel in history."[i] Border closings, quarantines, and stay-at-home orders put a sudden halt to both international and domestic travel, sending millions of people home on short notice, while keeping others stranded in foreign locales. Millions scrambled to cancel their upcoming flights and trip bookings – deferring vacations and getaways, rearranging business meetings and conferences, and postponing visits with loved ones. In the context of the massive economic, social, and health impacts of COVID-19, these cancelled trips may be a minor inconvenience, but for many of us, they have psychological and symbolic impacts that make the pandemic's disruptions truly hit home. We have become accustomed to the freedom and ease of traveling whenever we want, in order to have new experiences, meet new people, or visit distant friends and family.

The COVID-19 travel stoppages are not just an inconvenience for travelers, because they have also decimated the economies of many tourism-dependent destinations, along with the travel industry and the livelihoods that depend on it. At its peak, the global travel and tourism industry contributed $8.9 trillion to the global economy (10% of global GDP) and accounted for 330 million (one in ten) jobs worldwide.[ii] Global tourism has been growing so rapidly – and travel has become such a pervasive aspect of the modern, middle-class lifestyle – that until recently, one of the world's greatest travel-related challenges was how to cope with overtourism[iii] (see next section). Thanks to COVID-19, the problem of overtourism has been replaced by no tourism in just a matter of weeks. International trips are projected to decline by 60-80% in 2020, putting 100 to 120 million tourism-related jobs at risk.[iv] Millions have already lost their jobs and incomes, and many businesses are facing financial ruin, from airlines and cruise ships to hotels and restaurants, and from booking sites and tour operators to theaters and theme parks. Airline passenger revenues could fall by 55% in 2020,[v] while hotel occupancy rates and revenues have plummeted worldwide.[vi] The overall tourism-related economic losses may reach $2.7 trillion this year.[vii]

Travel is an especially tricky activity to reconcile with COVID-19, because the very act of travel (humans moving from place to place), how we travel (in crowded airplanes, cruise ships, buses, and trains), and what we do at the destination (visiting popular and crowded attractions) all form a perfect vector of transmission. For now, both the travel industry and tourism destinations have been focusing on how to reopen and restart business by implementing new precautions, such as reconfiguring airplane seats, disinfecting, mask-wearing, physical distancing, temperature checks, quarantines, contact tracing, "travel bubbles," and so on.[viii] The travel industry desperately wants to reassure customers that it will be safe to travel again, as soon as borders and businesses are open. However, by minimizing the global warning signs of the pandemic's spread, penalizing cancellations, and continuing to encourage travel and new bookings through mid-March, many leaders and businesses in the travel industry cannot escape some culpability in enabling the spread of COVID-19 across the world.[ix]

It will be a while before the world is comfortable to travel again, especially to the extent that we used to before COVID-19. When we do, it is certain that health and wellness will be foremost in our minds. But our concerns with travel and wellness should not be limited to COVID-19, however, because long before the pandemic hit there were many unhealthy aspects growing in travel and tourism.

The rapid growth of travel has made it increasingly unwell for both tourists and tourism destinations.

Travel and tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing industries.[x] In recent decades, economic growth, the expansion of the middle class, the proliferation of budget airlines and cheap airfares, and the relaxing of visa restrictions have made leisure tourism accessible to the masses rather than an out-of-reach luxury for the privileged few. The result is an unprecedented growth and democratization of travel: international trips have nearly tripled since 1995[xi] (peaking at 1.5 billion trips in 2019[xii]), and tourism sector growth has outpaced GDP growth every year since 2010.[xiii] This rapid growth is a double-edged sword, bringing the opportunity for more and more people to experience the wonder, awe, connection, and transformation that can come from travel, while simultaneously eroding the very experiences we are seeking when we travel.

Overtourism threatens the future of the world's most-loved cultural and natural destinations.

