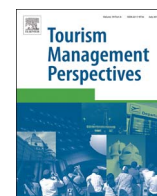




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Sustainable tourism: Sustaining tourism or something more?

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A B S T R A C T

Tourism today has a problem. It is addicted to growth, which is incompatible with sustainability goals. Despite three decades discussing pathways to sustainable tourism, tourism authorities continue to promote tourism growth despite the ecological and social limits of living on a finite planet. This article argues that tourism must be understood and managed with a wider context of sustainability. Additionally, strategic approaches to transitioning to a sufficiency approach to tourism and leisure is essential if sustainability is to be secured. Recommendations include: transforming the United Nations World Tourism Organization into an Office for Sustainable Mobilities, creating a global Tourism Wealth Fund, fostering diverse approaches to tourism strategies for development and regulating and managing tourism for a better balanced accounting for fairness, ecological limits, human benefit and sustainable futures. The growth fetish is resulting in tourism killing tourism. An approach focused on sustaining tourism is not a sustainable form of tourism send proof to Editor as well as author.

Tourism today has a problem. It is addicted to growth and may need to be placed in a 12-step programme of recovery, much like those created by Alcoholics Anonymous. Following this metaphor, the first step is admitting the problem. Check any government tourism website, almost without exception, and this point will be illustrated. For instance, my own country Australia has a “Tourism 2020” strategy, that focuses government and industry on a growth strategy targeting “... more than \$115 billion in overnight spend by 2020 (up from \$70 billion in 2009)” (Tourism Australia, 2017). With a mantra of growth, this strategy harnesses these players in a programme to grow demand, reduce the “regulatory burden” and increase transport access and infrastructure to grow visitor numbers. Almost gone are the days when tourism authorities might support tourism directed to education, social well-being, inclusion and other non-econometric goals. This is a timely moment to reconsider the possibilities for sustainable tourism in this United Nations declared International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development.

Before arguing this position, it is necessary first to revisit the basics of definitions. Our current engagement with “sustainability” began with the release of the document *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987); it defined sustainable development as “satisfying the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (WCED, 1987, ch 2, sec. 1, para. 1). A critical reading of this statement indicates a great deal of ambiguity in this concept and it has been problematic ever since. It contains an oxymoronic base as the term “sustainable” implies some form of limits while the term

“development” emphasises human use to meet human needs. It is also very anthropocentric as the sustaining of finite resources is for human use, ignoring the claims of other species and whole ecologies that are the concern of those with a more bio-centrally-focused worldview. As a result, the concept of sustainability has been very malleable in the interests of those benefiting from a status quo strategy. Monbiot (2012) argued that since 1992, world leaders have massaged the concept of sustainability to become “sustainable development”, which then became “sustainable growth” and arriving today at “sustained growth”. Monbiot (2012) asserted: “if sustainability means anything, it is surely the opposite of sustained growth. Sustained growth on a finite planet is the essence of unsustainability”. This is the context enabling tourism’s growth addiction.

It was not long after the Brundtland Report that the tourism industry engaged with sustainability embarking on the sustainable tourism journey. Following on from the trajectory of sustainable development outlined above, one has to ask if sustainable tourism is more about sustaining tourism and less about sustainable development? Butler’s classic definition illustrates this; he asserted a definition of sustainable tourism as “tourism which is in a form which can maintain its viability in an area for an indefinite period of time” (1999, p. 36). He differentiated this concept from “tourism in the context of sustainable development”, which he described as:

Tourism which is developed and maintained in the area (community, environment) in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter

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the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and wellbeing of other activities and processes.

Butler, 1999, p. 35.

Butler's distinction here is a valuable foundation for understanding that efforts directed at sustaining tourism might not guide us in a direction of sustainable development, much less long-term sustainability. This matters.

As tourism advances around the globe into the most inhospitable habitats, commodifying the most unusual products and experiences, becoming almost a mono-crop for a large number of tourism dependent nations and enmeshing armies of labour in low-wage, seasonal and vulnerable working conditions, one suspects that sustaining tourism is the driver of tourism policy, planning and management today. Illustrative of this are the luxury cruise ships and fly-overs of Antarctica that show no shame at profiting from the "last chance tourism" impulse. The poverty porn of slum tourism and the child exploitation found in orphanage tourism experiences reveal a moral deficiency in this consumerist, profit-driven world of tourism, allowing rich tourists to try to exculpate the guilt of their being amongst the privileged who can tour others' poverty. Worse still is how communities seeking development are pushed into a tourism-dependent economy in their attempts to try to garner some opportunities for themselves in a global trading system geared to their continued under-development. In the process, they serve up their people to be the docile workforce so that tourists can enjoy inexpensive holidays in these imposed tourism playgrounds and tourism multinationals can extract wealth as a result.

