Tourism on the Edge: Coping With Natural Disasters

Nirmala K.D

Assistant Professor, Business Administration,

Government First Grade College, Madikeri, Kodagu District

Abstract

Tourism has evolved into a major global industry and plays a significant role in shaping national economies through employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, and strong multiplier effects. However, in recent years, natural disasters worldwide have caused severe destruction, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives, widespread property damage, and the devastation of key tourist destinations. Such events inevitably disrupt the tourism. When a disaster occurs it has a negative impact on the tourism industry and various destinations as a whole affecting various sectors of tourism. A systematic approach addressing questions like how tourism businesses can react to crisis and measures to be taken if such crises happen is discussed widely on academic and business forums. This paper focuses on such issues pertaining to the tourism sector at the time of crises brought about by natural disasters.

Across the world, tourism has emerged as a powerful engine of economic transformation due to its capacity to generate employment, foster linkages with local enterprises, and earn substantial foreign exchange. It is recognized not merely as an activity but as a comprehensive industry that stimulates infrastructure development, boosts domestic production, attracts foreign capital, and promotes the dissemination of modern technology and information. Moreover, tourism contributes significantly to environmental conservation efforts, while helping safeguard cultural heritage, ethnic diversity, and traditional practices. As a highly interconnected sector, it integrates transportation, accommodation, food services, retail trade, and various ancillary industries. For many developing nations, tourism offers a strategic pathway to economic advancement, with a number of destinations relying on it as a cornerstone of their growth and survival.

Globally, tourism is a $7.6 trillion industry (2016). Tourism is considered as a sensitive and important industry, which plays a vital role in the business world with a substantial

contribution to the country's GDP. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC)'s forecast, tourism industry by 2021 is expected to give employment opportunities to 323.8 million people across the globe and is expected to contribute 9.6% to the world's GDP. This enormous growth projection is a consequence of technological advancements bringing the world tourist destinations within reach. However, like any other industry there are inherent global risks involved with respect to tourism sector too. Tourism is highly vulnerable sector as it is susceptible to disasters and crises ranging from natural to human influenced incidents, such as, natural calamities, wars, outbreaks of epidemics, incidents of terrorism, economic fluctuations, currency instability, energy crises, and so on. The globalization of tourism market is so remarkable that small scale crises in one part of the world can have a significant impact on other parts of the world. In recent years, natural disasters across the globe have brought about huge devastation to human society, infrastructure including tourist destinations. When a disaster occurs it has a negative impact on the whole tourism spectrum. Therefore, a process to help minimize the impact of a crisis on the industry with effective planning and performance is the need of the hour. An integrated approach to design strategies is essential to protect tourism business in particular and the society in general. This puts increasing pressure on managers and planners concerned with tourism to consider the impact of crises and disasters on the industry and develop strategies to deal with the impacts to protect tourism business and societies dependent on tourism.

Drivers of Crisis Situations in the Tourism Industry

According to the United Nations, a disaster is defined as *"a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread human, material, economic, or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources"* (ISDR, 2004). This definition underscores that disasters are not merely natural events but involve complex interactions between hazards and the vulnerabilities of the affected community, highlighting the multidimensional impacts on human lives, infrastructure, and the economy.

In the context of tourism and hospitality, crises are largely inevitable. McKercher and Hui (2004) describe crises as *"episodic events that disrupt the tourism and hospitality industry on a regular basis"*, emphasizing the recurring nature of such disruptions and their capacity to undermine both operational stability and destination image. The tourism

sector, being highly sensitive to both internal and external shocks, faces unique challenges in anticipating, managing, and recovering from these crises.

Parsons (1996) proposed a classification of tourism crises based on their gestation period:

1. Immediate crises – These occur with little or no warning, leaving organizations minimal time to investigate, plan, or respond before the impact is felt.

2. Emerging crises – These develop more slowly, potentially allowing organizations to take preventive or mitigative measures to either avert or limit their effects.

3. Sustained crises – These are prolonged events that may persist for weeks, months, or even years, requiring long-term strategic responses and recovery planning.