Tourism is the lifeblood of many cities and regions across the world. And yet, the exponential growth of travel has raised new concerns about whether it is too much of a good thing. The 1.5 billion international trips and 13 billion domestic trips[xiv] that take place every year are not evenly spread around the world, but are heavily concentrated in the most popular countries and regions. The top 20 destination countries alone account for 59% of all international trips taken;[xv] within these countries, certain cities, sites, and attractions receive the bulk of these visitors. As a result, the world's top destinations – from Iceland to Machu Picchu to Bali – now face the risk of *overtourism*, with throngs of tourists diminishing the quality of the experience for visitors and reducing the quality of life for local residents.[xvi] The media abounds with stories of popular destinations where tourism has gone from a boon to a menace. Venice – the world's poster child for overtourism – now receives 25-35 million tourists a year; its aging local residential population of 50,000 may drop to zero in the next decade, while the city has implemented Disneyland-style crowd control measures during the high season.[xvii] In 2018, the Philippines' popular Boracay Island was closed for six months to repair the degradation that came from being overrun by visitors.[xviii] At Mount Everest, queues of climbers at the summit have led to tragic deaths and created the "world's highest garbage dump," with thousands of pounds of garbage and piles of human waste left behind each year.[xix] In Paris, striking workers closed the Louvre for a day to protest the deteriorating conditions and overcrowding that threaten the museum's collection.[xx] The Taj Mahal's 8 million annual visitors have caused crowd surges that led to injuries, as well as structural damage and pollution that is turning the structure's marble yellow.[xxi]

Overtourism brings many negative impacts. Tourists' experiences are being degraded by overcrowding, long queues, and the commercialization of unique sites into inauthentic, theme park-like attractions. Local residents are becoming resentful, alienated, and displaced, as their rents rise, their neighborhood character changes, and tourism-focused businesses drive out local services while bringing few direct benefits to locals. Transport, energy, water, and sanitation infrastructure are overloaded. Over the long term, overtourism brings environmental degradation and puts at risk the very existence of the world's most loved cultural and natural treasures.[xxii]

For tourists, travel is becoming ever more stressful and unhealthy.

When we plan a vacation, we are often looking forward to a break from our normal routines. We may want to rest and relax, experience something new and different, stimulate our minds, reconnect with friends and family, or meet new people. Unfortunately, the travel experience has deteriorated for so many people, and in so many ways, that it can even be bad for our physical and mental health. From the moment we leave our doorsteps, every step of our trip can cause stress: crowded airport security lines, flight delays, and transportation hassles; jet lag and poor sleep; unhealthy restaurant meals and too much alcohol; and excessive sun exposure. At the most popular destinations, overtourism means that we are battling crowds and long lines to catch a 15-second glimpse of the Mona Lisa, or viewing the Trevi Fountain amidst security barricades, throngs of international visitors, and street vendors selling mass-produced trinkets. The pressures of social media exacerbate these situations, as more and more people flock to top attractions to check items off their bucket lists, or to post the requisite selfies on Instagram.[xxiii]

All too often we return from a trip feeling like we need another vacation in order to recover. A recent Columbia University study of business travelers found that frequent and extensive travel is associated with many physical and behavioral health risk factors, including obesity, high blood pressure, lack of physical activity, smoking, alcohol dependence, trouble sleeping, anxiety, and depression.[xxiv] Another study found that vacationers are most happy while planning and anticipating their trips, but are not generally any happier than non-vacationers after their trips. The more stressful a trip is, the less happy we are afterwards.[xxv]

Travel should be wellness-enhancing by inspiring wonder, awe, and connection.

It may be a long time before we will feel safe, and have the economic means, to travel to the extent that we used to prior to the pandemic. Yet, the human desire to travel will remain strong and possibly intensify, as we increasingly feel cabin fever and boredom while stuck at home during COVID-19. The need to move freely, to explore, and to be stimulated by new and diverse experiences is primordial and is essential to our well-being. Through a combination of geolocation tracking, mood monitoring, and neuroimaging, recent research in New York and Miami found that people who spent more time traversing a neighborhood or covering new ground in one day experienced more positive emotions, and this positive affect persisted into the next day. Furthermore, neuroimaging showed that such roaming stimulates the two regions of the brain (the hippocampus and the ventral striatum) that are associated with memory, learning, decision-making and reward processing. Essentially, wandering makes us happier and more mentally resilient.[xxvi]

