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Tourism policy and governance: Quo vadis?

Marion Joppe

School of Hospitality, Food and Tourism Management, University of Guelph, Macdonald Stewart Hall, #306, 50 Stone Rd. E., Guelph, ON N1G 2W1, Canada

A B S T R A C T

This is an opinion piece about research into tourism policy and governance to date and where future research should be undertaken. There is much greater need for policy relevant research that is clear about common definitions of terminology, adopts more consistent methodologies in data collection, challenges the dominant pro-growth rhetoric, and is written in a style accessible to policymakers. Researchers have long argued for a more meaningful role for host communities, but in a time of rapidly increasing tourism and the threat of overtourism in many destination "hot spots", it is no longer an option to stifle their voices.

Decisions related to goal-determination and the selection of methods to achieve the goal are referred to as *policies*. Although the term generally refers to a decision or action, it actually can also be a negative decision or even a non-action/non-decision. Policies are established in any kind of organization, but when we refer to "tourism policy", we usually mean some form of "public policy" which relates specifically to government decisions at any level from local to international. Governance, on the other hand, is how organizations deal with reaching these decisions. So, while governance is a fairly straightforward concept, albeit with many challenges, tourism policy is not, largely because the term "policy" is very fuzzy and tourism is a social construct that refers to a specific behavior: that of traveling to and staying in places outside one's usual environment. This behavior is controlled by policies, legislation and regulations written for many other purposes, such as controlling or facilitating the flow of capital and investments, the transportation of passengers and goods, worker rights, safety and security, or environmental protection. And that's where the trouble starts, because really, the appropriate development of tourism is highly dependent on decision-makers who have little regard for or knowledge of, tourism.

1. The role of the public sector in tourism and its analysis

The public sector – composed of elected and appointed officials as well as bureaucrats – plays a key role in both fostering and controlling the movement of tourists, as well as the activities of the businesses and organizations that provide the goods and services they need to complete their trip. The objectives pursued are to maximize particularly the economic benefits of this highly fragmented and dynamic activity, while minimizing potential problems for society, the environment, consumers, and businesses. Every aspect of its intervention (or non-intervention) is the result of policy decisions, most of which are made in branches of government or departments not directly concerned with tourism. These policies denote the formal position of the government in question on broader areas of concern, such as the safety, security, health and education of its citizens, and are the result of shifts in values and political ideology as government priorities and economic conditions change. Tourism is rarely at the forefront of these debates as it is seen as a means to an end (i.e. contributing to achieving these goals), not an end in itself.

Since government values tourism's economic contributions above all else, much of what is considered tourism policy is focused on how to increase revenues from visitors, and more specifically international overnight tourists. Hence, where national or regional policies exist, these are focused on a better understanding of the tourist markets, their potential, catering to their needs, and strategies to attract them. Although these policy documents at times address the barriers to international tourism, ranging from infrastructure needs (roads, rail, ports and airports but also attractors) to visa restrictions and access limitations, the aspects over which the commissioning organization (ministry, department, etc.) actually has control are very narrow. For all others, the organization is obligated to negotiate and attempt to influence those responsible for the various portfolios, the success of which is far from guaranteed. We can see this play out with President Trump's "travel bans" and the highly publicized responses to them. At no time did tourism (i.e., travel for legitimate business, pleasure or personal reasons) enter the discussion, although a number of the targeted countries were growing source markets for the United States. As a secondary function of increasing government revenues, these tourism

E-mail address: mjoppe@uoguelph.ca.

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policy documents may address strengthening the business community, either directly through investments, incentives or the cutting of red tape, or indirectly by proposing approaches to enhance the workforce productivity through training and education. Only in very rare occasion do they also consider improving the work environment and conditions for the labour force, minimizing the impacts on the local host population or reducing the negative impacts on the environment.