Seymour and Moore (2000) offered a complementary perspective, categorizing crises as either the *"cobra" type*, which strikes suddenly with little warning, or the *"python" type*, which unfolds gradually over time, enabling preemptive responses if recognized early.

Further expanding the classification, Karagiannis et al. (2006) suggested evaluating crises based on the degree of human involvement, distinguishing incidents as directly caused by human action, indirectly caused, or occurring without human involvement. This approach emphasizes the role of human agency and decision-making in both the emergence and management of crises. Similarly, Sausmarez (2007) highlighted the traditional dichotomy between natural crises, such as hurricanes and earthquakes, and man-made crises, including industrial accidents, terrorist attacks, or transportation disasters, acknowledging that the origin of a crisis significantly influences mitigation strategies and response protocols.

Overall, these diverse classifications underscore that tourism crises are multifaceted phenomena, shaped by temporal, human, and environmental factors. A comprehensive understanding of their nature is critical for effective risk assessment, crisis preparedness, and sustainable management in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Beirman (2003) in the context of tourism sector, deliberated on five main reasons that result in a *destination crisis*:

- international war or conflict and prolonged internal conflict,

- a specific act or acts of terrorism, especially those directed at or affecting tourists,

- a major criminal act , especially when tourists are targeted,

- a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, volcano, causing damage to urban areas or the natural environment and impacting the tourism infrastructure,

- health concerns related to epidemics and diseases (human or animals) ;

Crises are localized but its impact is global.

NATURAL CATASTROPHES

In recent years, global climate change has contributed to a marked increase in weather-related natural hazards, which have become a significant factor influencing travel choices. Events such as earthquakes, floods, wildfires, hurricanes, avalanches, tornadoes, landslides, and volcanic eruptions increasingly disrupt tourism activities and diminish visitor confidence. The rise in frequency and intensity of these occurrences poses serious risks to destinations whose economies rely heavily on tourism revenue. Beyond immediate damages, natural hazards can diminish a destination's scenic appeal, affect cultural assets, and weaken local economic systems—sometimes for short periods, and in more severe cases, for several years. Certain regions, due to their geographical or climatic conditions, are inherently more susceptible to natural disasters, thereby placing both residents and travelers at elevated risk.

Impact of Natural Disasters on Tourism Activities:

*Safety and Security Concerns***:** Natural disasters have a profound influence on the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals regarding their personal safety, particularly in relation to travel. When a destination experiences a major calamity, potential tourists often reassess the risks associated with visiting such places. As a result, many travellers may alter their plans and choose alternative destinations perceived as less hazardous. These risk perceptions are not formed in isolation; they are significantly shaped by how efficiently authorities respond to and manage previous disaster events. Effective crisis management—such as timely evacuations, transparent communication, and swift restoration efforts—can help mitigate negative impressions, gradually restoring traveller confidence. Conversely, poorly handled incidents, characterized by administrative delays, mismanagement, or lack of preparedness,

reinforce perceptions of insecurity even after the immediate threat has passed. Such negative impressions can persist in public memory and influence travel decisions long after the disaster has been resolved.

Infrastructure Disruptions: Tourism is heavily dependent on well-functioning infrastructure and public utilities, many of which are highly vulnerable to disruption during natural disasters. Key facilities—including transportation networks such as roads, railway stations, airports, and seaports; communication systems; power grids; water supply systems; and hospitality establishments—often suffer extensive damage in disaster-affected regions. These disruptions not only hinder tourism activities within the impacted area but can also affect a wider region, especially when the damaged location serves as a transit hub or connecting terminus for neighbouring destinations. For instance, if an airport that functions as a major connecting point is damaged, flight schedules must be revised, rerouted, or cancelled, affecting tourism flow even to areas untouched by the disaster. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami exemplifies this phenomenon; while the immediate effects were devastating within Indonesia and surrounding regions, the economic and infrastructural repercussions were felt across multiple countries, disrupting tourism networks far beyond the epicentre. Such disruptions necessitate significant adjustments in tourism scheduling, logistics, and operations, often resulting in prolonged declines in visitor arrivals and increased operational costs for tourism businesses.

