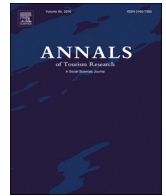




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## Research note

## Targeting sustainable outcomes with adventure tourism: A political ecology approach

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## ABSTRACT

Sustainability is a dominant paradigm in tourism research yet a lack of research on alternative tourism sectors to deliver sustainable outcomes hinders sustainable tourism research, planning, implementation, policy and management. This research uses a political ecology lens, to dissect how destinations can harness adventure tourism to achieve relevant sustainability objectives. Adventure tourism is not in itself sustainable but by targeting adventure travel that attracts passionate, high-paying tourists to participate in activities specifically suited to local landscapes, communities have the potential to create bespoke tourism products that fit the socio-ecological system and produce clear conservation and sustainable development outcomes.

## Introduction

Adventure tourism, valued globally at \$263 billion USD, is the fastest growing tourism sector (ATTA, 2016; Giddy & Webb, 2018). Adventure tourism products typically include low-volume and longer-duration visits to more remote destinations from high-skilled tourists with a strong willingness-to-pay for unique nature, cultural and or activity-focused experiences (Buckley, 2017; UNWTO & ATTA, 2014). Industry-led reports, including the Adventure Travel Trade Association (2016) and UN World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) (2014) Global Report on Adventure Tourism, feel these characteristics suggests adventure tourism may be an effective avenue to implement sustainable tourism theory. While the UNWTO (2012) emphasizes all tourism sector's potential to enhance biodiversity conservation, promote sustainable development in communities and growth in the global economy, making clear that "sustainable tourism is not a discrete or special form of tourism", no academic research explores adventure tourism through a conceptual sustainable tourism framework as has been exhaustively done with nature-based and eco-tourism (Lu & Nepal, 2009; Rantala, Rokenes, & Valkonen, 2018; Ruhanen, Moyle, & Moyle, 2018).

Using a bottom-up political ecology approach, this paper discusses nature-society relations unique to adventure tourism to propose conceptual links with sustainable tourism theory, and demonstrates these how these connections may be useful for future sustainable adventure tourism research and application.

## Adventure tourism through a political ecology lens

Adventure tourism, broadly defined as travel which includes physical activity, interactions with the natural environment, and immersion in the local culture (Cheng, Edwards, Darcy, & Redfern, 2018; Rantala et al., 2018; UNWTO & ATTA, 2014), sometimes overlaps or conflicts with interpretations of nature and eco-tourism (Weaver, 2001). This definitional ambiguity contributes to the

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current lack of literature investigating the intersection of adventure and sustainable tourism (Rantala et al., 2018) and hinders tourism research as a whole. Because of tourism's contextual nature, defining a tourism sector, and then evaluating its level of sustainability from the top down is difficult, if not impossible. This top-down sector-wide approach has resulted in the misinterpretation, by practitioners and academics alike, that nature-based and eco-tourism are synonymous with sustainable tourism (Lu & Nepal, 2009; Ruhanen et al., 2015). When nature and eco-tourism enterprises fail to deliver the promised conservation and development benefits, it is assumed that *sustainable tourism* has failed. Instead tourism sustainability depends on planning and management strategies implemented within localized social, ecological and economic contexts (Buckley, 2017; Douglas, 2014; Saarinen & Nepal, 2016). As such, sustainable tourism research must use new approaches and look beyond the traditional nature and eco-tourism rhetoric to identify the tourism conditions that can deliver sustainable outcomes.

Political ecology, a dominant discourse in conservation and sustainable development, is one approach that can help tourism researchers and practitioners understand the complex and constantly evolving relationships between tourists, tourism operations, community development and the natural environment (Saarinen & Nepal, 2016). This interdisciplinary lens is useful to investigate how these nuanced relationships, stakeholder perspectives and diverse political, economic, environmental, and social contexts combine to result in (or fail to result in) sustainable outcomes (Douglas, 2014; Neumann, 2005; Saarinen & Nepal, 2016). Adventure tourists interact with a destination's social, ecological and economic systems differently than other tourists, including (1) *place*, low-volume, long-duration visits to remote destinations; (2) *passion*, high-skilled activities; (3) *payment*, willingness-to-pay for one-of-a-kind experiences (Buckley, 2017; UNWTO & ATTA, 2014). Using the political ecology approach, the following investigates how adventure tourists interact with the complex bio-cultural-economic systems of a destination and how these relationships can support sustainable tourism (Saarinen & Nepal, 2016) by incentivizing environmental conservation and sustainable development goals.

