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# CLIMATE JUSTICE IN TOURISM

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# 8 The Nexus of Environmental Justice and Potential for Sustainable Tourism under Colonial Occupation in Palestine

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*In Palestine, environmental justice and tourism are intertwined and both are impacted by prolonged colonial occupation which asserts control over most elements of daily life. An apartheid system was created to further the colonisers' goals and interests, which in the case of Palestine pertains to reshaping the land while removing the indigenous people. On top of that, Palestine is experiencing the shared worldwide strain and impacts on natural resources including from climate change, habitat destruction, overexploitation of natural resources, invasive species and pollution. These five challenges are multiplied and exacerbated because of the Israeli occupation and colonisation of Palestine. Through structured interviews with five tourism experts and 10 tourism operators plus a literature review, we identified key challenges to and opportunities for sustainable tourism in Palestine. We show how responsible international tourism and expanded local tourism (especially alternative tourism) can aid in achieving environmental justice, human rights and even sustainability.*

## **Introduction**

In Palestine, environmental justice and tourism are intertwined and both are impacted by prolonged colonial occupation which asserts control over most elements of daily life. An apartheid system was created to further the colonisers' goals and interests, which in the case of Palestine pertains to reshaping the land while removing the indigenous people. On top of that, Palestine is experiencing the shared worldwide strain

and impacts on natural resources including from climate change, habitat destruction, over exploitation of natural resources, invasive species and pollution. These five challenges are multiplied and exacerbated because of the Israeli occupation and colonisation of Palestine. Through structured interviews with five tourism experts and 10 tourism operators plus a literature review, we identified key challenges to and opportunities for sustainable tourism in Palestine. We show how responsible international tourism and expanded local tourism (especially alternative tourism) can aid in achieving environmental justice, human rights and even sustainability.

While other countries have seen people travel to perform religious duties, they were often travelling within the same country (e.g. India). By contrast, Palestine has drawn religious pilgrims from many countries for nearly two millennia. By the 4th century AD, Christianity had spread in a global fashion and across many jurisdictions, which created what can properly be referred to not only as religious pilgrimage but religious tourism to Palestine (Isaac *et al.*, 2016; Mohamed & Suleiman, 2011). As expected, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank (including Jerusalem) and Gaza in 1967 resulted in drastic shifts in the management of tourism here. Israeli authorities have quickly ensured that tourists are met by Israeli tour companies and guides to the exclusion of the local Palestinians (Kelly, 2016). Partly in response, and partly to diversify and grow income, Palestinians developed new forms of tourism ranging from ecotourism to geotourism to cultural tourism to dark tourism (Abahre & Al-Rimmawi, 2023; Isaac, 2010a, 2010b; Kassis, 2013; Kassis *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, there is a trend of tourists coming to Palestine to be in solidarity with Palestinians and to bear witness to the injustices that Israel imposes in the daily lives of those it impacts. This phenomenon deserves special attention. Dark tourism and justice tourism are intertwined and become important to the mission of advancing justice and human rights in Palestine.

## Background

Palestine is located between Europe, Asia and Africa with an area of 27,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The 1967 occupied Palestinian Territories constitute 22% of historic Palestine (West Bank: 5879 km<sup>2</sup>, Gaza: 378 km<sup>2</sup>) (UNCTAD, n.d.). Geologically, the area belongs to the African tectonic plate which, as a result of plate collision, resulted in having the northern part of the Great Rift Valley located here (including the lowest point on Earth at the Dead Sea). Palestine is the western part of the Fertile Crescent, where humans first developed agriculture some 12 millennia ago (Eshed *et al.*, 2004; Zeder, 2008). This also allowed for rich human development, denoted by the fact that the Eastern Mediterranean region is thought of as the 'Cradle of Civilization' (Lopes & Almeida, 2017). The deep

connection of these indigenous populations to the land of Palestine underscores a continuous presence that predates modern political boundaries by millennia (Qumsiyeh, 2004).

