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Tourist Studies: 20th Anniversary Reflective Commentary:
On the need for sustainable tourism consumption

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism has remained the dominant tourism development paradigm within both academic and policy circles for more than three decades. However, little if any progress has been made towards implementing sustainable tourism in practice. Reflecting on this failure to achieve a more sustainable tourism sector, manifested not least in its increasing contribution to climate change, this paper argues that the problem lies in the continuing adherence to the economic growth model that underpins (sustainable) development policies in general and tourism development in particular. Highlighting the unsustainability of unabated growth, the paper goes on to suggest that the solution lies in the adoption of sustainable (reduced) levels of consumption. Yet, based on a recent exploratory study, voluntary limiting the consumption of tourism, even amongst the allegedly environmentally aware post-millennial generation, is an unlikely scenario. Hence, the path to sustainable tourism production and consumption lies only in effective regulation.

Key words: Sustainable tourism; sustainable consumption; economic growth model; de-growth

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Introduction

Notable over the last twenty years has been the continuing focus of attention on sustainable tourism development within both academic and policy circles. Research into the concept is manifested in a burgeoning literature, with reviews revealing both the scale and scope of work on the topic in general (Bramwell, et al., 2017; Buckley, 2012; Niñerola et al., 2019) whilst, unsurprisingly, a more recent dominant theme has been the relationship between tourism and climate change in particular (Scott, 2019). At the same time, not only is the objective of sustainable tourism development explicit in many local and national tourism development plans (Torkington et al., 2020) but also there is continuing evidence of adherence to the principles of sustainable tourism in, for example, numerous certification schemes (Klein & Dodds, 2018), various industry initiatives, the development of sustainability indicators (Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2014), the establishment of bodies such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and the alignment of tourism with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Spenceley & Rylance, 2019).

Equally notable over the last twenty years, however, has been the failure in practice to achieve sustainable tourism development or, indeed, a more sustainable tourism sector (Buckley, 2012). In other words, irrespective of debates surrounding the origins, definitions and objectives of the concept of sustainable tourism development (see, for example, Sharpley, 2000) and despite the fact that, as Ruhanen et al. (2015: 518) note, 'sustainable tourism developed alongside, but separate to, its parent paradigm of sustainable development' – manifested in a predominant parochial focus on making tourism itself more sustainable (Hunter, 1995) – there is little evidence of a transformation towards a more sustainable approach in tourism production and consumption. This is not to deny the existence of numerous specific tourism projects and developments around the world that reflect the principles of sustainable development. These are, however, typically small-scale and destination focused; as Wheeler (1991: 93) once put it, a 'micro solution to a macro problem.' In contrast, sustainable tourism development can only be considered, by definition, from a global tourism system-wide perspective (not least given the contemporary challenge of climate change and the undisputed need for tourism sector to reduce its carbon emissions)

and, in this context, there is much evidence of the tourism sector's unsustainable trajectory. For instance, international tourist arrivals had, prior to the Covid-19 crisis in 2020, grown exponentially over the last two decades, leading in some instances to 'over-tourism' (Milano, et al., 2019) and the emergence of anti-tourism movements (Hughes, 2018); increasing numbers of destinations are becoming unsustainably economically dependent on tourism (as starkly revealed by the Covid-19 crisis); and, of particular relevance to this commentary, there has been limited evidence of more sustainable consumption practices on the part of tourists.

The challenges of achieving sustainable tourism development (within contemporary conceptualizations of sustainable development more generally) are discussed in more detail elsewhere (e.g. Buckley, 2012; Mika, 2015; Sharpley, 2020; 2021). The point here, however, is that the continuing unsustainability of tourism reflects not only a long-recognized disconnect between academic theory/ policy making and the "real world" practice of tourism – as Murphy (1988: 187) observed more than three decades ago, 'the message about sustainable tourism seems to have become trapped in an academic-government loop' – but also, more significantly, the continuing dominance of the growth imperative in tourism policy and within the industry itself. As already noted, this is not to deny the development of specific sustainable tourism projects, such as the EuroVelo, a trans-European cycle tourism route network project (Weston et al., 2012) whilst the Covid-19 crisis has presented an opportunity for destinations to re-assess their tourism policies. Venice, for example, plans to introduce a daily charge for visitors. Nevertheless, not only is successful destination development frequently measured in terms of increased visitor numbers and receipts (and tourism business success in terms of increased sales and profits) but also organizations such as the UNWTO and the WTTC enthusiastically continue to promote further growth in international tourism as a basis for global development. This, of course, mirrors the more general adherence to the capitalistic economic growth-based model that has underpinned economic planning in industrialized nations since the end of the 18th Century and has remained a fundamental tenet of global development policies since the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, amongst the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a principal target of SDG 8 is to 'Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries' (UN, 2018).

