



## Book Review

**A Research Agenda for Sustainable Tourism, C. McCool, K. Bosak (Eds.). Edward Elgar Publications, Cheltenham (2019). xiv + 255 pp., Hardback, £90.00, ISBN 978-1-78811-709-8**

Sustainable tourism – or what should more accurately be referred to as sustainable tourism development – was first proposed some thirty years ago. Since then, it has attracted significant academic attention; reviews of the relevant research indicate that around 5000 papers have been published on the topic, a body of work complemented by innumerable books, chapters and other publications. Nevertheless, it remains a highly contested and widely (mis)interpreted concept. Whilst it is inarguable that tourism, as with any other economic activity, should be sustainable in the sense that it should not impact negatively on the resources upon which it depends, the extent to which it may contribute to sustainable development, reflecting its original conceptualization, is significantly less certain. Indeed, some commentators note that, despite having been embedded in national and international tourism policies for three decades, there remains a lack of evidence of sustainable tourism development in practice. Therefore, it might be logical to assume that a book offering a ‘research agenda for sustainable tourism’ would, at least in part, address the longstanding definitional and conceptual controversies surrounding the topic as a basis for exploring potential new avenues of research that might contribute to the now substantial literature.

In this respect, readers of this book are likely to be disappointed. In their preface, the editors rather curiously define sustainable tourism ‘loosely ... as a response to the question “What should tourism sustain?”’ (p.xiii), in so doing aligning themselves firmly to a tourism-centric focus. In the concluding chapter, they then admit that they ‘are really not sure what it is we are referring to ... we will only know sustainable tourism when we see it’ (p.239). In contrast, however, a clearer framework for the book is provided in Chapter 1, in which the argument is put forward that sustainable tourism (as undefined by the editors) and the challenges facing its achievement are best considered from a systems-thinking perspective. In other words, rejecting what is seen to be the simplistic objective of a balance between the so-called triple bottom line of sustainability, it is proposed that a systems approach might offer the basis for understanding the complexities of the socio-ecological systems within which tourism occurs. This is not, of course, a new idea. The notion of tourism as a system has long been supported and rejected in equal measure, whilst chaos/complexity theory has also been applied to tourism. Nevertheless, it provides a conceptual framework for the book to which a number of subsequent chapters adhere more or less explicitly. Moreover, as now summarised, the content of some chapters suggests that the implicit purpose of the book is to promote systems thinking as a basis for exploring tourism more generally rather than to generate a research agenda for sustainable tourism in particular, a point returned to later in this review.

Following the introductory chapter referred to above (Chapter 1),

the book comprises a further 14 chapters, including the editors’ concluding chapter. Together, these represent a rather eclectic collection that, to a greater or lesser extent, offers an agenda for research, only some of which appears to be based on identified gaps in the sustainable tourism literature. Chapter 2 presents a short and rather uncritical review of the notion of the tourism system, confirming the book’s theoretical underpinning but not progressing the discussion to propose new foci for research. Drawing on the cases of the Christchurch and Kaikoura earthquakes in New Zealand, the next chapter maintains the systems thinking ‘flavour’ whilst addressing the relationship between sustainable tourism and resilience, coming to the unsurprising conclusion that sustainability in tourism in areas susceptible to natural disasters (from the tourism centric perspective) requires destination resilience. Also unsurprising is the suggestion that research should focus on indicators of resilience. Both resilience and systems thinking also feature in Chapter 4, although it is dominated by a case study of the factors determining the direction of tourism development in Vanuatu. Whilst of interest in its own right, it is unclear how this contributes to development of a wider research agenda; a number of general questions are raised about resilience in the tourism system, but it is unclear how these follow on from the case study.

In Chapter 5, various approaches to managing the visitor experience in parks and protected areas are reviewed as a foundation to suggesting a management-by-objectives approach to visitor use management. Whilst the relevance to sustainability is explicit and, again, a systems perspective is in evidence, much of discussion addresses well-rehearsed debates on park management and sustainable use and no distinctive paths for research are proposed. Unfortunately, after a promising start, Chapter 6 also rather falls into the ‘old wine in new bottles’ trap in its adoption of a systems-influenced ‘destination community well-being (DCW) approach’ to connecting people (tourists) with experiences, with a particular focus on the role of communities and destination management organisations. The argument for greater community involvement, though expressed within a novel framework, is not new whilst the need for destinations to market to segments ‘that are better matched to DCW objectives’ displays an idealism that competes with the recognised reality of tourism as a form of conspicuous consumption. And again a distinctive agenda for research is not in evidence. In contrast, however, Chapter 7 offers an honest and factually up-to-date analysis of the relationship between tourism and climate change; as such it is the most satisfying contribution to the book and the one that most explicitly addresses the issue of sustainability with the identification of clear knowledge gaps demanding further research.

Many of the remaining chapters appear to lose sight of the overall objective of the book: a research agenda. Chapter 8, for example, discusses tourism’s potential contribution to each of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. It offers a rather idealistic overview of how tourism might make such a contribution but, offering no critique, buys into the ‘establishment’ support for SDGs. Other than, rather curiously, referring

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to knowledge needs for protected areas, however, no relevant research directions are proposed. Chapter 9 provides an overview of sustainable business models; here, some broad issues are raised with regards to sustainable production and consumption although aligning the discussion with tourism is in places incidental. The following chapter then delves (unsuccessfully) into what is described as the 'human health dimension of sustainable tourism'. Skimming over a variety of issues, from the restorative effects of tourism environments to tourism-related employment and environmental health, many themes are considered simplistically whilst the questions for future research are excessively broad and the focus of much extant work. Chapter 11 comprises a lengthy discussion of the information needs for the effective management of tourism in protected areas; it is, however, more akin to a text book chapter on the management of parks and protected areas and it is likely that many readers will be familiar with its key themes. The following chapter looks more specifically at monitoring visitor use of a river system; though interesting, it is descriptive with a focus on management techniques rather than on developing a research agenda for sustainable tourism. Similarly, Chapter 13 offers a discussion of community engagement in sustainable tourism but, again, the approach is excessively broad, simplistic and uncritical with no clear research questions being offered. Chapter 14, focusing on tourism's environmental impacts (on which significant research has of course long been undertaken) returns explicitly to the systems-thinking perspective, though it is not convincing (and, indeed, a little naïve) in its analysis. And finally, the editors draw the book to a conclusion in Chapter 15.

Overall, then, this book suffers a number of weaknesses that are likely to limit its interest to potential readers. Although the title suggests that it is seeking to establish a research agenda for sustainable tourism, many will struggle with the editors' (non)definition of the concept. It might be logically expected that the book would explore key themes, issues and debates within the extant sustainable development literature; instead, its intent appears to be to argue for a systems-thinking approach to tourism, sustainable or otherwise. As such, it might be asked whether the book is wrongly titled. In addition, and as summarised above, a number of chapters fail to offer clear or distinctive areas for future research – in short, in much of the book, a research agenda is lacking. The inclusion of a number of chapters might also be questioned; some adopt a management focus in specific contexts, whilst others read as though they have been written for a non-tourism academic audience, discussing key themes in a highly simplistic manner. This is not to say that some elements of the book are not challenging and thought-provoking; indeed, the systems-thinking approach offers a valuable perspective on tourism. However, to conclude, this book was, for this reviewer at least, a dissatisfying read. The expected/hoped-for research agenda did not emerge and it is uncertain to what extent it makes a contribution to the sustainable tourism development literature.

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