The unique geography and geology have given Palestine more biological diversity than some countries ten times its size. The diverse habitats cover five ecozones: the central highlands, the semi-coastal region, the eastern slope, the Jordan valley and the coastal region. Palestine also spans five phyto/bio-geographical regions (Mediterranean, Irano-Turanian, Saharo-Arabia, Coastal and Sudanese). The indigenous Palestinians lived in all parts of the country in some 1300 villages and towns in relative harmony with each other and with nature. The population in the first decade of the 20th century was 850,000, with various religious persuasions (3% Jewish, 13% Christian, 80% Muslim and 4% other). The land was owned or, as is typical of many indigenous societies, known to be used by local people for millennia. Since 1948, hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns have been destroyed and a huge refugee population was created by the nascent state of Israel (Pappe, 2006; Qumsiyeh, 2004).

As in other countries, environmental decline in Palestine impacting people and nature stems from climate change, habitat destruction, overexploitation, pollution and invasive species. Also, as in many other countries, colonialism played a significant role in this decline. The first to warn of the potential threat to the Palestinian's environment was Ives (1950). More recent studies show ominous evidence of decline (see Braverman, 2021, 2023; EQA, 2022; Qumsiyeh & Abusarhan, 2020, 2021; Qumsiyeh *et al.*, 2014; Tal, 2002). Wars and weapons also devastate the landscape (Qumsiyeh, 2024; Yin *et al.*, 2025). Case examples include:

- (1) refugees and displaced Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza create significant environmental and economic pressures (more studies are needed here);
- (2) relentless actions of Israel to prevent Palestinians from accessing their water sources resulted in sealing of springs which had devastating environmental impacts for people and wildlife;
- (3) destruction of Hula Lake and wetlands (included removing the local villagers and the disappearance of 219 species); and
- (4) diversion of water from Lake Tiberias devastated the Jordan River basin (see Messerschmid, 2008, 2012, 2014).

These issues impact sustainability and tourism. For example, the destruction of the Jordan River ecosystem impacted potential ecotourism in that area and resulted in the shrinking of the Dead Sea – the lowest point on Earth and an inland salt lake recreational area – which diminished its long-term potential as a tourist destination (see Salameh & El-Naser, 2008).

## Methods

We conducted a meta-analysis and synthesis of the literature associated with environmental justice and tourism in Palestine using our own Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability (PIBS) archives and Prof. Qumsiyeh's ongoing work as an educator in Tourism and Hotel Management at Bethlehem University. We also did a number of interviews with five key officials in the Ministry of Tourism and with ten tour operators over the period of June to December 2024. The series of questions we asked focused on their understanding of the nexus of tourism with environmental justice under conditions of occupation/colonisation and what challenges and opportunities they see pertaining to tourism in Palestine (again with a focus on environmental justice). Data from the literature and from the semi-structured interviews were analysed and culminated in a summary focusing on the challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism in Palestine. We also offer a brief case study of the work of the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability (<https://www.palestinenature.org/>) focusing on its impact *vis a vis* environmental and climate justice. These diverse sources of data have been analysed to spotlight issues of climate justice and environmental justice in a Palestine under prolonged occupation and oppression.

## Findings

### Challenges

We asked 15 individuals to list in order of significance the main challenges to sustainable tourism in Palestine. We then analysed the data to develop a list of recommendations. The five challenges (that were included by eight or more of the respondents) in order were:

- (1) Wars and conflict which produce things like the drying up and deterrence of tourism and the destruction brought on by war (see Qumsiyeh, 2024).
- (2) The ongoing practices of the Israeli occupation: this included things like denying mobility of tour guides; an inability to organise tours effectively (unless you are a Jewish Israeli tour company); diverting tourists away from indigenous Palestinian communities; and significant fragmentation of key tourist sites, denying uniform access to them (for example, Nazareth in Galilee and Bethlehem in West Bank). The Segregation Wall in particular even separates Jerusalem from Bethlehem which is its suburb a mere 10 kilometres away; this impacts not only people but even wildlife and biodiversity (Husein & Qumsiyeh, 2022). The Israeli occupation has led to restrictions on movement and access to sites (including, for example, an everchanging and unpredictable imposition of hundreds of checkpoints), which can deter potential

- visitors and limit the economic benefits that tourism could provide to Palestinian communities. The latter especially impacts local tourism.
- (3) Inadequate infrastructure (roads, transportation networks, parking spaces, etc.).
  - (4) Excessive commercialisation and commodification of tourism and its negative impact (including waste).
  - (5) Disconnect between the local population and the tourists. Much of the tourism, especially to religious sites, is essentially visiting a location while avoiding meeting local people. Israeli tour guides even actively discourage interactions with local Palestinians. Thus, Christian tourists often visit places like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem while not interacting with or knowing much about local Palestinian Christians in those areas. Tourists engage with sites primarily as spectators of relics rather than as participants in a living cultural and spiritual heritage (see ATG, 2010).