One could be excused to think that such a complex and multi-faceted sector lends itself to a great body of policy-relevant research from a wide range of academic disciplines. Indeed, Jafari and Ritchie (1981) identified 16 different disciplines from which researchers tackle various aspects of this phenomenon. Although there was a somewhat sustained and explicit interest in tourism policy during the mid-70s to the mid-90s, it was largely descriptive of the actors that influence and are influenced by tourism, the mechanisms available to policy-makers, and the benefits to be derived from the "orderly" growth of this industry. One of the earliest to turn his attention to the need for tourism policy was Italian economist Alberto Sessa (1976), but perhaps some of the most prolific were political scientist Linda Richter (on the politics of tourism in Asia, China and the USA), the former Commissioner of U.S. Tourism and founding member of the World Tourism Organization David Edgell Sr. (on international tourism policy and US policy), and geographer Colin Michael Hall (linking tourism to politics and tracing the power relationships that guide it). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Tourism Committee has been the only instance to systematically report on policies and structural changes that affect the development of both domestic and international tourism in its member countries, but academics have not taken advantage of this database to explore the forces at play in formulating the policies nor in monitoring their impacts over time, except for an early article by Airey (1983). Instead, academics have largely focused on specific policy areas, limited comparative analyses (often to contrast cultural perceptions and understanding), and regionalized decision-making processes and development implications.

2. The need for policy relevant research

Policy relevant research implies asking questions with significance for policy and research that provides realistic policy options and actions. To have policy significance, research must have implications for the policy world. Even when highly focused on a narrow issue (e.g. increase conservation and restoration of indigenous burial mounds), a policy is general in the sense that it addresses all indigenous burial mounds, not just a specific one. So, while case studies are important as illustrative examples of issues, actions and consequences, they are rarely helpful on their own in formulating policy. Given the economic importance governments attach to tourism development, assessing the economic impacts of proposed or existing government action is possibly the easiest – and most common – way of influencing policy formulation. Economists such as Larry Dwyer and Peter Forsyth, among others, have evaluated the impact of various taxes on tourist flows, the expenditure associated with a number of sporting events, the trade-offs between other industrial sectors and tourism, major events affecting the macro-economic environment, and deregulation or privatization of sub-sectors and businesses. Many of the techniques used to inform policy by assessing the economic contribution, impacts and net benefits derived from tourism have been captured in *Tourism Economics and Policy* (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Dwyer, 2010).

Unfortunately, the data collection approaches employed with these techniques by academics and other researchers vary widely from the definitions used to the sampling framework, making it very difficult to compare results across jurisdictions. Yet policy-makers are often especially interested in implementation elsewhere and results achieved to help inform their own decision-making as to which of several options may produce the best intended outcomes given their specific context. The need for commonly accepted definitions and metrics to foster true multi-jurisdiction comparability has never been stronger. In other disciplines, it is not unusual to see large international consortia of researchers essentially duplicating studies to validate results and arrive at generally accepted, if not fully generalizable, findings. This type of study is rare in tourism research unless undertaken by public or quasi-public organizations and then often commissioned from an international consulting company rather than academics, with no peer review of the methodology.

Since the OECD Tourism Committee was set up to analyze, monitor and promote policies that contribute to the improvement of the economic and social well-being in its member countries, it is one such body whose research provides policy-makers with concrete advice on the implementation of effective tourism strategies to support tourism development at the local level. Its thematic tourism policy reviews, for instance on the relationship of tourism with other sectors (e.g. agriculture, culture, sports, transport) as well as cross-cutting topics on the creative economy, innovation, social media, climate change, training and education, etc., also provide deep insights into the diverse approaches adopted by countries with concrete recommendations as to what constitutes "good practices", but based on the documentation of "what is" rather than "what could be" and the consideration of options (OECD, n.d.). Unfortunately, the neoliberal worldview whereby governments largely see their role as enabling free markets to thrive, drives tourism globally, and thus also what are considered "good practices".

