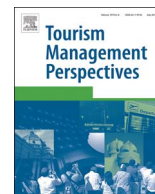


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Tourism Management Perspectives

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tmp

Will sustainable tourism research be sustainable in the future? An opinion piece

Bernard Lane

University of Bristol, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Sustainable tourism research
Multi-disciplinarity
Research journals

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development of sustainable tourism, and sustainable tourism research. It notes that sustainable tourism was created, in Central Europe, largely by academics. Now a global concept, sustainable tourism research has progressed to a Second Generation stage, with new and complex multi-disciplinary research areas exploring major holistic issues and opportunities. Twenty research areas are listed that need urgent attention for sustainable tourism to become an implemented norm. The paper goes on to examine five major challenges that could endanger that progress: its complexity, the need for new working practices to create multi-disciplinary research teams, the evolution of improved research journals, changes in the relationship of Universities to tourism research, and better links between industry, policy makers and researchers. Greater public, political and industry wide appreciation of what sustainable tourism means, offers and requires is needed: a Chair in the Public Understanding of Sustainable Tourism is needed perhaps?

1. In the beginning...

The concept of sustainable tourism was a child of the exciting 1970s and 1980s. It was conceived as a reaction to tourism's rapid growth (in terms of volume, and in its geographic coverage), in the post war period. It originated, not in the English speaking world, but in Central Europe, amongst German, Italian, and French speakers. It was not a child of the tourist industry, or of government policy makers, but of academics and other commentators. That was both a strength and a weakness. For German speakers, a vital reference is [Krippendorf, Zimmer and Glauber \(1988\)](#). English speakers should read [Krippendorf \(1987\)](#). They reflect different communication styles, but both are campaigning documents, seeking to make the interaction between tourism, tourists and the world – natural, man-made and cultural – a better experience for all concerned. They capture the *Zeitgeist* – the spirit – of the times, which indirectly owed much to the *Limits to Growth* discussion sparked by the creation of the Club of Rome in 1968 – see [Meadows, Meadows, Randers and Behrens \(1972\)](#). Discussion of Sustainable Development was first given full international recognition by the Brundtland Report ([WCED, 1987](#)). The word sustainable/sustainability is now in common use.

But the early campaigning years lacked research findings, a problem which led the forerunners of Channel View Publications to launch the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (JOST) in 1993, to provide a platform for research into sustainable tourism. That journal rose to become one of the top 5 tourism research journals by 2009, (it had been accepted onto

the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) in 2008 (see [Bramwell & Lane, 2008](#)). Many other journals also publish papers on sustainable tourism but JOST, by focussing on that subject, and because its editors adopted active management policies, became the market leader. Several thousand papers have now been submitted to JOST: across the whole journal world, approximately 2000 papers on aspects of sustainable tourism have now been published.

The early stages of sustainable tourism research saw the subject defined ([Bramwell & Lane, 1993](#)) and a series of basic topics researched and papers published by tourism academics, geographers, sociologists and economists. That first generation of sustainable tourism research was analysed by [Lu and Nepal \(2009\)](#) and discussed by [Lane \(2009\)](#). The years 2008–2018 saw research enter a second generation stage, and it is progress in that second stage which could, paradoxically, call into question the future of the subject unless there are radical developments.

Second generation sustainable tourism research moved into more sophisticated and demanding research territory. And it exposed the weaknesses of the trajectories of existing research. But it did move a little closer to suggesting solutions to tourism's problems.

2. The Top Twenty

At least 20 real and potential growth areas in second generation sustainable tourism research can be listed. The list below draws on the author's 25 years of editing the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, and over 50 years working as trainer, amateur and consultant with

E-mail address: Bernard.Lane@tiscali.co.uk.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2017.12.001>

Received 2 December 2017; Accepted 4 December 2017
2211-9736/ © 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

communities, policy makers, NGOs, and tourism based or related companies of many kinds.