Remarkably, not one of the 15 people interviewed mentioned tourism's environmental damage (e.g. pollution, use of water, dependence on jet fuel, etc.). This is an area generally ignored in the rush to increase tourism for economic benefit (see Milano *et al.*, 2024, for a review). At PIBS we are focused on the environment and are located near the Church of the Nativity, which gets hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. As such, we engage in studies like this one to promote potential sustainability in various aspects of human activities in the region. The threats must be studied and dealt with realistically (see below under opportunities).

Human-induced climate change will drastically affect the Arab world (Verner, 2012). A World Bank study shows that the impacts, including water resource decline, will be drastic by 2030 (World Bank, n.d.). In the West Bank and Gaza, demand will double, while supply will shrink dramatically. This is coupled with population growth and habitat destruction leading to 'unliveable' conditions (Kuttab, 2024; Verner, 2012). The damage from climate change is compounded by environmental injustice in Palestine (Al-Haq, 2021; EQA, 2020; Salem, 2011; Weizman & Sheikh, 2015). As a result of climate change, the environmental issues discussed above could get exponentially worse in the occupied Palestinian territories. One study suggests that even more scarcity of water, caused by the intertwining factors of climate change and military occupation, could see a rise in incidences of diarrhoea, cholera and dehydration (Mimi *et al.*, 2009). Clearly, unregulated and unfettered tourism driven strictly by a desire for an increased number of tourists is 'toxic' (Pezzullo, 2009). Rational planning needs to be implemented to ensure tourism can face the coming challenges. The next set of findings explore what opportunities exist for sustainable tourism that brings benefits to the people with minimal or no impact on the environment.

## Opportunities

The same representative tourism stakeholders were asked about opportunities to address the challenges noted above. The six most frequent answers given were:

- (1) International support towards liberation and self-determination to allow freedom of movement would allow tourists to come to Palestine and be guided by locals.
- (2) Improved public spaces (e.g. roads, parking lots, green spaces, etc.).
- (3) Further development of alternative tourism (e.g. niches such as ecological, cultural, hiking, political/solidarity). Given the unique ecology and diverse landscapes present in Palestine, ecotourism has become an increasingly popular motive for visiting the region. One can easily explore five distinct eco-zones in a span of 70 km. In 2007, Bethlehem University hosted a summit on ecotourism in the West Bank and identified three main benefits of marketing this style of tourism for the international visitor: economic stimulation, increasing or preserving biodiversity and movement towards national development goals.
- (4) Better local and national (i.e. the Palestinian Authority) support for local communities (relating to tourism). For example, some respondents asked for fewer taxes, fewer regulations and more incentives for small family businesses.
- (5) Many souvenir makers informed us of exploitation by sellers/marketers, where more than 90% of a souvenir's price may go to sellers' commissions and to kickbacks to tour operators and bus drivers, who bring tourists to the shops. This necessitates controls and administrative support from those developing regulations and standards for this sector of the economy.
- (6) Promote domestic and Palestinian diaspora tourism which can become a more reliable source than international tourism, especially during times of conflict or instability (see Novelli *et al.*, 2012).

Only one of the people we interviewed spoke obliquely of sustainability in tourism but it was only in the context of stating 'how we increase the amount of tourists while we have limited space (including in hotels)... it is impossible?'. When specifically asked, hardly anyone knew about the impact of tourism on the environment, including: use of water, pollution, travel's contribution to greenhouse gases, etc. (see also Becken & Scott, 2024; Milano *et al.*, 2024). Several tour operators told us that we need programs to teach about such things as environmental justice and climate justice after we explained to them briefly what these terms mean. One stated: 'At the diploma program we talked briefly about ecotourism but only that there are nice natural areas and we can bring tourists to see them.... no one [in the diploma program] explained to us about why or how we should do sustainability projects'.