Another reason that we yearn for travel is to experience wonder and awe, and to satisfy a fundamental human need for connection, inspiration, and transcendence. Awe can be inspired by many things: nature (Grand Canyon, waterfalls, giant sequoia trees); beauty (natural and manmade works of art); personal achievements (athletes, musicians); threats (volcanic eruptions, tornadoes, electrical storms); personal virtue (saints, good deeds), and the supernatural (angels, ghosts).[xxvii] The feeling of awe can lead to a diminished sense of self, a realization of the larger picture in which we are only a small part, and an increased sense of connection and empathy that enhances our well-being. While most travelers may not explicitly express these sentiments, the fact that the world's hottest tourism spots include nature and the great

outdoors, architectural wonders, masters' works of art, sports events, music and theater, and so on, tells us that we yearn for the opportunity for personal growth and transformation during our travels. And yet, with the advent of mass tourism, much opportunity for awe has been lost. It is difficult to develop wonder and awe, or have any space for quiet contemplation, when everyone is jostling for the perfect spot for a selfie. Increasingly, the value and rewards from travel have been reduced to the egotistical ticking-off of "been there" spots and the number of "likes" on Instagram or TikTok, where the quantity and social media edification of travel posts trump the actual experiences of the traveler.

Much like how 9/11 has forever transformed flying, COVID-19 will make a permanent mark on travel. It will be up to us to determine whether travel will henceforth become a better or worse experience. Surely, we will encounter new health screening procedures (e.g., temperature checks, declaration forms, contact tracing, quarantines, etc.). We can also expect new preventive measures that may make our wandering more restrictive and less enjoyable: new faces hidden behind masks, physical distancing, body language that communicates fear and threats, and "rationing" at popular sites to prevent overcrowding and lower the risk of disease transmission. In spite of these inconveniences, the hiatus caused by COVID-19 creates an opportunity for all the actors involved in travel and tourism to envision a more healthy, rewarding, and positive way for us to experience our future journeys and trips.

As individuals, we can reconnect with our purpose and intent for travel.

As we anticipate all the new hassles and risks that will be associated with travel after COVID-19, some of us may question if it is even worth it. While we expect our vacations and getaways to improve our well-being, the reality is that the travel experience is often unwell, even long before the pandemic hit (as discussed above). Perhaps we have been approaching travel in the wrong way, caught at the intersection of mass tourism, social media mania, and crass consumerism. In recent years, a growing number of travelers have pursued a more purposeful approach to travel, giving rise to niches like ecotourism, wellness tourism, cultural tourism, voluntourism, and geotourism. By asking ourselves why we wanted to travel in the first place – what experiences we desire and what we hope to learn from them – we can become more mindful and intentional when the world of travel opens up to us once again. Perhaps we will focus more on the quality of our experiences, rather than the number of trips we are taking. Perhaps we will discover that awe and wonder can come from our own curiosity and openness, rather than how exotic or popular the place is. Perhaps we will stop expecting to be entertained in a passive way and will take more initiative to engage with our destination and its people. We could become less concerned with what we can buy, acquire, or gain from the places we visit, and instead become more conscious about the footprints or handprints that we leave behind.[xxviii] We may fight our impulses to document every visit with a selfie, and put down our phone or camera, so that we can be fully present to experience the moment. If the benefits of travel are to feel the wonder of a new place, experience the awe of nature, or have the exhilaration of trying something new, perhaps we do not have to go to far-flung foreign locales to have these pleasures. A trip to a new park or natural area close to home, or even the fun of planning a hypothetical trip we may not take, can help us rediscover the joy and happiness that we associate with travel. In a post-COVID-19 world, perhaps we will travel less but will learn to receive and enjoy more benefits from our travels.

The travel industry can lead the charge in reopening tourism in a healthier direction.