While all these topics also find their way into academic research, much of that work is somewhat anecdotal in nature, relying on case studies that are too often location and context specific. Even the *International Journal of Tourism Policy*, the only one that specifically sets out to provide "a forum for scholars and policy makers to exchange views and ideas at an international level on key issues that shape the growth of today's tourism industry" (Interscience Publishers, n.d.), falls into this trap with many articles written about very specific aspects of tourism studied in a restricted geographic context. While the author(s) of such an article may make(s) policy recommendations, they are rarely actionable and therefore have limited usefulness for decision-makers. However, their findings often challenge the dominant liberal worldview, arguing for much greater influence and control by local host communities, a message that is counter to the neoliberal agenda and powerful business interest. Also, many bureaucrats only have a limited understanding of the chain of causation and consequences, usually restricted to their area of expertise, and do not appreciate the wide-ranging effects on other stakeholders. One such example is the 2008 decision by the USA to list the polar bear as a threatened species under the *Endangered Species Act*, thereby banning all imports of polar bear trophies, under pressure from climate change advocates and those opposed to sport hunting. While the polar bear is the poster-child of climate change and therefore emotions run high any time the question of hunting them arises, their hunt has been part of the Inuit lifestyle for millennia and today is strictly controlled through the issuance of hunting tags. While about 80% of the quota is harvested by the Inuit for their own use, the remainder were used for Inuit-guided sport hunts using dogsleds, mainly by Americans. The import prohibition has had a devastating effect on the Inuit population, for whom this was often their only opportunity to generate income for equipment and supplies that enable subsistence activities (Weber et al., 2015).

Finally, we come to policy accessibility which reflects the essential readability of the research. Most senior bureaucrats do not have the time to wade through multiple articles in the hopes of gleaning information that will be of assistance in policy formulation and more junior staff working on policy may find the academic language difficult to understand. While in other policy fields it is relatively common to see close collaboration between government and academia, even to the extent of major public sector funding for research led by academics or the appointment of academics in an advisory capacity to political leaders, this is more rarely the case for academics working in tourism. Similarly, while mainstream and specialized media often report on research findings, these seldom include the work of tourism academics. Conferences tend to bring together either industry with some government delegates addressing policy issues but few academics in attendance, government representatives with participation by some large private sector interests but again few academics tackling broad policy, or academics with or without industry or government representation but rarely addressing policy. Even the *International Conference on Tourism Policy*, held for the 19th time in 2017, is really just an academic conference and not one where “leading academic scientists, researchers and research scholars […] exchange and share their experiences and research results on all aspects of Tourism Policy” (ICTP, 2017).

Of course, there are examples where the collaboration between academic research and government can be traced to policy. One truly notable initiative in this regard was the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre (STCRC), set up by the Australian Government in 1997 as part of its Cooperative Research Centres Program with a seven year grant, and which brought together 16 universities, the private sector and government. A significant number of meaningful research papers came out of this partnership over the years.

The work of the STCRC was in keeping with the many questions researchers raised during the latter quarter of the last century concerning particularly environmental stewardship, but also the broader question of sustainability, which includes improvement in the quality of life of the residents. Since then, the lens has shifted somewhat to throw greater light on the many inequities between groups and among stakeholders that exist and to challenge the current distribution of power in favour of private interests in keeping with the dominant neoliberal approach.

3. Tourism governance and the role of host communities

“Governance determines who has power, who makes decisions, how other players make their voice heard and how account is rendered” (Institute on Governance, n.d.). Hall (2011) identified four types of governance, ranging from *hierarchies* (state governance) to *markets* (essentially private economic actors and their associations) to *networks* (dominated by various forms of public-private partnerships and associations) to *communities* (governance at the most local level with direct public involvement). The first three all tend to buy into a neoliberal agenda, perpetuating the focus on economic growth, job creation, constant increases in tourist volumes and spending, and a business environment that is allowed to externalize social and environmental costs.

Although governance – much like policy – reflects the economic, social, cultural and political system in which it exists, hierarchical governance tends to still be the norm in most other policy arenas that impact tourism. As Hall points out, the tourism literature contains few examples of direct discussion about it in spite of its dominant role nor is there a breadth of analysis of how tourism can be positioned within the context of the agendas pursued by these hierarchical actors, but in a way that allows to drive positive social and environmental change by providing a more meaningful role for host communities.