These insights asserted to us the significant need for education but also for government regulation pertaining to sustainability in tourism. One cannot expect those who are financially benefitting from tourists to worry much about the actual impact of tourism on climate change or other sustainability issues (see Peeters & Papp, 2024). One alternative in Palestine is to expand ecotourism and other sustainable forms of tourism, including domestic and diaspora tourism, while decreasing more damaging forms of tourism (see also Qumsiyeh & Handal, 2018; Tabash, 2017).

Another area to highlight is the growing role of many institutions that work for environmental justice such as the Land Research Center (<https://www.lrcj.org/en>), the Applied Research Institute (<http://ARIJ.org>), Al-Haq (<https://www.alhaq.org/>) and our Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability (PIBS <http://palestinature.org>). PIBS was founded in 2014 and has operated mostly through volunteer efforts and by individual donations. Its achievements in research, education, conservation and community engagement towards sustainable human and natural communities are exemplary (Qumsiyeh, 2023a; Qumsiyeh & Amr, 2020; Qumsiyeh *et al.*, 2017). The institute works to empower local communities by fostering food sovereignty, benefitting from nature while protecting it and resistance strategies to achieve environmental and human rights goals (Qumsiyeh, 2023b; Qumsiyeh & Abusarhan, 2020, 2021; Qumsiyeh *et al.*, 2017, 2022, 2024). Here are some of PIBS' accomplishments relating to environmental justice and conservation:

- Published more than 150 research papers in peer reviewed journals in many areas, including fauna, flora, conservation measures, environmental injustice, sustainable agriculture, climate change, protected areas and human rights. Some of those papers can be seen at [palestinature.org](http://palestinature.org).
- Published more than 300 other articles of a more lay person nature in magazines, journals and key information websites.
- Launched a Mobile Educational Unit (MEU), which is the first mobile exhibit of its kind in Palestine (see Figure 8.1). In two years before the genocidal war commenced in late 2023, we visited 46 schools, benefitting 6011 students in marginalised communities who were unable to visit us.
- Enhanced awareness of tens of thousands of visitors through visits to our Natural History and Ethnography Exhibits and the Botanical Garden (see Figure 8.2).
- Produced various educational modules, such as interactive games (see Figure 8.3), tailored to the Palestinian community, brochures and posters on environmental topics including adaptation and mitigation of climate change to distribute to schools together with animated videos.
- Established 20 environmental clubs in West Bank schools and helped empower university students to work for environmental issues.



**Figure 8.1** Students at a marginalised school holding our climate change brochures that articulate challenges and solutions. The students are in front of our mobile museum/educational centre. (Credit: PIBS)



**Figure 8.2** Children visiting one of the exhibit areas of the natural history museum and learning about the geography of Palestine with the issue of desertification (see Qumsiyeh *et al.*, 2014). (Credit: PIBS)



**Figure 8.3** Two children competing in a game we created that teaches them about conservation and sustainability. (Credit: PIBS)

- Held over 1800 workshops, half of them local and half to over 40 countries, benefitting more than 15,000 participants.
- Led the efforts for the new Protected Area Network and National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) (PIBS, 2022).
- Provided leadership and acted as a model for national, regional and global actors in areas like environmental justice and challenging settler colonialism *vis a vis* the environment.
- Set up a successful animal rehabilitation unit.
- Engaged in community service activities that benefited especially marginalised communities (including women, farmers and Bedouins).

An example of a successful integrative pilot project that our institute implemented was to work with four local communities to the west of Bethlehem and south of Jerusalem to promote eco-friendly agriculture, local tourism and ecotourism to the tourists already coming to Bethlehem for religious tourism. Some of the data can be found in Qumsiyeh *et al.* (2023, 2024). We are now expanding this work, with support from a National Geographic Society grant and other sources, to eight communities and creating the first Palestinian biosphere reserve (on biosphere reserves, see Bouamrane *et al.*, 2019). This reserve will draw both domestic tourists and some of the international tourists already coming

to Palestine (for pilgrimage, for example) to help protect the environment while also promoting sustainable practices to the local people.