With their revenues decimated by the COVID-19 shutdowns and their very survival at stake, travel and tourism businesses are understandably scrambling to mitigate short-term damage and implement preventive measures that will bring back their customers and allow travel to reopen once again. Given the unsustainable and unhealthy growth trajectory of tourism over the last decade, perhaps the industry should not be seeking to go back to "normal," but rather to relaunch travel in a healthier direction for the long-term. The travel industry is the critical middleman between tourists and their destinations, or the intermediary that makes travel possible; in the quest to lap up the profits of tourism's skyrocketing popularity, the industry has not been serving either stakeholder well.[xxix] Destinations are feeling overwhelmed by the busloads of tour groups and hordes of cruise ship passengers crowding their top attractions. Meanwhile, tourists feel as if they are treated no better than baggage on crowded economy-class flights, or feel burned by punitive cancellation policies and lack of refunds during the COVID-19 travel shutdowns. However, travel does not have to be this way, and the industry can lead the charge in making tourism a more healthy and wellness-enhancing experience for all involved. A profitable future for the industry may not always require more tourism, but better tourism. For example, COVID-19 has forced some travel companies, destinations, and attractions to experiment with online offerings (e.g., Airbnb's online experiences) that demonstrate how virtual experiences can often provide a similar level of connection, wonder, and personal growth as a physical trip, especially for those who do not have the financial or physical means to travel.[xxx] Likewise, the rapid rise of wellness tourism in recent years is evidence of the growing demand for (and profitability of) travel experiences that are healthier for both the travelers and their destinations.[xxxi] Travelers and consumers increasingly care about who they do business with – not only from the perspective of their own experiences and how they are treated, but also in terms of how companies treat people and the planet (e.g., employees, customers, destinations, stakeholders, etc.). The travel and tourism industry can lead the charge in shifting tourism from a consumptive to a contribution mindset, to the long-term benefit of their own business, as well as the travelers and destinations they depend upon.

Communities must balance economic interests with quality of life.

One interesting result from the COVID-19 shutdowns has been the emptying out of tourists in the world's most overcrowded destinations. For the residents of these communities, the experience is like hitting the pause button; they are no longer outnumbered by tourists and can enjoy their own cities once again. According to one resident in Venice, "we don't want to go back to how things were before. Overtourism was the norm, but it wasn't normal, the city was overwhelmed…"[xxxii] Although this pause is temporary (and is a major threat to livelihoods and incomes), it is also an opportunity for high-tourism regions to take a step back, reassess the role tourists play in their communities, and consider measures to better balance the economic gains from tourism with the quality of life for local residents. This is not an easy task, especially for countries and regions where the economy depends upon tourism. But it is those places that have the most at stake. If a destination becomes so degraded that there is no authenticity left, and if it is so overrun with tourists that they can no longer experience any wonder or awe, then both the travelers and the local community are losers. The sustainability of tourism destinations ultimately depends on the wellness of the destination; the communities and residents who are the beneficiaries must be their own champions and stewards.

Appendix: What Is Wellness?

Wellness is a modern word with ancient roots. The key tenets of wellness as both preventive and holistic can be traced back to ancient civilizations from the East (India, China) to the West (Greece, Rome). In 19th century Europe and the United States, a variety of intellectual, religious, and medical movements developed in parallel with conventional medicine. With their focus on holistic and natural approaches, self-healing, and preventive care, these movements have provided a firm foundation for wellness today. Wellness-focused and holistic modalities have gained more visibility since the 1960s/1970s under the writings and thought leadership of an informal network of U.S. physicians and thinkers (such as Halbert Dunn, Jack Travis, Don Ardell, Bill Hettler, and others). As these have evolved, proliferated, and gone mainstream, they have informed the healthy-living, self-help, self-care, fitness, nutrition, diet, and spirituality practices that have become a flourishing wellness movement in the 21st century.

The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) defines wellness as: ***the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health***.

There are two important aspects to this definition. First, wellness is not a passive or static state, but rather an "active pursuit" that is associated with intentions, choices, and actions as we work toward an optimal state of health and well-being. Second, wellness is linked to holistic health – that is, it extends beyond physical health and incorporates many different dimensions that should work in harmony (see figure).

Wellness is an individual pursuit – we have self-responsibility for our own choices, behaviors, and lifestyles – but it is also significantly influenced by the physical, social, and cultural environments in which we live.

Wellness is often confused with terms like health, well-being, and happiness. While there are common elements among them, wellness is distinguished by not referring to a static state of being (i.e., being happy, in good health, or a state of well-being). Rather, wellness is associated with an active process of being aware and making choices that lead toward an outcome of optimal holistic health and well-being.

Wellness Is Multidimensional

Physical: Nourishing a healthy body through exercise, nutrition, sleep, etc.

Mental: Engaging the world with the intellectual mind.

Emotional: Being aware of, accepting, and expressing our feelings, and understanding the feelings of others.

Spiritual: Searching for meaning and higher purpose in human existence.

Social: Connecting and engaging with others and our communities in meaningful ways.

Environmental: Fostering positive interrelationships between planetary health and human actions, choices, and wellbeing.

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