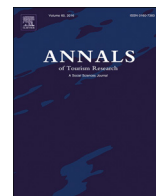


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Research Note

Re-thinking sustainability and food in tourism

Giovanna Bertella

UiT-The Arctic University of Norway, Norway



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Re-thinking sustainability and food in tourism

Now is a good time to reflect on the way food tourism could contribute to a better future. A number of scholars comment on the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to re-think tourism in terms of sustainability, social and ecological justice (e.g. [Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020](#); [Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020](#)). Most considerations tend to focus on recovery strategies, challenges of over-tourism and high-carbon travels and the necessity of a global shift. Reflections on the origin of the COVID-19 crisis seem to be lacking. As in other recent epidemic outbreaks, e.g. the swine flu in 2009, the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic stems from animal sources, more precisely from the use of animals for food ([Wu, Chen, & Chan, 2020](#)). This research note argues that reflections on animal-derived food are relevant to a re-consideration of food tourism.

This note starts by describing the link between animal-derived food and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) concerning health (SDG3) and climate action (SDG13), and reflecting on the ethical dimension of sustainability. It continues by commenting on the possibility to study food in tourism adopting an ecofeminist perspective. It concludes with the identification of three research areas for future studies.

Animal-derived food and sustainability

The use of animals for food has important implications for the health and climate action SDGs. The case of the COVID-19 pandemic offers a good example of the challenges relative to potential diseases. Zoonoses, like the one derived by COVID-19, can have severe effects on the sector, for example in terms of travel restrictions, and jeopardise tourists' health ([Jamal & Budke, 2020](#)). Although not always foodborne, zoonoses as well as other diseases from animal ingredients, for example *Escherichia coli* infections, can emerge due to low hygienic standards and raw/undercooked meals, and be transmitted to tourists ([Shahidi, 2020](#); [Sofos & Geornaras, 2010](#)).

Still with regard to health, the consumption of some animal-derived food can be associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular diseases and cancer ([Abid, Cross, & Sinha, 2014](#)). Obviously, all tourists eat, and some foods can have a central role in the tourism experience. For example, broadly used in the tourism marketing of the region of origin, the Parma ham belongs to the World

E-mail address: giovanna.bertella@uit.no.

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Health Organisation Group 1 of carcinogenicity (i.e. extensive and reliable epidemiological studies have concluded that there is sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity in humans from eating processed meat) (WHO, 2020). Thus, consuming some animal-derived foods while travelling can be qualified as an unhealthy tourism practice.

More challenges relative to the use of animal-derived food concerns the extensive use of resources that this food usually requires, and the destructive effects of modern animal farming on the environment (Westhoek et al., 2014). Considering various elements, such as raw materials and transport, Gössling, Garrod, Aall, Hille, and Peeters (2011) indicate some management practices to reduce the environmental impact of the food service in hospitality. Such practices include sometimes limiting ('Buy less beef') and sometimes encouraging ('Buy more pork') the use of animal-derived food. These recommendations are partly in line with two recent studies according to which some animal-derived foods, first of all beef, are among the major sources of greenhouse gas emissions (Ritchie & Roser, 2020), and the environmental sustainable diet is constituted mainly by whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes (Willett et al., 2019).

One might argue that some of these challenges concern mainly the use by the tourism sector of food from industrial systems. With regard to this, it might be important to note that the tourism sector is growing at a considerable speed (UNWTO, 2020). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that most destinations rely on the industrial food system to feed tourists, and some also on imports. If the growth of the tourism sector will continue, the idea of tourism destinations depending only on local nonindustrial food systems is unrealistic.

Another objection to the considerations about the environmental unsustainability of diets relying considerably on animal-derived food might concern the possible compensation in terms of socio-cultural benefits and regional development (e.g. Higgins-Desbiolles & Wijesinghe, 2019; Sims, 2009). This objection can be related to the dominant way of framing food in tourism derived from an understanding of sustainability heavily influenced by the *Our Common Future* report (WCED, 1987). Some scholars argue that this work presents a limitation: the lack of recognition about the difference between natural resources and other assets (Morandín-Ahuerma, Contreras-Hernández, Ayala-Ortiz, & Pérez-Maqueo, 2019). What this criticism highlights is the necessity to view the economy, the tourism sector included, as a social subsystem of the biosphere on which all communities depend. In other words, environmental sustainability is the foundation of any type of sustainability.

The latter consideration leads to some reflections about the underlying anthropocentric worldview of sustainability and its ethical dimension. According to the dominant understanding of sustainability, everything that is not human, including nature and animals, is a resource that can be managed, strategically and responsibly, in order to guarantee a good standard of living for future (human) generations. It is only recently that some tourism scholars have critically discussed the use of animals in food tourism from an ethical perspective (e.g. Bertella, 2018; Kline, 2018; Yudina & Fennell, 2013). This can be viewed as a starting point to broaden the meaning of sustainability, and in particular to include considerations about the moral obligations and duties between human and nonhuman sentient beings.

So, where do we go from here?

This research note proposes a way to frame the study of food in tourism inspired by ecofeminism, a philosophical perspective that critically analyses our position in the world in relation to other humans, animals, and nature (Adams & Gruen, 2014). According to ecofeminist Greta Gaard, food and climate change challenges can't be solved adopting the masculinist worldview of dominance of (some) humans on the nature (Gaard, 2015). This implies the necessity of radical changes in the way we think about ourselves, as individuals and world citizens and in relation to nonhuman entities, and in the way we act. This research note challenges scholars to explore food in tourism in such terms, more specifically focusing on the transformative potential of food experiences and investigating sustainable food systems that acknowledge the relevance of human and non-human stakeholders.

Tourism experiences can be transformative and encourage tourists to change their habits and, eventually, promote societal changes (Lean, 2009; Smith & Reisinger, 2013). Thus, it can be advanced that tourists choosing to eat healthily and sustainably during their holidays might find the inspiration to do so also when returned home. This inspiration can come from a conscious choice by the tourism practitioners who design and promote 'green' food offerings and engage in other sustainable actions (e.g. Miller, Merrilees, & Coghlan, 2015). More studies are needed to explore the design of this type of food tourism experiences and their possible contribution to societal changes.

Food production has received scant attention by tourism scholars and the existent studies tend to adopt an anthropocentric view. Bertella and Vidmar (2019) describe a futuristic scenario where tourism entrepreneurs producing vegetables in innovative labs become the new role models for travellers. The authors discuss the implications of such scenario for indigenous communities and wildlife, suggesting that the foodservice of future tourism should develop not only innovatively but also responsibly in relation to the environment, the involved human communities and the animals. A similar responsible innovation perspective is desirable for future studies about food tourism.

It seems that few tourism scholars recognise that the access to a nutritious sustainable diet is one of the greatest challenges for a better future, and even fewer relate such reflections to a renewed understanding of sustainability and to the link between food consumption and production (Ellis, Park, Kim, & Yeoman, 2018). Yeoman and McMahon-Beatte (2016) propose a utopian vision about food tourism as a project shared among communities, producers, tourists and politicians. In the same line, this research note concludes by advancing a view about a scholarship that re-thinks the use of animal-derived food in tourism in the name of values related to global human health, environmental protection and animal wellbeing. Important research areas that have emerged in the discussion presented in this note and could contribute to explore strategies towards the SDG3 and SDG13 are:

- less/non-anthropocentric and more inclusive understandings of sustainability;
- transformative food experiences that can enhance healthy and ethical eating practices;
- approaches to food tourism that include innovative, 'green' and safe food production both at the macro and micro level.

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