However, the economic growth model, essentially founded on ever-increasing production and consumption, has increasingly come under scrutiny (Daly, 2014; Jackson,

2016: Rutherford, 2008). Not only is continuing economic growth based on the exploitation of a finite supply of natural, non-renewable resources by definition unsustainable – as Daly (1990: 1) suggests, ‘The term sustainable growth should be rejected as a bad oxymoron’ – but also the developmental contribution of economic growth to the achievement of social well-being is also questioned (Pilling, 2018). Hence, even allowing for the potential ‘de-coupling’ of production from resource use through efficiencies and technological advances (Ward et al., 2016), it is becoming more widely acknowledged that, on a global basis, there is a need to move towards more sustainable lifestyles and consumption (UNEP, 2015) – that is, avoiding unnecessary or wasteful consumption and consuming only sustainably produced goods and services. Putting it more starkly, ‘overconsumption and economic growth are positively correlated with each other’ (Salimath & Chandna, 2018). Greater demand stimulates higher levels of production which, in turn, encourages businesses to innovate, increase market share, increase revenues and stimulate consumer demand in a “circle” of growth that, ultimately, exacerbates resource degradation and depletion. This process is clearly evident at the destination level; from the author’s own observations, for example, increased tourism demand in Siem Reap, Cambodia, has led to an explosion hotel development and the provision of services with a corresponding increased in resource exploitation. Consequently, in order to achieve sustainable resource use, there is an overall need for more sustainable (or more precisely, reduced) levels of consumption.

This is certainly the case in tourism. Although much recent attention has been paid to specific cases of “over-tourism” (e.g. Dodds & Butler, 2019), these are not problems in themselves but, rather, symptoms of a wider problem, namely, the over-consumption of tourism on a global scale. In other words, although the tourism carrying capacity of some destinations, such as Barcelona and Venice, has (prior to the Covid-19 crisis) been grossly exceeded – though as noted earlier, the crisis has stimulated some destinations to adopt more sustainable post-crisis policies – tourism more generally (as a form of consumption enjoyed by a relatively small proportion of the global population) makes a disproportionate contribution of around 8 per cent of carbon emissions. More precisely, tourism is, for the most part, a form of non-essential lifestyle consumption and, given that the richest 10% of the global population contribute some 50% of total lifestyle consumption-related carbon emissions (Oxfam, 2020), it can be inferred that, individually, tourists make a significant and disproportionate contribution to global warming, to say nothing of the other negative consequences associated with excessive tourism development. Logically, then, there is a need to reduce the overall consumption of tourism to more sustainable levels (as long recognized

in the quantity vs. quality of tourism debate – see Fleischer & Rivlin, 2009) as part of the drive to address the challenges of climate change. But, is this realistic or indeed possible? And what are the implications for tourism’s potential contribution to the SDGs? Drawing on a recent exploratory study, this commentary reflects on this question, considering in particular whether the younger, post-millennial generation (as an allegedly environmentally aware group) are likely make such a lifestyle consumption choice. First, however, the challenge posed by the growth model to sustainable tourism development is briefly reviewed to contextualize the argument for a reduction in tourism consumption.

Economic growth and unsustainable (tourism) development

As noted above, since the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of modern capitalist economies, economic growth has underpinned economic planning and development policies. In the early years of the promotion of development as a global project in the mid-20th Century, economic growth and development were considered synonymous (Mabogunje, 1980) whilst, not coincidentally, the academic field of development studies first evolved as a branch of development economics, further entrenching the ‘positivist orthodoxy’ (Leys, 1995: 7) of economic planning as a means of achieving development. Nowadays, economic growth as measured by an increase in per capita GDP is not only a yardstick of economic health but also a measure of a nation’s well-being more generally. Indeed, such is its centrality to contemporary neoliberal capitalism and to understandings of development and prosperity that, as Pesch (2018: 1134) argues, seeking economic growth is no longer a choice made by policy-makers; rather, ‘we are locked into mechanisms of growth, be it cognitively, culturally or economically.’

Undoubtedly, some degree of economic growth is both desirable and necessary in order for societies as a whole to not only satisfy their basic needs but also to benefit from goods and services that are considered to contribute to their well-being. More precisely, economic growth as indicated by an increase in GDP reflects higher spending on goods and services which, in turn, suggests that those goods and services are not only valued by consumers, but are valued because they improve their lives. Hence, in short, economic growth is believed to lead to increases prosperity. In simple terms, this is why tourism, as a potential driver of economic growth, is integral to innumerable local and national development policies and, arguably, embedded in a number of the SDGs.

The relationship between economic growth and wider development or prosperity is complex and a discussion of the dynamics between capitalism, growth and development is

well beyond the scope of this commentary (for example, Sklair, 1994). Nevertheless, two points demand emphasis. First, continuing economic growth is increasingly considered to result in negative social impacts, described by some as the ‘growth delusion’ (Pilling, 2008). Not only is there evidence that, as the world’s population on average (?) becomes wealthier, there is an increasing incidence of income inequality both within and between countries (World Inequality Report, 2018). Such inequality is fostering what Rutherford (2008) refers to as a social recession manifested in, for example, increasing individualism, the breakdown of community cohesion and an increasing incidence challenges including drug abuse, family breakdown and mental health issues (see, for example, Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Moreover, it has also long been argued that greater wealth and levels of consumption, far from increasing happiness, may actually reduce it and increase levels of anxiety (DeLeire & Kalil, 2010). Interestingly, recent work has revealed that the consumption of experiences (such as tourism) may result in longer-lasting happiness than material consumption (Gilovich & Kumar, 2015), although tourism-specific studies suggest that taking more than one holiday does not result in greater happiness (Nawijn, 2011).

