

Beneath the surface of tourism in Bali

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Thousands of people in Bali have joined a movement to reject land reclamation in Benoa Bay. Supplied, Author provided

“For thrill seekers and chill seekers” – that’s the phrase the Today Tonight television program used to show areas in Bali as a freshly rebranded holiday destination, in its recent **Brand New Bali** series.

But beneath the glamorous surface of cocktails, swimming pools and beach holidays lies an environmental threat that may cause the island to face a water crisis in less than four years.

One segment of **Brand New Bali** focused on the area of Canggu, hailed as the new “place to be”, after Kuta, Legian and Seminyak.

Showcasing one newly opened Australian-owned beach club at Berawa beach, the segment shows Australian visitors, the Australian beach club manager and a local businessman named Ketut talk about the splendours of Canggu and its rise from a small fishing village to a trendy international surf destination.

The beach club sits on an aquifer, underground layers of rock that contain water that can surface through natural springs or be extracted using pumps. Like most tourism businesses and households in the area, the beach club relies on groundwater for daily water consumption.

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Lack of management and overconsumption of water can cause aquifers to face groundwater depletion and land subsidence. Although Bali is a lush, tropical island with rich volcanic soil and a more than 1,000-year heritage of rice production, researchers estimate the island will run dry by 2020.

Stress on waterways is more than just a local issue to Bali. It is of global concern, as UNICEF's current campaign World Water Week seeks to highlight.

Balinese opposition to outside investors

Bali's struggle against cashed-up outside investors is most prominent in the "Tolak Reklamasi" movement. Thousands of supporters have joined the movement to reject land reclamation in Benoa Bay, where investors from Jakarta are planning to build hotels and casinos on artificially-built islands.

Protesters claim this will have negative environmental consequences such as flooding, place stress on water and waste management, and destroy dozens of Hindu sacred sites.

While there are many - local residents included - who welcome the booming tourist scene in Canggu and the economic opportunities this offers, researchers warn about rapid and uncontrolled development. Balinese tourism researcher I Nyoman Darma Putra has addressed the **shift from cultural tourism to marine tourism** and notes the increasing demand for marine leisure activities by tourists. He cautions against the rapid development of coastal spaces and urges developers to consider **Balinese people's religious relationship with the sea**, as well as the sustainable management of environmental resources.

Tourism and water

An estimated 60% of Bali's water is consumed by the tourism industry. This not only affects water sources but can disadvantage neighbouring users too.

Stroma Cole's research shows how wealthy tourism operators can afford better technology to access deeper groundwater resources. While most households have wells up to 40 metres deep (some only 12m), resorts are reported to drill deeper wells - 60m and more - literally sucking up their neighbours' water. The neighbours are then forced to dig deeper or look elsewhere for freshwater.

Although there are laws that regulate water consumption, they are rarely enforced. Most users are unaware of these regulations. As a result, those with financial resources can buy themselves an advantage in accessing resources.

Water tables across Bali have dropped up to 50m in the past 10 years in parts of Bali and 60% of its watersheds are declared dry. The damage could become irreversible once aquifers suffer saltwater intrusion, rendering the groundwater useless for domestic purposes.

Bali tourism: who really benefits?

So what benefit may this beach club have to the area? Surely, large developments can bring economic prosperity to semi-urban areas?

The prospects seem bleak. Beach vendors, who have been selling cold drinks and snacks on this stretch of sand in Berawa for years, were forced to move to make way for the new mega-club, and are left fearing for their business. Many of those beach vendors have families to feed. The assumption that more tourism business means more wealth for Balinese residents is also misleading: an estimated 85% of tourism businesses are owned by non-Balinese..

The Today Tonight segment does well in highlighting the popularity of places like Canggu and touches on the special place Bali holds towards its Australian audience. Australians in particular have a close connection to Bali through decades of mass tourism and the market seems to be changing from a budget, all-inclusive version, to a glossy, exotic marine tourism destination.

While an exclusive cocktail in the newest popular beach bar will look good on any traveller's social media feed, consumers, developers and residents alike must consider seriously measures of environmental sustainability, so that generations to come can enjoy the beauty of this wonderful island.

The author makes no claim of representing or speaking on behalf of a Balinese community. Some of the information is based on ethnographic field research the author undertook in the Canggu area between 2015 - 2016 as part of his PhD project.



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