Impact on Future Travel Plans: Tourism is generally a discretionary activity associated with leisure, relaxation, and significant financial expenditure. Hence, travellers are naturally inclined to avoid destinations that have recently experienced disasters or are perceived to be disaster-prone. Even when an adverse event is isolated or unlikely to recur, the psychological impact on prospective tourists can be substantial. With the rise of digital media and real-time news broadcasting, images and videos of destruction are disseminated instantly across the globe, amplifying fear and risk perception among potential visitors. A decline in tourist arrivals not only harms the tourism sector directly but also leads to cascading effects on related businesses such as hotels, airlines, travel agencies, restaurants, and local enterprises dependent on tourist spending.

Restoring confidence among tourists becomes a critical and challenging task for destination managers and governments. Risk-averse travellers may prefer alternative

destinations that appear safer and more stable. Even after conditions return to normal, the negative association with the disaster can linger for months or years, making recovery slow and complex. Marketing strategies, safety assurances, destination rebranding, and targeted promotional campaigns are often required to rebuild a destination's image.

Disaster and Crisis Risk Preparedness in the Tourism Industry

Globalization of the tourism industry and the fact that the world is also becoming more connected, have led to a new reality for tourism industry, that has a ripple effect- where crises that occur in one single place can affect the tourism worldwide. However, the negative consequences of these incidents can be moderated if the stakeholders involved in tourism industry are prepared for confronting such incidents. But, as is the case with any sector, crisis preparedness is not yet an integral component of tourism business. So the need for crisis preparedness is obvious. Kovoor – Misra (1995) defines crisis preparation 'as an ongoing process of developing organizational capabilities to prevent, contain and recover from crises and to learn from experience'. While averting a disaster may be impossible, minimization of the damages or management of the crises is an effective way out. Crisis preparation should be of high concern for every business involved in tourism industry. The short term effect of extreme natural disasters on tourism is quite devastating such as immediate income from tourism coming to a standstill, tourism attractions being damaged or completely destroyed, time consuming rebuilding operations, in some cases impossible missions, less tourism-related jobs, financial difficulties for local communities that depend on tourism income and most important tourists becoming hesitant to return because of the negative perception and perceived danger. When discussing natural disasters unlike others prevention in many cases is impossible so the focus is on *managing* and *recovery*.

Management of Tourists during Natural Disasters:

- Certain natural disasters, particularly weather-related events such as cyclones, storms, or heavy rainfall, can often be anticipated with the help of timely forecasts. Early warning systems should be integrated into pre-emergency planning to ensure proactive management. Tourism authorities and local agencies can establish dedicated communication centers serving as information and help desks for tourists. These centers can provide real-time updates, guidance, and instructions for evacuation if necessary.

- Natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, or landslides can generate unexpected challenges for tourists, including heightened anxiety, stress-related conditions, and other health emergencies. It is essential to deploy standby medical teams capable of addressing both physical injuries and psychological stress. In disaster-prone tourist destinations, permanent or semi-permanent medical relief units should be stationed to ensure rapid response and immediate healthcare support.

- Effective disaster management requires seamless coordination between tourism agencies, hotels, resorts, restaurants, emergency shelters, local authorities, NGOs, police, and defense forces. Establishing formal protocols and partnerships in advance allows for rapid evacuation, resource mobilization, and minimal disruption during crises. Joint drills and scenario-based planning can enhance the efficiency of this collaborative framework.

- Establishing reliable communication channels is critical. Tourists should have access to means to contact their families, friends, or emergency contacts to reassure them about their safety. This may include dedicated hotlines, mobile alerts, or temporary communication centers at evacuation points.

- The impact of a natural disaster does not end with safe evacuation. Tourists may continue to experience psychological stress and trauma after returning home. Follow-up measures, such as phone calls, emails, or online support systems, can provide reassurance, guidance, and access to counseling services if needed. Tourism agencies can also offer information about compensation, insurance claims, or support programs available to affected visitors.

