

POSTCARD MOTIFS AND LITTERED LANDSCAPES: HOW THE INGLORIOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TOURISM AND WASTE (RE)SHAPES PHU QUOC ISLAND'S APPEARANCE

Heide Kerber, Institute for Social-Ecological Research

Heide Kerber (*kerber@isoe.de*) is a human geographer working at ISOE-Institute for Social-Ecological Research in Frankfurt, Germany. She has worked for more than ten years on inter- and transdisciplinary social-ecological research projects focusing on water resource issues. In her doctoral dissertation, she scrutinizes marine plastic pollution from a multi-level governance perspective.



Abstract

Phu Quoc Island is famous for its sun, sand, and sea, but tourism struggles with visible plastic pollution. The colorful plastic waste disrupts tourists' imaginaries of a pristine, tropical paradise. To counter the threat of image loss, local authorities and the tourism industry create both materially and symbolically 'clean' places that fulfil the scenery tourists seek. Drawing on my human geography background, I frame this making, maintaining, and manipulation of attractive environmental features as place-making practices. Yet, the creation of an appealing environment makes it necessary to find places to store the immense amounts of waste. I understand these places as 'places

behind the scene,' referring to Goffman's theatre metaphor of front- and backstage settings. The paper illuminates how waste-tourism entanglements foster the creation of front- and backstage places, which ultimately lead to an increasing socio-spatial fragmentation of the island.

Keywords: Vietnam, tourism, place making

Introduction

Researching where others go on vacation. How did I come to this? I am a human geographer scrutinizing marine plastic pollution. Since the majority of marine plastic pollution comes from land-based sources, I started my research where plastic waste flows into the ocean. My research takes me to Phu Quoc Island, one of Vietnam's sought-after destinations. The problem in a nutshell: Phu Quoc's hasty transformation from an insider's tip to a tourism magnet. As the number of tourists is growing tremendously fast, and with it, the amount of single-use plastic (SUP) waste, the necessary infrastructure development to collect and manage this waste on the island is progressing only slowly. Littered landscapes are the consequence of this asynchronicity. The fragmented appearance of places linked to the ever more apparent pollution piques my

interest as a human geographer: Colorful waste disrupts the scenery of dreamy white beaches and crystal-clear water that is presented on travel blogs and postcards. I asked myself what results from this disorder or disturbance.

Conceptual Framing

In framing this article, I had in mind the insightful geographical work by Uma Kothari and Alex Arnall on the role of waste in recreating tourist imaginaries of pristine landscapes. They demonstrate for the Maldives how the apparently untouched islands' landscape needs constant manipulation and management of space by the tourism industry (Arnall & Kothari, 2020; Kothari & Arnall, 2017). The Maldives, like many other high-end tourist destinations, is subject to negative international publicity due to the accumulation of waste materials, especially plastics, along the shorelines. Waste materials affect how a place smells, feels, or is experienced—creating environments that are either attractive or repellent. Yet, as Kothari and Arnall argue, tourists visit a destination "to enjoy particular environmental features, and that the quality of these directly shape their enjoyment of a particular place" (Kothari & Arnall, 2017, p. 983) and determines whether they will return to that place. Even though Kothari and Arnall

do not explicitly refer to the contemporary marine plastic pollution research, their observation fits nicely with these findings.

The body of research on marine plastic pollution highlights littered landscapes as a key economic risk for the tourism sector. Studies show that tourism islands are especially exposed to plastic pollution and are significantly vulnerable to its impacts. These islands depend on tourism, for which a pristine landscape is vital. Yet, capital intense but unprofitable waste infrastructure development is not a priority. Consequently, the fast-growing amounts of waste—to which tourism contributes significantly—get out of control.

Besides the locally generated waste issue, marine debris from near and far washes ashore, which puts even more pressure on waste management. The decline of aesthetic value contradicts tourist imaginaries, such as the restorative qualities of clean coastlines, and thus risks leading to a decline in tourism revenues (Botero et al., 2017; Corraini et al., 2018; Wyles et al., 2016). Therefore, the tourism industry engages in management, or as Arnall and Kothari (Kothari & Arnall, 2017) put it: in manipulative activities. Resorts often spend a fortune to clean their beaches in order to maintain the attractive environmental features tourists seek.