- (1) *Place*: Adventure tourists seek to, not just observe but, physically experience the natural landscape through multiple senses (Giddy & Webb, 2018). The desire for unique landscapes, “meaningful” connections, and participation in a specific activity draws adventure tourists to regions which may be otherwise difficult to access or lack scenic appeal that attracts mass-tourists or even nature and eco-tourists. Adventure tourism experiences often improve relative to a landscape's remoteness, ruggedness or uniqueness and is often centred around existing outdoor natural attractions (Bell & Lyall, 1998). As a result, adventure tourists are more willing to sacrifice luxury amenities or comfort for strong connection to place. Low-volume, low-impact tourism can therefore be developed to suit fragile ecological and cultural landscapes without investing in expensive eco-lodges or other invasive infrastructure (Giddy & Webb, 2018). This creates a relatively low barrier to entry, leaving many rural or developing regions well suited to pursue and benefit from adventure tourism development.
- (2) *Passion*: Adventure tourists travel based on a specific interest which often requires building niche skills, whereby successfully mastering skills provides powerful emotional experiences. The emotional connection between place, activity and participant, called “peak experience”, heightens as skills and specialization increase (Bell & Lyall, 1998; Buckley, 2017). As a result, adventure tourism has a high rate of repeat tourists, where tourists progressively build skill in an activity, become increasingly passionate about that activity and therefore choose future tourism experiences based on peak experience, creating a financially stable tourism market (UNWTO & ATTA, 2014).

Passion for an outdoor activity also suggests adventure tourists may be more likely to uphold pro-environmental attitudes, and sense-of-place values (Peterson, Hull, Mertig, & Liu, 2008; Thapa, 2010). Gale (1972, p. 285) finds “strong personal attachment to an outdoor recreation activity can lead to an equally strong commitment to protect those features of the environment which contribute directly to the enjoyment of the activity”. While other research refutes Gale's claim (Theodori, Luloff, & Willits, 1998), many examples exist of passionate adventure tourists engaging in environmental protection of ecological elements fundamental to their preferred activity. For example, climate-advocacy non-profit Protect Our Winters has a global network of over 200,000 snow-sport participants; the opening of Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, USA to oil drilling prompted outcry from hikers, climbers and campers; hunters and anglers have a long history of wildlife conservation.

- (3) *Payment*: Environmental awareness and social justice are considered strong and growing values among adventure tourists (Buckley, 2018), which can be harnessed directly into local conservation or community development initiatives. For example, research in Portugal found 86% of surf tourists are willing to pay a tax for environmental protection of the Algarve where they surf (Frank, Pintassiglo, & Pinto, 2015). Coupling responsibility ethics with the desire for novel travel experiences means adventure tourists generally spend more time at a destination and are willing to pay more than the average tourist (Buckley, 2017; Buckley, Shakeela, & Guitart, 2014). Adventure tourists' spending is also considered to have a much larger local impact than that of mass tourists. Estimates show 5–20% of international mass-tourists's spending remains in the destination economy, whereas 65.6% of adventure tourist revenues support local development (UNWTO & ATTA, 2014). The higher localized economic impact is because *passion* and *place*-based attractions mean adventure tourists are willing to pay more for local guides with skills in the activity and knowledge to interpret and safely recreate within local cultural and environmental contexts (Buckley, 2017; Buckley et al., 2014; UNWTO & ATTA, 2014). In particular “harder” adventure tourism activities requiring more skilled guides and tourism operators, result in higher paid jobs and increased local economic opportunities (Cheng et al., 2018).

## Discussion, application and future research

Adventure tourism is not *innately* sustainable. Like all tourism sectors, sustainability in adventure tourism is highly contextual, varying by destination and operation, while concerns of mass-tourism, nature and culture commodification, growth, and travel-related emissions ensue (Bell & Lyall, 1998; Rantala et al., 2018). Rather than focus on operational sustainability, (e.g. renewable-energy-powered eco-lodges), or evaluating sustainability across the entire adventure tourism sector, this research alternatively suggests that adventure tourism developed through a political ecology lens gives tourism and community stakeholders agency to achieve specific locally-relevant, conservation and development goals. Understanding adventure tourist-destination relationships through connection to *place*, *passion* for specific activities and willingness to *pay*, destinations can harness bespoke adventure tourism activities that attracts a specific demographic of high-paying tourists suited to local ecology, culture, knowledge, and current political-economic situation.

Targeting specific activities provides an avenue to connect with and engage passionate, high-paying tourists in local sustainability issues. For example dive adventure tourism using local marine knowledge could be targeted to incentivize reef conservation while diversifying a local economy beyond commercial fishing. The case can even be made for some consumptive or motorized adventure activities, like snowmobiling, which may otherwise be considered un-sustainable. For a rural community dependent on natural-resource-extraction-based industries, targeting snowmobiling adventure tourism may help create sustainable development wherein the benefits; reducing reliance on resource extraction and engaging local residents and high-paying tourists in forest conservation and sustainable trail management, may outweigh the costs of the activity.

Future empirical research should use a political ecology approach to investigate adventure tourism dynamics at the destination and operation scale to explore under what circumstances (activity, geography, governance, etc.) *place*, *passion* and *payment* result in sustainability successes or failures as well as how sustainable adventure tourism outcomes connect with global-scale objectives such as the Sustainable Development Goals or Paris Agreement targets. Unique factors influencing each tourism operation, activity, and destination may mean there will never be a complete or comprehensive framework for implementing sustainable tourism, but looking beyond traditional outlets to incorporate alternative tourism sectors and multidisciplinary perspectives into sustainable tourism theory will be important to global tourism policy and management, particularly as adventure tourism matures, new sectors develop and demand for sustainability increases.

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