The focus of the majority of research into governance of tourism has been on networks and communities; the former, because the organizations that are set up to direct tourism development and its marketing are almost exclusively constituted of partnerships that involve public and quasi-public sector organizations and tourism business interests, while the latter are advanced as the solution to ensuring that benefits from tourism are maximized for the local population and the conservation of the environment.

Governance through networks has generated much research into their effectiveness, inclusivity, collaboration and challenges. Although there is a plethora of these bodies at every jurisdictional level, membership is often “pay to play”, leaving no room for participation by residents. At best, they are represented by one or several elected officials who may or may not be knowledgeable about tourism. As regards the governance of marketing campaigns that ultimately not only shape how a geographic region is portrayed, but also who is targeted and the type of tourism that is promoted, the influence of the private sector leaves little room for other voices to be heard.

And yet, the negative impacts that inevitably accompany an ever increasing number of international and domestic tourists are borne by local residents. Hence, research into residents' perceptions of tourism – both positive and negative – the engagement of the diverse stakeholders in its development and appropriate governance structures, especially in the context of sustainability, is very abundant and long-standing with numerous theories (stakeholder theory, social network theory, complex systems theory, learning theories, theory of communicative action, etc.) underpinning the work. Although it is recognized that governance requires government and non-government stakeholders to voluntarily collaborate through a complex web of both horizontal and vertical networks, private citizens and their associations in their capacity as taxpayers, workers and residents have little meaningful input into policymaking deliberations. At best, they are “consulted” and requested to provide feedback on proposals that are fairly well advanced. Even their elected officials in local authorities can only exercise the powers granted to them by senior levels of government, severely constraining their ability to avoid the destruction of what are ultimately the primary attractors for tourists – the local environment and culture.

4. Conclusion

The neoliberal agenda and globalization have been receiving significant and increasing resistance as consumer values shift in keeping with a radical change in world order, demographics and worldviews. This, in turn, calls for bold new approaches to tourism development from a volume-oriented, mass phenomenon where competition is too often based on price to a model based on value, meaningful experiences and where the host community and the environment derive many of the net benefits. The arguments for this change in paradigm have been put forth by numerous authors, but perhaps none clearer than Larry Dwyer (2017) and Anna Pollock (2012). But in the face of bodies like the World Tourism Organization (governments) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (private sector) congratulating themselves vociferously on the relentless growth of the industry, very few policy-makers have paid any attention to these messages until recently. Yet, host communities and fringe stakeholders are increasingly making their voices heard as overtourism becomes a problem in some of the most popular destinations. So far, there are few practical recommendations coming out of academic research on how to shift away from a neoliberal to a political economy perspective or how to curtail and responsibly manage tourism growth as part of a broader agenda of job creation.

There are many talented young scholars taking on part of this daunting task in every region of the world and contributing in many languages other than English. A number of these have worked at some level of government, giving them good insight into the inner workings of policymaking. Just a few that might be worth watching, based on early publications, are Judith Estol, Alberto Amore, Dao Truong, and Meredith Wray – all of whom dare to challenge preconceived ideas about tourism.

While fun to write, this opinion piece has also been a huge challenge because how do you do justice to the large body of work that has contributed in small as well as significant ways to the topic? By mentioning some, will others be very upset for not being recognized? How do you limit references to 10 (well 12, actually) when really, my “opinion” has been informed by reading many of the articles over the years? Am I stepping into the quagmire of plagiarism by not citing all those influences? As others tackle their opinion pieces on future research into important tourism topics, it will be interesting to discover how they have untangled this predicament.

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Marion Joppe is a Professor in the School of Hospitality, Food and Tourism Management, University of Guelph, Canada. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Aix-Marseille, France in Law and Economics of Tourism, and specializes in destination planning, development and marketing, and the experiences upon which destinations build. Marion has extensive private and public sector experience and continues to be heavily involved in the tourism industry, sitting on a number of local, provincial and federal committees and boards, and is the current President of TTRA International.