3. The list

1. Partnership creation and management: design and implementation issues.
2. Governance Issues is Tourism ungovernable? If not – how can it be governed for sustainability?
3. Protected Areas as Sustainable Governance prototypes.
4. Destination Management.
5. Visitor Experience Planning.
6. Financial and Taxation Instruments for Sustainable Tourism.
7. Climate Change Issues.
8. Behavioural Change: is it possible, if so, how?
9. Scenario Planning and Futures.
10. Transformational Tourism, in an era of stressed and ageing people.
11. Slow Tourism Implementation.
12. City Tourism: the need for a Charter, Protocols and Best Practice.
13. Markets & Marketing: another case for a Charter, Protocols and Best Practice.
14. Data Development, and Data Handling: Big Data, Data Sources, and the various issues raised over the years by Sara Dolnicar et al. (which are too many to include in the reference list).
15. Social Media.
16. De-growth: can it work and if so, how?
17. Social Enterprise rather than Community Enterprise?
18. Indigenous Tourism: is sustainable tourism a valid tool for social and cultural conservation and regeneration
19. The unresearched roles of print and broadcast Media
20. Understanding Business and Businesses: consultancy and overcoming the academic taboos of dealing with reality.

One overriding fact arises from considering the Top Twenty. Almost all of these areas are complex and demanding. Tourism in general is a complex assembly industry involving numerous independent stakeholders. Sustainable tourism is extremely complex, because it requires a holistic approach, that includes business, markets, ideologies, environments, societies, cultures and the politics of control – plus the vagaries of fast changing fashion trends. The pioneers of sustainable tourism research had little idea of the size and complexity of the subject that they were working on. Some commentators who did realise that – if only vaguely – often mocked the subject. But many of us, perhaps like the space scientists assessing the solar system(s) who will never undertake space travel, have continued the quest to understand and tame the tourism beast. It presents challenges that – if not addressed – could relegate sustainable tourism to real life irrelevance. Dwyer (2018) notes, quite independently of this paper, the pressing need for tourism paradigm change. Larry Dwyer was trained as an economist, but more importantly, as a philosopher. He makes an interesting case.

4. The challenges

There are five major challenge areas that future sustainable tourism researchers need to cope with, and possibly to overcome, if they are to become relevant and to survive. They need to grapple with complexity, to change their working practices, to somehow encourage changes within the journal world, to change the thinking of many Universities and to learn to work with industry and policy makers much more effectively.

4.1. Complexity

The increasing complexity of sustainable tourism research stems in part from the large numbers of relevant research papers now published and accessible, providing a cornucopia of evidence, opinions, theories

and case studies. But the really major complexities come from the need to work with so many other disciplines from applied economics to psychology, anthropology to health studies, politics to botany and zoology, marketing to customer service, the conservation of nature and the conservation of the built environment, aeronautical engineering to heritage interpretation, media studies, and of course the many branches of tourism studies. Put the word “Polymath” into Google. And then dream? Are there many sustainable tourism researchers who are polymaths, or who even know many people from other disciplines well enough to work with them?

4.2. Working practices

Traditionally, social science researchers – which is what most sustainable tourism researchers probably are – worked alone or with a colleague or perhaps two colleagues. They enjoyed being lone rangers, and that had advantages: they need not compromise, they could innovate without fear of ridicule – until they came to submit their work to a peer reviewed journal. But the complexity of the subject area means that most researchers ought to work in multi-disciplinary teams. And those teams could, perhaps should, be large and multi-institutional. Email, Skype, and low cost travel, have made team working possible on a grand scale, as most science and medical researchers know. It is not, however, *easy*. There is a need for co-ordinators, mentors and goodwill. The applied biologists of Europe realised the need for multi-national, multi-experienced teams and in 2009 set up Alter-Net to assist the process of team creation. It enables institutions from 18 countries to share the goal of *integrating their research capability* in order to: assess changes in biodiversity, analyse the effect of those changes on ecosystem services and inform the public and policy makers about this at a European scale. See <http://www.alter-net.info/about-alter-net>. Could sustainable tourism researchers create similar organizations across the world, perhaps using sub-themes or using a series of whole continent groups?

4.3. The research journals

Back in the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth century, research journals were the property of learned societies or of Universities. They were amateur in some respects. By 2018, they are largely tradable commodities, the properties of large multi-national corporates, who are able to fund useful smart web sites and global distribution systems. They owe allegiance to share holders who seek high returns, rather than to high science. They have corporate goals. Their executives rarely read papers, write papers, or edit papers. Neither editors nor reviewers are trained. Editorial boards rarely if ever meet to determine policies. Editors typically do their work – for very little money – as a part time occupation, often late at night. But those editors determine which papers, and which areas of research are encouraged and developed. Editors need to be risk takers, mentors and takers of others' advice, as well as polymaths! And decision making in evolving, complex and contested subject areas like sustainable tourism is especially important.