I realized how much this is also true for Phu Quoc Island, when I did my field research in 2017 and 2018. I saw nicely staged tourism hotspots and remote villages that are left to fend for themselves.

I conducted qualitative interviews with a broad range of actors on Phu Quoc, first to gain an understanding of the situation and second to collect a variety of perspectives. I interviewed local authorities, managers of different kinds of resorts, tour boat

operators, diving enterprises, beach cleaners, tourists, formal and informal waste workers, fishermen, local shop owners, and local households.

Drawing on my findings, I frame the observed maintenance activities as place-making practices, understanding them as processes and interactions that create images and imaginative geographies of place. I argue that waste takes up the role of a 'parallax object' that "disturbs the smooth running of things" (Zizek, 2006, p. 17). I decided to take this perspective, as social scientists researching waste governance argue that in many societies, waste is ideally invisible.

I use the theater metaphor by the sociologist Erving Goffman as an analytical lens, which I find an enriching, illustrative description for place-making endeavors. Goffman argues that people tend to act in front of other people in a way that meets their expectations and makes a good impression. He frames this as a frontstage performance. In contrast, backstage is a "place, relative to given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (Goffman, 2008, p. 53). MacCannell (1973) transfers the idea of front- and backstage arrangements to tourism settings. He argues that tourists are eager to enter the backstage in order to experience authenticity. Yet, I observed the opposite. Based on my research findings, and findings in marine pollution research in Phu Quoc, the great majority of tourists are looking for frontstage places that meet their scenic expectations rather than seeking to discover 'authentic' backstage settings.

Desire to explore the entire island of Phu Quoc depends to some extent on class and country of origin. I have observed a change in the country of origin

of tourists visiting Phu Quoc. However, there are still more national (domestic) than international tourists visiting Phu Quoc. I have observed that for a long time, it was mainly western backpackers or individual travelers who visited the island; now there are many international tourists, mainly from Russia and China. It is my impression that the tourists who seek to explore the island (both stages) are primarily from western countries (United States, Canada, Europe, or Australia). It was interesting that no matter whom I spoke with, the person viewed all Western tourists as equally environmentally conscious while perceiving Vietnamese, Russian, and Chinese as not environmentally conscious.

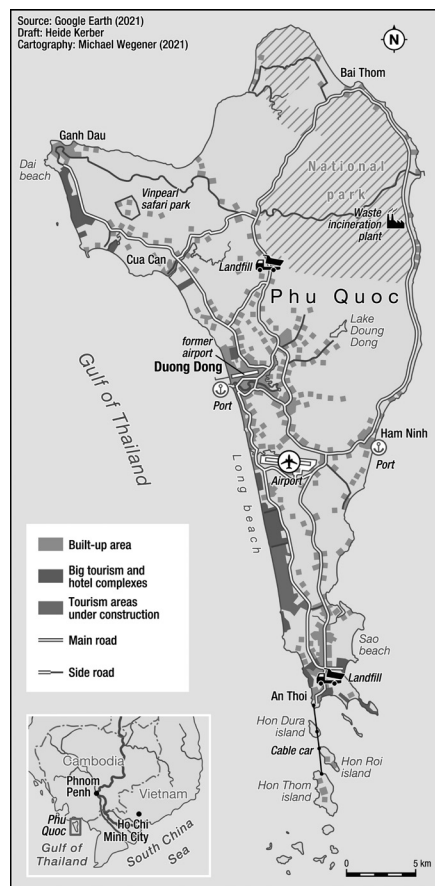
Setting the Stage: The Island Phu Quoc

Phu Quoc is an island in the south of Vietnam, west of the Mekong Delta, and about 40 kilometers off the mainland. The island's capital and economic hub, Duong Dong, is located on the west coast. In addition, there are two other urban centers: An Thoi, on the southern tip, and Ham Ninh, on the east coast. Along the coast are sensitive marine ecosystems such as seagrass beds, coral reefs, and mangrove swamps, which provide habitats for rare flora and fauna. These ecosystems are a protected nature reserve.

