

Air Quality a Concern for Inbound Tourists

International tourists are concerned about air pollution in Hong Kong, SHTM researchers **Dr Rob Law** and **Dr Catherine Cheung** explain in a recent study, and they are willing to pay an exit tax to help control the situation. This is heartening news, considering the harm that worsening pollution could have on inbound tourist flows. Yet given that tourists tend not to be concerned about pollution before they arrive in Hong Kong, the researchers suggest that decision makers should be “formulating more sustainable planning policies” to avert any potential damage to one of the pillar’s of Hong Kong’s economy.

Air Quality and Tourist Concerns

Pointing to the ongoing growth of tourist arrivals in Hong Kong, the researchers mention their earlier finding that “30% of international visitors disliked the air quality in Hong Kong”. This sort of aversion combines situational and personal concerns. Not only do visitors notice that haze often “blocks the view of tourism locations”, but they are also concerned about their own health. Local observers have noted that despite an air quality monitoring system operated by the government and efforts to reduce emission levels, the pollution seems to be worsening.

“Inevitably”, write the researchers, “air quality will have an impact on the sustainability of the tourism industry in Hong Kong”.

Tourism researchers around the world are becoming increasingly aware of the damage that pollution can do to tourist confidence in a destination, but studies of air and environmental quality issues in relation to tourism have mainly focused on Western countries. This prompted the SHTM researchers to consider the local

situation, not the least because Asia now has “the fastest tourist growth rate in the world”. And given that Hong Kong attracts both Asian and Western tourists, they could also shed light on any differences between the two groups in response to declining air quality.

A Comprehensive Study

The study was conducted as part of a recent omnibus survey, with 10 questions on perceptions of indoor and outdoor air quality asked of international travellers at the Hong Kong airport. Interviewed as they approached the departure hall, the visitors were asked whether perceived air quality had affected their choice of destination before arriving in Hong Kong, whether they had found Hong Kong’s air quality acceptable during their stay, how Hong Kong’s air quality compared to that of their home country and whether air quality had improved since their last visit to Hong Kong.

All 1,304 of the respondents had stayed in Hong Kong for at least a night, and they came from the major tourist-generating markets of mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, the United States, Australia and Western Europe. A majority were male and from Western countries and almost half considered themselves to be “experienced travellers”. They were mainly frequent visitors, and on average they had stayed in Hong Kong for 4.68 nights.

These were certainly travellers who could provide much needed insights into tourist perceptions of air quality in Hong Kong.

Shifting Perceptions

The researchers point out that their interviewees were not particularly worried about air quality before they

arrived in Hong Kong, but their overall perceptions became ambivalent once they stayed. Interestingly, Asian and Western travellers “had significantly different perceptions” of the situation. Tourists from Western countries, in particular, had negative perceptions of outdoor air quality, but were not as worried about indoor air quality.

In a finding that should be of concern to the hospitality and tourism industry as a whole, the interviewees thought that both indoor and outdoor air quality were better in their home countries. Travellers from Australia and Western Europe were adamant about this, perceiving “the air quality to be much worse than in their home countries”.

Immediate Action Needed

One promising outcome of the survey is that 59% of the interviewees indicated they would be willing to pay an exit tax averaging US\$9.23 to help fund pollution control measures. Given that Hong Kong attracts over 20 million international visitors a year, this could generate substantial revenue. The researchers suggest that however funding is raised, the Hong Kong Tourism Board’s substantial investment in promoting Hong Kong as a tourist destination will be at risk if air quality initiatives are not put in place. This could be as straightforward as government restrictions on vehicle traffic, stricter emission standards and encouraging individual travellers to use the rail network.

Aware that much of Hong Kong’s pollution could also be coming from the heavily industrialised Pearl River Delta, the researchers suggest closer cooperation with mainland Chinese authorities to produce an effective plan to reduce pollution. Both Hong Kong and the mainland should also consider adopting internationally recognised emission measurement standards that allow objective comparisons with other countries.

Environmental quality is the key to attracting tourists to any destination. As the researchers suggest, action on

air pollution is needed now to ensure that Hong Kong’s tourism industry remains healthy in the future.

Points to Note:

- Air pollution has the potential to harm Hong Kong’s tourist industry.
- International visitors were not particularly worried about air quality before they arrived.
- They were worried after their stay, with Western tourists voicing the most concern.
- Visitors are willing to pay an exit tax to help fund pollution control initiatives.

Law, R. and Cheung, C. (2007). Air Quality in Hong Kong: A Study of the Perception of International Visitors. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 390-401.