Many of these issues are common to most subjects. But sustainable tourism is especially impacted because it is changing from being reactive to be pro-creative, and innovative. Its absence of support from the industry and public sector policy makers make it especially dependent on research journals that can be sensitive to its needs and risk-taking, not simply a processing system for academic work.

Journals are driven by download and citation statistics. High downloads justify journal purchases to librarians; high citations attract “good” and well known authors – (and many others too!). Together these metrics have a curiously conservative effect on research. Existing well researched topics tend to gain high citations, because large numbers of people work on them. Innovative subjects or methodologies by definition have fewer researchers, and so score fewer citations. Any

PhD student working on a “new” area takes at least 3 years before they get a paper accepted: the commonly used SSCI 3 year index thus reduces citations of innovative research, effectively putting the brakes on fulfilling the Top 20 List given earlier.

There are two ways that journals could encourage innovation and more sustainable tourism. Currently, papers are submitted on an ad hoc basis to a range of journals. It would be unfair to describe the acceptance/rejection process as a lottery, but there is an element of chance – ranging from the number of papers that a journal is receiving at a particular time, to the personal interests and predilections of editors, and especially to the thoughtfulness and knowledge (*or otherwise*) of the chosen reviewers. All experienced editors should know most of their reviewers, and know that some are more critical than others, some more far seeing than others, and in some sub areas, reviewers are rather conservative.

Long term relationships between editors and authors that could encourage the long term subject development are rare. They could encourage forms of nepotism or patronage, or they could encourage healthy integrated working relationships. These issues are rarely discussed in the Social Sciences. Science journals do discuss them – and many have adjudication committees to assess problematic decisions.

A second way forward could be for Editors to commission papers, and whole Special Issues, to expedite innovative and/or under researched areas. Special Issues have been a favourite technique employed by JOST, and while papers sought were subject to review, authors felt more secure because they had been approached. Twenty-six special issues were published between 1993 and 2017. They have been well read and well cited, but Special Issues require considerably editorial time inputs, and as editor workloads rise, are hard to justify.

4.4. The Universities

The Universities employ most sustainable tourism researchers. Just as research journals are now managed according to their financial viability, so are Universities. Most academics are now assessed according to research outputs, typically number of papers published in SSCI journals. That encourages material/data slicing to maximise publications: large numbers of simple papers also reduces the risk of rejection. Universities are in effect discouraging innovation and risk taking. Their short term assessments of their staff can also discourage large complex and multi-disciplinary research projects which take a long term view of research and publications. Scholarship with meaning needs time and reflection – and entails risks.

4.5. Working with the tourism industry and with policy makers

There are reviewers who criticise some papers on sustainable tourism because they suspect that the material being used comes from a consultancy report, and not from “pure research”. Many academics are uneasy about working with the industry: They have little practical experience, and fear being somehow tainted by commercialisation. Few academics are asked to work with policy makers, perhaps because policy makers fear working with academics, for political reasons, or because they distrust academics' ability to maintain confidentiality. For whatever reasons, academic inputs into tourism businesses, and public sector policy and regulation or governance are rare. Some journals do not encourage “practical relevance”. *Annals of Tourism Research*, a top journal, publishing many sustainable tourism papers, headlines its web site as follows:

“*Annals of Tourism Research* is a social sciences journal focusing upon the academic perspectives of tourism. While striving for a balance of theory and application, *Annals* is ultimately dedicated to developing theoretical constructs.”

However, the industry is also implicated in this problems: some companies make it difficult for academics to publish results from

consultancy work that might give away “commercial secrets”. The public sector can be equally secretive, as researchers in Australia discovered when they published, in JOST, a comparison of a two district councils with contrasting sustainable tourism policies: the less effective council threatened legal action.