Until the mid-2010s, pepper cultivation and fishing products were still important pillars of the economic architecture; today, it is high-end tourism. Population and tourism numbers are rising rapidly: from 101,000 inhabitants and between 2 to 3 million tourists in 2017; to 120,000 inhabitants and close to 4 million tourists in 2018; and up to 146,000 inhabitants and more

Figure 1*Phu Quoc Island*

(Map by Heide Kerber and Michael Wegener)



than 5 million tourists in 2019. In Phu Quoc, here, the promise of economic progress has not (yet) lost its validity. The strategy of the provincial administration to market Phu Quoc as a 'green, clean island' is diametrical to current developments. In addition to rising deforestation and more impervious surfaces, growing mountains of waste make the socio-ecological challenges of economic 'progress' visible. Waste becomes a symbol of the critical societal relation to nature.

Phu Quoc's waste management system combines formal and informal management structures. The formal waste storage and treatment infrastructure comprises two open, unsecured landfills

and one non-functioning incineration plant. The daily volume of waste is roughly 160 metric tons; however, according to local authorities, municipal services collect and dispose of approximately 130 metric tons to landfills. Yet, waste escapes the dysfunctional, and in rural villages simply non-existent, system, finding its way into island's environment and ultimately the ocean. During a clean-up campaign, more than 90% of the trash collected consisted of plastic items, such as foam, fishing equipment, and food containers (Greenhub & IUCN Viet Nam, 2021). To be fair, not all waste originates from the island, but much does. Waste is carried by the wind, transported by rivers and storm water, left on the shore, or disposed of directly into the marine environment. It becomes increasingly visible, and the island's image of natural beauty begins to fade as the tide of waste pollution rises. I see this as a critical development.

On- and Off-Stage: Getting a Glimpse of Place Making

To counter the threat of image loss, the tourism industry and local authorities have created both materially and symbolically 'clean' places—or, speaking with Goffman's theatre metaphor, 'frontage' places.

Hoteliers of luxury resorts are eager to make plastic pollution as invisible as possible within their resorts. One hotelier frames this activity as creating 'islands of cleanliness.' As a key element, hoteliers replace single-use plastics by eco-friendlier alternatives like glass water carafes or bamboo or steel straws. These replacements embody the hotel's ethos of sustainability and foster the production of a space in which consumption is possible with a clear conscience. Moving around the frontstage of the