- Tourism personnel, including guides, hotel staff, and local service providers, should receive regular training on disaster response protocols, first aid, and crisis communication. Awareness programs for tourists regarding safety measures, emergency exits, and local disaster risks can empower them to respond appropriately during an event.

- Modern technology such as mobile apps, SMS alerts, GIS mapping of disaster-prone areas, and social media platforms can enhance information dissemination, track tourists' locations during emergencies, and coordinate resources efficiently.

- Disaster management plans should be periodically reviewed and updated based on lessons learned from previous incidents, evolving risks, and advancements in

disaster management practices. Simulation exercises and post-crisis evaluations can help strengthen the resilience of tourism infrastructure and improve the overall safety of visitors.

Tourism Recovery Strategies

Tourism is one of the most important economic development and recovery opportunities for many destinations after disaster strikes.

- An effective communication strategy to alleviate tourist perceptions of risk is often a key element in tourism recovery strategies.

- A more inclusive marketing strategy, predominantly at the destination level, including promotion, advertising and public relations is essential. Tour operators can participate in tourism fairs and create a positive image.

- All the rumors which create a negative image of a tourist destination must be addressed by the stakeholders of the tourism industry in a unified manner. The media always plays an important role during natural disasters .Media-national and international should be invited to the destinations so as to get firsthand information about the safety.

- Films, social media and celebrities can be used to spread a positive image of the tourist destination.

- Post disaster tourism recovery is a big challenge as the sector has to ward off the grapevine leading to negative publicity. One approach is to use the services of people with credibility to speak positively of the tourist destination such as the defence forces and the relief teams who had previously worked during the disaster and restored the normalcy of the destination.

- The government should focus on comprehensive tourist destination management. A Public-Private participation to optimize the tourist destination image should include government agencies, local tourist organizations, tour operators, hospitality sector and others. This would ensure the success of the reconstruction of the image of a tourist destination and also help to overcome the impact of the negative publicity.

- Natural disasters sometimes do have constructive advantages for tourism. Landscapes can sometimes become more attractive after such crises; rebuilt infrastructure can become more attractive and can lead to increased tourist inflow and subsequently reviving tourism business.

- Branding can be done such as on the lines of *Theme based tourism* depending on the destination characteristics- eco-tourism, heritage tourism, adventure tourism etc.

CONCLUSION

Tourism is widely recognized as a highly fragile and sensitive industry, largely because the demand for travel can fluctuate dramatically in response to various disasters and crisis situations. Given the global nature of modern tourism—where destinations, businesses, and travellers are interconnected across vast geographic and economic networks—the industry now operates within a landscape where local disruptions can have far-reaching global implications. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent, a crisis occurring in one region may influence traveller perceptions, mobility, and decision-making patterns worldwide. This heightened level of vulnerability makes it imperative for tourism stakeholders to maintain constant awareness of the occurrence and potential impacts of natural disasters to ensure long-term sustainability.

To strengthen resilience, the tourism sector must invest in understanding the nature of crises and disasters, including their lifecycle, triggers, and immediate and long-term consequences. A comprehensive understanding of these phenomena enables organizations to formulate targeted strategies for prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Despite the inherent complexity and unpredictability of disasters, informed and proactive planning can significantly reduce the intensity of their impacts on both tourism operations and the wider community.

Effective crisis management strategies must be tailored to suit the specific characteristics of each event. The type of crisis, the duration and timing of its occurrence, the level of control possible, and the magnitude of its consequences all determine the appropriate response. For example, the strategy required for a sudden natural calamity such as an earthquake differs substantially from that needed for a prolonged crisis like political instability or a public health emergency. Hence, flexibility

and adaptability are essential components of disaster management in the tourism sector.

Importantly, crisis and disaster impacts are not permanent. With coordinated efforts from all stakeholders—including government bodies, tourism organizations, local communities, emergency services, and the private sector—tourism activities generally recover over time. The recovery period may vary depending on the severity of the event, but collaborative planning, transparent communication, and sustained rebuilding efforts often help restore stability and visitor confidence. Ultimately, strengthened disaster preparedness and effective crisis management not only support the restoration of tourism activities but also contribute to building a more resilient and sustainable tourism industry for the future.

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