## Discussion

From our intensive interviews and via the literature review, we can state that religious tourism remains the most significant component of Palestine's tourism landscape, drawing visitors to its historical and religious sites, such as Nazareth, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The impact of religious tourism on the environment is of concern. Increased foot traffic to sensitive historical sites can lead to environmental degradation, including erosion and pollution. The potential of tourism development in Palestine is very high if one deals with environmental justice and other decolonising issues.

It is natural that local interviewees prioritised ending Israel's monopoly on tourism, which would solve other challenges to normalising tourism away from this power disparity. As noted above, there was significant agreement on the challenges faced by locals in ensuring more sustainability in tourism. Likewise, there was agreement on the opportunities to improve the tourism sector in the direction of sustainability (which is also related to climate and other environmental justice issues). What was not expected is the finding that tourism operators had little knowledge of the challenges and opportunities they face in relation to environmental issues such as climate change.

The Tourism Panel on Climate Change (TPCC) noted that 'climate justice has not been explored sufficiently in the tourism context' (TPCC, 2023: 18). Important pronouncements like the Davos Declaration on Climate Change and Tourism (UNWTO, 2007) overlooked issues of climate justice and only exhort tourism stakeholders to 'secure financial resources to help poor regions and countries'. Similarly, the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism (2021) focuses on pathways to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the tourism industry and supporting commitments to reach 'net zero'; it is silent on climate justice concerns. As our research has shown, it is possible to engage in people centred climate change adaptation and mitigation in Palestine despite the context of injustice (Qumsiyeh *et al.*, 2022; UNDP, 2010).

Sustainable tourism in Palestine, like other activities, is not possible unless the local people's interests are taken into account and in a meaningful way. Nature-based solutions are thus critical to sustain both human and natural communities (Turner *et al.*, 2022). If done properly, the development of alternative tourism in Palestine, including eco-tourism, can help both people and nature. Alongside improved adjustments to current tourism, focusing on more local and eco-friendly approaches would help significantly in issues of sustainability. If we take Bethlehem as an example, over 3 million tourists visited the birthplace

of Jesus during periods of calm. But most of those tourists did not stay in Bethlehem due to having been brought by Israeli tour companies and led by Israeli tour guides. They spent very little money locally. Less than 8% stayed in Bethlehem overnight. It would have a significant positive economic impact for the local Palestinians if these tourists actually stayed and shopped in the hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops in Bethlehem; however, this boon in business would raise other issues, for example, increased water shortages. Israel takes most of the Palestinian water (Messerschmid, 2012, 2014) and with ongoing impacts from climate change and an already significant decline in rainfall, we expect the allocation of water to local Palestinians to decrease substantially while the local population continues to grow.

Environmental justice and climate justice are related concepts that address aspects of environmental and social issues. Both concepts share a concern for equity and fairness, and ensuring protection of both people and nature. These concepts emphasise the need to address systemic inequalities and empower affected communities. The climate justice concepts grew out of the environmental justice movement and took off as a discipline of its own, especially after the first Climate Justice Summit at The Hague during the Convention of the Parties 6 (COP6) meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Attention to climate justice has grown in the past 25 years to become central to the environmental justice movement and to encompass global issues including mitigation, adaptation and international equity (Evans-Agnew & Aguilera, 2023; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014).

Since October 2023, two years have passed with hardly any tourists in Bethlehem as Israel engaged in a genocide, ethnic cleansing and ecocide initially in Gaza, and then in Lebanon and the West Bank. Bethlehem itself was isolated and tourism dried up as the Israeli military expanded its repressive measures and invasion of Palestinian villages, towns and refugee camps. Without international laws being enforced to bring justice during a genocide, then it is difficult to imagine those same laws and actors helping to bring about environmental justice in Palestine. For now, this is mostly being done on the ground, day by day, in grassroots and indigenous ways.