Working with the industry, with social enterprises, with public sector policy makers, with NGOs, and with communities is essential if academics are to fully understand how sustainable tourism could be implemented. It is also a potential way of raising research money, especially in neoliberal economies. It can improve undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, and help graduates' job prospects. Critically, it can help develop a market for post experience courses, as part of a life-long learning programme: critical because, with declining birth rates, universities will run out of young people to teach, while not refreshing the growing number of those who, in the future, could be in employment until their 70th year.

There is a best practice example to draw inspiration from. [Higuchi and Yamanaka \(2017\)](#) offer a splendid example of academic involvement in a tourism business, based in Japan, which highlights the central requirements that both sides need to recognise: the practical value of long term embeddedness, trust and co-creation. Both sides need to understand each other, and each others' needs and strengths and realise that the research process will take time. [Higuchi and Yamanaka \(2017\)](#) is a must read choice.

5. Conclusions

Will sustainable tourism research be sustainable as an academic pursuit in the future? Probably yes. But that question is too simplistic. Will sustainable tourism research help sustainable tourism towards real life implementation, and be a relevant and well funded force within sustainable development, and the conservation of the environment, societies and culture? The answer is much less certain. Sustainable tourism was a child born of academics. That academic parentage now has to mature and change if its child is to become a working adult, striving not just for a concept but for a better world.

We look back, and can learn from the past. Many of sustainable tourism's founding fathers were good communicators, using a range of public media to promote their ideas. We need to re-ignite that spirit, and their skills. If large multi-disciplinary research groups can be created, they need media skills. They need to understand social media, be able to out tweet the opposition, and look and sound good on TV and radio. That may not be enough. The University of Oxford, (UK), has a chair in the Public Understanding of Science, “to communicate science to the public without, in doing so, losing those elements of scholarship which constitute the essence of true understanding”. The University of Cambridge, (UK), has a chair in the Public Understanding of Risk. (See also the web site of Professor Tanya Byron: <http://www.professortanyabyron.com/>.)

Tourism is a multi-billion dollar industry, employing over 100 million people directly, and generating c. 10% of global GDP (<https://www.wttc.org/mission/>). It needs the guidance that independent thinkers can bring to make its operations increasingly sustainable. There is a case for a Chair in the Public Understanding of Sustainable Tourism, to build industry, public and political support for this remarkable subject area. That chair, perhaps backed by an advisory council, could help to bring academics together with the industry and public sector policy makers to encourage the development of new research models and programmes, and behavioural change by all parties.

References

- Bramwell, B., & Lane, B. (1993). Sustainable tourism: An evolving global approach. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 1(1), 1–5.
- Bramwell, B., & Lane, B. (2008). Priorities in Sustainable Tourism Research. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 16(1), 1–4.

- Dwyer, L. (2018). Saluting while the ship sinks: The necessity for tourism paradigm change. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2017.1308372>.
- Higuchi, Y., & Yamanaka, Y. (2017). Knowledge sharing between academic researchers and tourism practitioners: A Japanese study of the practical value of embeddedness, trust and co-creation. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 25(10), 1456–1473.
- Krippendorff, J. (1987). *The Holiday Makers: Understanding the impact of leisure and travel*. London: Heinemann.
- Krippendorff, J., Zimmer, P., & Glauber, H. (1988). *Für einen andern Tourismus (towards an alternative tourism)*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Lane, B. (2009). 30 years of sustainable tourism: Drivers, progress, problems – And the future. In S. Gossling, M. C. Hall, S. Page, & D. Weaver (Eds.). *Sustainable tourism futures: Perspectives on systems, restructuring and innovations* (pp. 19–32). London: Routledge.
- Lu, J., & Nepal, S. K. (2009). Sustainable tourism research: An analysis of papers published in the Journal of Sustainable Tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 17(1), 5–16.
- Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D. L., Randers, J., & Behrens, W. W., III (1972). *The Limits to Growth*. New York: Universe Books.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987). *The Brundtland*

Report. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Bernard Lane was trained as a geographer, and worked on rural regeneration, rural and sustainable tourism, architectural conservation and heritage management at the University of Liverpool, (UK), University College Dublin, (Ireland), the University of Bristol (UK) and Leeds Beckett University (UK). In 1992, with Bill Bramwell, and the forerunner of Channel View Publications, he founded the Journal of Sustainable Tourism. He now works as a consultant, mentor, educator and speaker on a global basis.