

Embarras de richesse

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Visitors to the Aloha State are both a boon and a bane

THE hotels are full, Japanese tourists throng the designer stores of Waikiki, and the unemployment rate is a mere 3% of the workforce. So what could possibly knock Hawaii, the “aloha” or “welcome” state, off its wave? The answer, according to Rex Johnson, the president of the Hawaii Tourist Authority, is that Hawaii's 1.2m residents may one day get fed up with playing host to overseas visitors, 7m of them this year. “Once we lose this thing called aloha and the residents no longer think of tourism as a wonderful industry, we'll be like any other sand and surf destination, but farther away.”

Indeed, some residents are already fed up. KAHEA, an alliance of environmentalists and defenders of native Hawaiian culture, bemoans the pollution caused by the cruise ships and the risk posed by the tourist hordes to creatures such as the dark-rumped petrel and the Oahu tree snail, or to plants like the *Marsilea villosa* fern. KAHEA has a point: the US Fish & Wildlife Service currently lists some 317 species, including 273 plants, in the Hawaiian islands as threatened or endangered—the highest number of any state in the nation. Even the state flower, the hibiscus *brackenridgei*, is on the danger list. The loss of species, says one government report, has been “staggering”. As for the impact of tourism on Hawaiian culture, a KAHEA spokeswoman wryly notes the element of exploitation: “Native Hawaiian culture is used as a selling point—come to this paradise where beautiful women are doing the hula on your dinner plate.”

So what else is new? Hawaii's environment and culture have been under threat ever since Captain Cook and his germ-carrying sailors dropped anchor in 1778. Foreign imports, from the Dole pineapple plantation on Oahu to the Parker cattle ranch on the Big Island, have inevitably had an impact on species that evolved over the millennia in isolation. Moreover, with up to 25 non-native species arriving each year, the impact will continue. But, as the US Geological Survey argues, the impact can add to biodiversity as well as lessen it. The real challenge, therefore, is for Hawaii to find a balance between the costs and the benefits of development in general and tourism in particular.

The benefits are not to be sneezed at. The state's unemployment rate has been below the national average for the past two-and-a-half years (at the moment, only Wyoming, at 2.9%, has a lower rate). Economists at the University of Hawaii reckon that Hawaiians' real personal income rose by 2.8% last year, will rise by 2.7% this year and will continue through 2007 at 2.5%. According to the state's “strategic plan” for the next decade, tourism should take much of the credit, accounting directly and indirectly for some 22% of the state's jobs by 2007, more than 17% of its economic output and around 26% of its tax revenues. Only the presence of the armed forces comes close in economic importance.

The trouble is that the costs can be high, too. As one economist puts it, “We have a Manhattan cost of living and Peoria wage rates.” That translates into a median house price today on the island of Oahu, home to three-quarters of the state's population, of \$500,000, and a need for many workers to take on more than one job. Social activists

point to the disparity between the modest homes of most Hawaiians and the gated communities and resort complexes that provide second homes for visitors from the American mainland. A 2002 survey of Hawaii residents found that 50% of the sample thought tourism had been “mostly good” for themselves and their families—but this was down from 58% in 1999, and 54% blamed tourism for the increased traffic that clogs Hawaii's few roads. So should Mr Johnson and his pals in tourism be worried? Though the 2000 census reckoned native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders were a mere 9% of the population (Asians, notably Filipinos and Japanese, made up 42%, whites 24%), probably a fifth of the population has some native Hawaiian blood, and virtually everyone, regardless of race, professes to care for Polynesian culture.

This means that the University of Hawaii, which has managed the star-gazing observatory on the summit of the Mauna Kea volcano since the late 1960s, is now seeking forgiveness for desecrating what turns out to be sacred native Hawaiian land. It also means widespread support for the “Akaka bill”, a move by Hawaii's politicians in Washington, led by Senator Daniel Akaka, to secure federal recognition of a “native Hawaiian governing entity”. The bill deliberately does not envision independence, the demand of some in the “sovereignty movement”. For too many Hawaii residents that evokes alarming thoughts of a loss of their American passports, or American-Indian-style casinos. Instead, it would give native Hawaiians their own office within the federal government, more control over their lands and protection from legal challenge for any affirmative-action programmes.

Such sensitivities should, in the end, be an asset to Hawaii's tourism, forcing it to go for quality rather than quantity in its choice of visitors. In a sense, that choice has already been made. Flights to Hawaii are expensive; Waikiki, the main attraction for February's 122,500 visitors from Japan (a fifth of the total), is a tiny area wedged between the beach and a canal, and so cannot expand; and every development project has to get local political approval. In their darker moments Hawaii's economic planners may worry about airline bankruptcies, a return of SARS or a Pacific tsunami—but the fact is that the sun shines, the surf is clean and over 60% of tourists are repeat visitors. In other words, so far at least, that aloha spirit is alive and well.