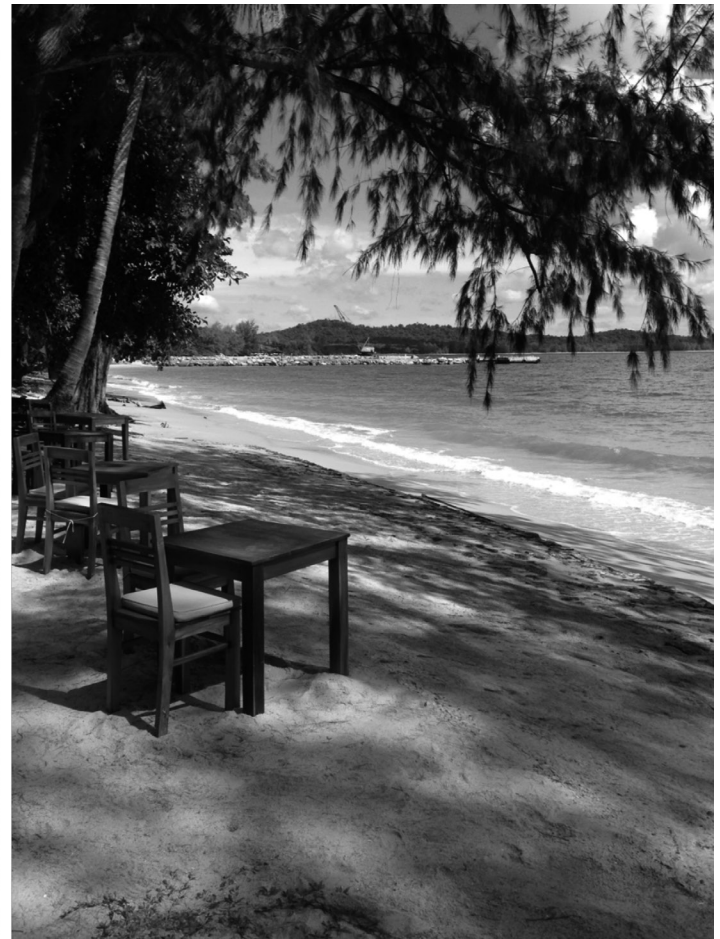
resort, such as the breakfast buffet, I see reusable glass bottles for the juice, jam and sugar in small ceramic bowls, and bamboo straws for the fresh coconut or the iced coffee. However, from my glimpse of the backstage, I know that the fruits for the juice and jam and all the other food so attractively presented to the visitors as eco-friendly are unwrapped from the plastics, for example, the bags, wrapping, and sachets they come in. Moreover, staff members clean the resort's beach section early in the morning, late in the evening, and in between to maintain the appearance of the beautiful natural setting. More curious tourists are, therefore, shocked when they leave the hotel's section while walking on the beach and come across garbage barely 50 meters further on. This shows how fragile and porous the boundary between front- and backstage is. Along the famous sandy 'long beach,' the resorts line up but are interrupted by non-managed, that is not yet manipulated, sections in which abandoned fishing equipment, old furniture, and discarded plastic items accumulate. It is a vivid example of these not fully controllable borders between the manipulated and non-manipulated. Tourists handle this frontstage-backstage entanglement very differently. Some feel disturbed, even put off, by the presence of waste, others ignore it and take their nap beside it, and others obstinately seek again to find the tropical paradise displayed in the travel guides.

Local authorities practice place making by enhancing waste infrastructure in tourism hotspots and shifting newer infrastructure sites to backstage places. The tourist hotspots such as Duong Dong, An Thoi, Ganh Dau, and other major tourism areas with their carefully designed exclusive high-end

Figure 2

Unmanaged (left) and Managed (right) Beach Sections on Phu Quoc

(Photo by Heide Kerber)



resorts have public waste collection services up to twice a day. Yet the rest of the island settlements, including the last of the original fisher villages, have no waste collection service. This leaves the residents there unable to dispose of their waste adequately. The selective—indeed uneven—distribution of waste collection services and, with it, the waste burden, however, occasionally stands out. A tourist who has explored the entire island sums it up: “So, there is a strong contrast between the touristic parts and the real part. So, the real part is a shithole and the touristic part is, as an exception, tidy.”

Very few places on the island are exceptions to this rule. One of them is the landfill along the busy north-south road. The dumpsite is a relic of times when tourism was located along the beach southwards, with the dumpsite located ‘off the beaten track.’ Now, it heavily disturbs the picture of an idyllic holiday destination. The smelly waste mountain makes the ugly side of consumption and the failed waste governance obvious and pushes place-making endeavors. Therefore, waste infrastructure such as the second landfill in An Thoi and the waste treatment plant in Bai Bon (constructed in 2016) are as far from tourism centers as possible—given the small

island’s area; at least for the time being, until further tourism development reaches out and assimilates current backstage places.

Summary

To counter the disruptive character of waste and thus to preserve Phu Quoc’s paradise-like postcard imaginaries, the tourism industry and local authorities engage in a constant manipulation and maintenance of environments that tourists desire. Waste has no place here. Goffman’s idea of front- and backstage places presents an enriching, illustrative perspective on their place-making practices.

Figure 3

A Glimpse of the Backstage (left) and Frontstage (right) of a Resort

(Photo by Heide Kerber)



Frontstage are the carefully designed luxury resorts and the maintained appearance of tourism centers. Yet, this frontstage makes backstage places necessary to hide what disturbs the idyll: namely waste. The creation of places drives spatial fragmentation, leading not only to a contrasting appearance of the island but also inequalities.

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