Alternative tourism models have emerged in Palestine in response to the challenges posed by traditional religious tourism, alongside the occupation and environmental injustice. These models focus on community engagement, cultural exchange and environmental sustainability, and emphasise local participation, and hence the creation of a more equitable distribution of tourism's benefits. Initiatives such as eco-tourism and cultural tourism encourage visitors to engage with local communities, fostering a deeper understanding of Palestinian culture and the sociopolitical context. Alternative tourism seeks to address the environmental impacts associated with mass tourism by

promoting responsible travel practices. For instance, initiatives that encourage visitors to participate in local agricultural practices or community projects can help to enhance the sustainability of tourism while providing economic benefits to local residents (Aswita *et al.*, 2023). By integrating environmental considerations into tourism development, alternative tourism can contribute to climate justice by ensuring that local communities are not only beneficiaries of tourism but also active participants in its management and sustainability.

Similarly, justice tourism has gained traction as a means of raising awareness about the sociopolitical issues facing Palestinians (see Kassis, 2013; Kassis *et al.*, 2015). This form of tourism encourages visitors to engage with the realities of life under occupation, providing a platform for advocacy and solidarity with local communities. Currently, this style of tourism has a very small climate change footprint in Palestine. While over three million tourists came to the occupied Palestinian territories in 2022 on religious tourism (PCBS, 2024), our institute estimates that, at best, less than 5000 justice tourists and solidarity activists came in that year (unpublished data of PIBS). Such ‘alternative tours’ that highlight the impact of the occupation on daily life also study the impact of the occupation on the environment and raise awareness of climate change and other environmental challenges (Qumsiyeh & Abusarhan, 2021).

We also have a significant opportunity to draw some of the religious tourists to simply see other things *while* they are here to increase their understanding of and participation in the stewardship of the environment. For example, our institute PIBS at Bethlehem University has a museum of Natural History and Ethnography which is focused on highlighting the rich local biodiversity and the environmental challenges and solutions (Qumsiyeh, 2017, 2023a; Qumsiyeh *et al.*, 2017). This becomes a form of non-violent, popular resistance to the oppression of the occupation (Qumsiyeh, 2021). In this way, the interplay of tourism and environmental justice is tied to the potential for sustainability (Lee & Jamal, 2008; Whyte, 2010). In Palestine, under this prolonged occupation and colonisation, the interplay is most acutely felt because of the imbalance in power dynamics (Alatout, 2006; Qumsiyeh & Albaradeiya, 2022). International law can play a role in addressing situations of prolonged occupation and colonisation, such as in the case of Palestine (Koutroulis, 2012). There is also a body of international environmental law that is relevant to our cause (Sands & Peel, 2012) especially in light of the ongoing ecocide (Qumsiyeh, 2024; Qumsiyeh & Abusarhan, 2020, 2021). Most recently, in July 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled on several issues raised by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) regarding the impacts caused by Israeli policies and practices through its occupation, including on natural resources and environmental harm (ICJ, 2024). The World Court determined that, not only was Israel’s use and disposal of hazardous waste in the Occupied

Territories a violation of multiple international humanitarian laws and treaties, the entire occupation itself was deemed illegal.

Our findings suggest that the main challenges faced can likely be minimised through a multi-faceted approach to tourism in Palestine that increases both economic stimulation and global solidarity to build pressures to dismantle the largest impact on environmental and other justice issues in the region: the colonial displacement and settler occupation of Palestine. Knowing that religious tourism is the biggest draw of international visitors to the region, there needs to be a shift in their experience while in the West Bank to include more interaction with and contribution to the local people and economy. There must be a change in marketing and regulations that allows for more opportunities for tourists to directly interact with those who are caretaking these sites and stewarding the land – the Palestinians. Through low climate impact activities, such as visiting the Palestine Museum of Natural History or hiking in local agricultural areas, such as Battir, the religious tourists could start to become more connected to the land and the people. Rather than simply passing through on their way to one holy site, they could build appreciation for the sovereignty of the indigenous population by witnessing the traditional methods of tending to the land and sites that they are here to visit. As the positive impact coming from tourism increases, the local authorities would theoretically be motivated to improve current regulations to maximise profits and protections for the local industries. Ultimately, however, final decision making comes from the occupation powers which do not act in ways to ease or improve conditions for the local population (see, for example, OHCHR, 2023). This is why every decision, including regarding tourism, should be made with the end goal of dismantling the occupation.

