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(Eco-) Disaster Tourism in the United States

With tourism being a global phenomenon of growing importance, natural disasters such as the Indian Ocean Tsunami or Hurricane Katrina can have enormous impacts on this worldwide industry. However, it is not only negatively affected by the global challenge that frequently occurring natural disasters pose to modern society. In the 1980s, alternative tourism – for example, ecotourism and special interest tourism – became more and more established. The numerous natural disasters that occurred in the United States during the 1980s contributed to the success of one of these special interests within the tourist industry, that known as *(Eco-) Disaster Tourism*. Though the term may be new, the phenomenon of disaster tourism existed long before the recent trend. As early as 79 AD, Pliny the Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus) was driven by his curiosity and went to see the eruption of Vesuvius that buried Pompeii and Herculaneum. Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus) writes about his uncle: “This phenomenon seemed to a man of such learning and research as my uncle extraordinary and worth further looking into.” Unfortunately, his trip did not result in as much new scientific knowledge as he might have hoped to bring back. Pliny’s other intention was to rescue people in need, which he did not get to do either.

Modern disaster tourists are often driven by motivations similar to Pliny’s. Combining one’s curiosity with good intentions, the new trend of so-called *voluntourism* or *philanthropic travel* is a way (and for some an excuse) to get a first hand look at a disaster zone. It is a very ambiguous and controversial industry that is not usually well-regarded among relief organizations. A sub-category of disaster tourism, *toxic tours*, showcases environmental discriminations towards underprivileged groups within society. The motivations of disaster tourists partly overlap with those of *grief* or *dark tourists*, whose major interest lies in looking at sights of historical man-made tragic events.

Since disaster tourism can have so many faces, it is especially important to classify and define terms such as *disaster*, and *disaster tourism* in particular. In the process, disaster tourism may be examined from various perspectives; historical, economical, political, ethical and psychological.. In this context, the legitimacy of disaster tourism with regard to the trauma of the victims needs to be taken into consideration.

My aim is to address these different approaches by answering the following questions: Is disaster tourism in the United States a new phenomenon? According to an exhibition organized by the Bancroft Library, it is a new industry, emerging from the ashes of San Francisco’s in 1906. Does disaster tourism reflect a *Westernization* of society? Since tourism itself is considered a modern western phenomenon, I intend to show that disaster tourism further contributes to the Westernization of society by looking at the commercialization of natural disasters through *staged authenticity* in the form of theme parks such as Coney Island, which played a major role for the leisure industry in the early 20th century. Some disasters contributed to the official protection of particular landscapes, which, as a result, were opened up to development as tourist sites. Therefore, the topic plays an important role within the discourse of environmental politics. The question of whether or not disaster tourism can have positive effects on the region through voluntourism and educational tours will be explored by looking at the reaction of the affected population to this kind of tourism.

In tackling these questions, I will focus primarily on archive sources dealing with disaster history and the tourism industry. Furthermore, I will examine literary sources as well as records from contemporary witnesses and newspapers. In addition, for the more recent forms of disaster tourism, I will conduct personal interviews.