The fact that tourism is not operating towards sustainability should be apparent with even a cursory glance. "Overtourism" is leading the headlines of 2017. Places as diverse as Venice, Dubrovnik, Barcelona and Bali known as holiday icons are clearly bursting at the seams and their communities are charting towards the higher zones of Doxey's Index of Irritation. The status quo clearly cannot hold and the leading conundrum the global community faces is how to move away from the neoliberal addiction to growth. Unfortunately, we are living out a wicked problem as powerful interests align resisting the change needed.

The structural context set by powerful corporations, subservient governments and consumerised citizenry needs to be understood. Politicians now think in short term election cycles and have become fetishist to growth, seeking corporate funding for their re-election campaigns and voter support for the jobs and growth they continually promise to deliver. Corporations have demanded in repayment for their largesse a reduction of barriers to business, elimination of "red tape" and a business-friendly investment environment; this means a hollowing out of the role of governments to use policy, legislation and regulations to govern for the public good, longer-term wellbeing of society and holistic sustainability.

There are particular manifestations in the tourism sphere. Tourism ministries have become fixated on marketing agendas, turning away from any commitments previously held of tourism, recreation and leisure for social cohesion, inclusivity and well-being. What were once government ministries filled with public servants, are now statutory corporations dominated by marketing, public relations and communications experts (with none of the longevity in their roles in comparison to their public service predecessors). In this context, the goals of their tourism strategies are succinctly stated in dollar, growth and employment metrics. In such circumstances, economic sustainability trumps all other aspects of sustainability. While references to sustainable tourism may appear sporadically in their corporate publications, whole paragraphs and pages outline growth strategies and creating a business-friendly environment.

Another pillar of this system is the compromised consumer, who has largely abandoned the responsibilities of citizenship and bought into the culture-ideology of consumerism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). In the commodified lifeworld that has accompanied neoliberal globalisation,

people increasingly identify through their consumer choices and eschew public participation for consumption. Such a situation makes it possible for the ceaseless growth in holidays and transnational flights despite the growing discomfort with the limits to growth which periodically confront us (through images of emaciated polar bears in our social media feeds, for instance). The best we can muster is a carbon offset here and a charity donation there; we cannot be brought on board any serious efforts to turn back the neoliberal growth agenda yet because we enjoy these accoutrements of the good life.

Of course, we must confront the role of tourism academia in this. We are relinquishing our roles in pressing the industry and governing authorities to be more responsible and accountable. This is largely the result of the corporatisation of universities, but a few specific developments are worthy of mention. We are becoming ahistorical and uncritical. I say the former as our reference lists and course lists are culled of publications greater than ten years old (thus potentially removing Butler's, 1999 classic work from this reference list), following an argument that only the recent is relevant. However, a good deal of the analysis on responsible tourism and biting critiques of tourism occurred before the 2000s (e.g. Wheeler, 1991). The absence of criticality grows as corporatisation takes over. Universities are being weaned from the public purse and forced to seek grants for "industry-relevant" research from the private sector as neoliberalism assaults our ivory towers. We cannot bite the hand we now rely on to feed us.

Couple these things with the wider assaults on sources of knowledge ranging from scientists addressing environmental degradation, and climate change in particular, and accusations of "fake news" levelled at the mainstream media, we have arrived at a situation where the status quo becomes largely unassailable. The long-term damage that this emasculating of all of the authorities that should be frank and fearless in speaking truth to power is the biggest threat to sustainability that we face.

Of course, after years of public discourse of sustainability we cannot walk away from responsible rhetoric altogether so we have seen public relations agendas through these years of responsible tourism, corporate social responsibility (CSR) in tourism, pro-poor tourism, poverty alleviation in tourism, and now green growth. But these are often smokescreens for conducting business as usual, only implementing sustainability measures that are at a micro level and that actually can pay off in cost savings for tourism corporations (e.g. energy saving devices, waste reduction and water use minimisation). One only needs to look to the marketing of Airbnb as a pioneer of the "sharing economy" when cities around the world are condemning it for its damaging impacts on their communities to realise marketing spin places a great distance between CSR rhetoric and sustainability realities. That such jurisdictions are now proposing to implement much needed regulations suggests that when the outcomes of allowing corporations too much laissez faire freedoms become too dire, they will be forced to react. Moreover, this is only a piecemeal approach and ignores the larger problem of relying on corporations to direct our futures through a vision premised on growth and more growth.

Let us be clear: academics both within tourism and without are asserting that a growth ideology is not compatible with long-term sustainability. For instance, Ward, Sutton, Werner, Costanza, and Mohr (2016) have shown growth cannot be decoupled from environmental impacts and concluded:

If GDP growth as a societal goal is unsustainable, then it is ultimately necessary for nations and the world to transition to a steady or declining GDP scenario...We argue that now is the time to re-cognize the biophysical limits, and to begin the overdue task of re-orienting society around a more achievable and satisfying set of goals than simply growing forever (p. 12).