Increasing awareness of and opportunity for alternative tourism in Palestine is crucial to this end. Each tourist that makes a solidarity visit to Palestine, regardless of why they are drawn to the area – the nature, the religious sites, ancient history, research, etc. – can create an exponential impact on global solidarity upon their return home. Indeed, most recently, bestselling US author Ta-Nehisi Coates documented just 10 days that he spent experiencing alternative tourism in the West Bank in his newly released book *The Message* (Coates, 2024). This firsthand account, reflecting on what he witnessed, has caused ripple effects across the United States and much of the West; indeed, his book was a top seller during the week of Christmas 2024, and has a waitlist in libraries across the country. Every tourist brings a story back with them and in Palestine much of that story is shaped by the occupation and the palpable injustice and awe felt by international visitors when they are allowed to get off the Israeli tour buses and really spend time with the communities of Palestine. If we start to approach tourism as a key to increasing the global movement for the liberation of Palestine, then this will inevitably

include a more sustainable living environment, as the occupation has the number one impact on the health of every living organism in the region.

Practically, this means getting creative within the current challenges and not wasting any time. The opportunities identified in the respondent interviews include changes that would not only improve tourism but improve local experiences as well. Increased accessibility and improved commercial regulations will benefit all. While tourism is being drastically limited during the current genocide, making local strides for local people, which will inevitably benefit tourism once it is returned to its pre-war numbers, is an option. Working on local sustainability practices with or without tourists involved will only make it easier when the tourists return. Similarly, petitioning local administrators with tangible data for improved market regulations will serve the local economy regardless of the consumers. Ultimately, the challenges and opportunities exist with or without tourists and, while this pause is occurring, it might be an ideal time to reassess and make digestible steps towards improving conditions while solidarity grows globally, even from afar, even without setting foot in Palestine. The world has never been able to witness these conditions of steadfast resistance in the face of naked colonial violence in such a clear way before. Millions of people worldwide have expressed solidarity with the people of Palestine. This presents a platform for further growth in the justice and solidarity tourism movement that supports Palestine as these witnesses maybe drawn to come and visit a liberated and sustainable Palestine.

## Conclusion

In Palestine, we are still experiencing active colonisation and oppression. At least two of the people we interviewed argued that addressing tourism's environmental and climate justice issues would have to wait until after liberation is achieved. Yet, we argue that work can be done in preparation for post-conflict peace building and better natural resource management (Bruch *et al.*, 2016; Stahn *et al.*, 2017) and that a good model of this is found in the work undertaken by PIBS (see above).

The challenges articulated in the findings can be faced by taking advantage of the opportunities we outlined from our research study, advancing both environmental and climate justice through these processes. Others have proposed pathways to advance toward these forms of justice by combining the power of law (local and international law) with the power of the people (local action); analyses suggest this combination can be effective (e.g. Maru, 2023; Qumsiyeh, 2023b).

The tourism sector in Palestine, including ecological, religious and alternative niches of tourism, faces significant challenges due to the ongoing and prolonged Israeli occupation and apartheid. This complicates efforts to promote sustainable practices and equitable

benefits for local communities. One tool for challenging this apartheid system is through creative forms of tourism that contribute to self-emancipation. This includes areas like expanding connectivity and local tourism (as a form of resistance and resilience). It includes recruiting internationals to visit or enhancing existing visitor itineraries by enticing them off Israeli controlled circuits and into visiting other areas (like Palestine's natural areas and museums).

Those visitors who witness the occupation and the impact it has on all living creatures in the region help grow solidarity, get involved and bring closer the goal of peace and sustainability for both human and natural communities. Increased awareness of the situation on the ground for plants, animals, bodies of water and most importantly the indigenous people, is one of the prongs that is needed to bring about a global campaign to end Israeli impunity and create accountability for the ongoing violations of myriad laws of man and nature. Bringing tourism into an occupied territory that is already experiencing a shortage of resources due to the Israeli restrictions and misuse of nature on top of climate change is a challenge and the cost versus benefit must be regularly reassessed. However, building global awareness of and resistance to the occupation is vital for any sustainable next steps. Environmental justice *in* Palestine is part and parcel of overall justice *for* Palestine.

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