Hall (2009) and Higgins-Desbiolles (2010) have opened the argument for this in tourism specifically, calling for de-growing tourism, a sufficiency mind-set and a steady-state strategy, already evidenced in

phenomena such as slow tourism, holidaying at or closer to home and fostering conscious consumerism. Arguably, Bhutan has modelled one approach with its Gross National Happiness strategy seeking a controlled form of development and tourism that attempts to secure ecological and socio-cultural sustainability. More recently, Copenhagen has provided another approach with its campaign urging tourists to live like a local.

Where should we be heading? We must understand and manage tourism in terms of the wider systems within which it operates. If a neoliberal paradigm promoting endless growth is the dominating ideology that motivates governments and industry, efforts to make tourism more sustainable will be undermined. It is also important to be clear that tourism is a significant player in the unsustainability of the current growth model and the culture-ideology of consumerism that underpins it (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). Tourism also stands to be gravely undermined by the impacts of unsustainable growth strategies, including global warming, exceeding carrying capacity, concentration of wealth accruing to some and precarity of futures for others. The loss of coastal environments, the crime-ridden and unstable “destinations”, the extreme weather patterns and devastated nature that are created by these dynamics are all unlikely to support a thriving tourism sector.

What are we to do?

The transitions away from the growth fetish require a metaphysical questioning of our purpose and meaning as sentient, conscious and responsible beings. Tourism in fact represents a microcosm of the existential questions we are facing. On the one hand, tourism can be used for selfish, individualistic, hedonistic and exploitative purposes and on the other, it is one of the facilitators of education, cross-cultural engagement, ecological appreciation and spiritual development. In allowing the business side of tourism to eclipse the social capacities of tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006), we have done a grave disservice to ourselves and allowed tourism to be hijacked by those that seek to drive it for narrow agendas. One key to sustainable tourism is reclaiming tourism for its higher purposes (contrary to the position of Butcher, 2002).

Practically, we must position tourism into a structural management of a mobilities perspective. When potentially millions of people are going to be forced to move as political, economic and environmental refugees, justifying the facilitation of movement of pleasure-seeking tourists without accounting for their environmental and other impacts will become untenable. The United Nations World Tourism Organization is a sign of the imbalanced priorities. The United Nations is a body enabling international cooperation for the highest priorities of humankind. Arguably the UNWTO is the only specialised agency of the UN dedicated to fostering a commercial sector and being comprised in membership largely of powerful multinationals driving tourism's growth agendas. If sustainability is our goal, the UNWTO should be transitioned to a UN Office for Sustainable Mobilities ensuring that people are enabled to transit across borders in a coordinated way that manages mobility within a balanced accounting for fairness, ecological limits, human benefit and sustainable futures.

In working towards meaningful sustainability, it would be helpful if diverse cultural views were integrated into our planning. The example of Bhutan indicates that diverse cultures offer diverse approaches to sustainable development and sustainable tourism. Neoliberalism has been imposed as a mono-cultural approach to growth-led development. Due to globalisation of trade and finance and the power of multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, a one-size-fits-all model has been pressed on countries around the world and the imposition of free trade regimes like the General Agreement on Trade in Services allows little autonomy in national approaches to development. The Islamic world shows a way that a different worldview can offer a different cultural approach to finance, banking, development and social welfare. Countries in Latin America have offered explorations of alternative economies and have seen workers take-over workplaces to create economic structures that

support the majority rather than an elite minority. Additionally, Indigenous values are offering Indigenous communities pathways to building sustainable futures based on their lifeways and principles of the relatedness of all living beings. Just as strong ecosystems are founded on biodiversity, strong human systems are arguably built on eco-socio-cultural diversity.

A programme of planning for a sufficiency approach to tourism is essential. We might consider creative possibilities and embrace radical thinking. This might include a principle of subsidiarity, a term I propose to describe a requirement for responsible use of holidays so that travel that needs to be done at great distances can be allowed only rarely in a lifetime and additionally stipulating some measure of returns on this investment must be made. For instance, we might prioritise the travel of the younger generations who can use it in the development of their education and experience. Simultaneously, we should demand our lives in our home communities be made better so that we do not require the hedonistic escapism of holidays so frequently (e.g. ensuring good working conditions, vibrant communities and healthy environments to access and enjoy). The UN Office for Sustainable Mobilities could oversee a Tourism Wealth Fund funding and enabling tourism's capacity as a social force.

In concluding this opinion piece, I will repeat what I argued in 2010: “sustainable tourism necessitates a clear-eyed engagement with notions of limits that the current culture of consumerism and pro-growth ideology precludes” (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010, p. 125). We have allowed the tourism phenomenon to be hijacked in the interests of a few, forgetting the beneficial purposes for tourism that were found in the days of the Grand Tour or the spiritual journeys of great religious pilgrimages. These few have pushed a growth ideology that serves their purposes but have us in the unenviable position where tourism is killing tourism. Last chance tourism is emblematic of a death instinct in tourism. If we desire a future that is sustainable and we want to pass on to our children the glorious things we currently enjoy, we must get real. Sustaining tourism is not a sustainable form of tourism.

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