Second, throughout history, civilizations have acknowledged the need for natural resource conservation. In more modern times, however, the fragile balance between natural and non-renewable resource exploitation, the ability of the ecosystem to assimilate the outputs of human activity (the ecosystem’s “source” and “sink” functions) and, in particular, increasing production and consumption related to population growth have come more sharply into focus. There were calls for limits to growth in the 1970s (Meadows et al, 1972) whilst, more recently, it has been argued that with increasing global population levels and, in particular, evidence of highest consumption growth rates in emerging economies (Nguyen et al., 2017) the need exists for ‘a substantial and rapid reduction in consumptive behaviour’ (Turner, 2008: 410) in order to sustain the global ecosystem.

This inseparability of the environment from human existence and development has, since the late 1980s, been formally acknowledged in the adoption of sustainable development as the global development paradigm. Though highly controversial, not least reflecting its ambiguity, malleability and inherently oxymoronic character (Robinson, 2004; Redclift, 1987), sustainable development seeks to ‘enact a positive vision of a world in which basic human needs are met without destroying or irrevocably degrading the natural systems on which we all depend’ (Kates et al., 2005: 20). Inevitably, how this vision is achieved is subject to competing ecocentric to anthropocentric philosophical positions, the latter giving primacy to human interests in how nature is perceived and exploited and promoting the

concept of de-coupling referred to earlier in this commentary. This suggests that production efficiencies and technological innovation will ‘de-couple’ production and consumption from resource depletion. On the one hand, it is argued that there are ‘unrealistic expectations of efficiency improvements or technological breakthroughs’ (Kallis, 2011: 874) whilst, on the other hand, some suggest that innovation and efficiencies will have a rebound effect, stimulating increased consumption that will negate environmental savings (Pesch, 2018). For instance, prior to the Covid-19 crisis, it was estimated that global air passenger numbers would double to more than 8 billion by 2037 (IATA, 2018), outweighing any potential environmental efficiencies in aircraft design.

Either way, fundamental to sustainable development or what Porritt (2007: 33) describes as the ‘capacity for continuance’ is the need to maintain the global ecosystem’s so-called source and sink functions: reducing the depletion of non-renewable resources relative to the development of alternative, renewable resources and reducing the rate at which waste (notably carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses) is deposited back into the ecosystem or, more simply stated, sustainable production and consumption relative to global population levels. This challenges the anthropocentric notion of the triple bottom line; human well-being on the global scale is dependent upon the well-being of the ecosystem which should be ‘regarded as a superordinated system to the other dimensions’ of sustainable development (Marco, 2005: 5).

And yet, sustainable development, as articulated in a variety of policies from the Brundtland Commission’s report *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987) to the current UN Sustainable Development Goals – and to which tourism remains firmly aligned – is explicitly based upon the premise of economic growth which, as previously argued, is correlated positively with over production and consumption (Salimath & Chandna, 2018). As Adelman (2017: 23) observes, most definitions of sustainable development ‘perpetuate instrumental rationality, progress, economic growth and conceive nature as capital’ or, putting it another way, the underlying ‘thesis of most sustainable development policies [is] that resource conservation is necessary primarily to support future human development based on economic growth’ (Sharpley, 2020: 1940). For example, numerous references are made in the Brundtland Report to the need for economic growth with a suggested requirement of global economic growth by a factor of 5 to 10 to achieve sustainable development (WCED, 1987: 50) balanced against unexplained and unrealistic expectations of technological innovation (Kallis, 2011). Similarly, the UN’s SDGs promote economic growth as the principal mechanism for reducing poverty and supporting development more generally. However,

while many of the goals are both necessary and justifiable, the viability of the SDGs is, according to Adelman (2017), undermined by the contradictions emanating from its inherent economic growth message.

It is for this reason that recent years have witnessed increasing advocacy for de-growth in terms of both sustainable development in general and, to a lesser extent, tourism development in particular (Andriotis, 2018; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). Following development policies based on economic growth (including tourism) is seen as incompatible with environmental sustainability and, indeed, societal well-being (Martínez-Alier, 2009) and, hence, the path to a more sustainable world is seen in reducing overall levels of production and consumption or, as UNEP (2015) propose, doing more and better with less. This is highly applicable to tourism. As Sharpley (2020: 1942) suggests, the excessive demands placed on many tourism destinations (over-tourism) as well as the sector's increasing contribution to global warming more generally, are 'fuelled by, on the one hand, the continuing expansion of the tourism industry seeking to profit from tourism and, on the other hand, the increasing consumption of tourism experiences manifested in the growth in both the overall number of tourists and, significantly, the consumption of tourism by individual tourists'. There is, therefore, the need to reduce global levels of tourism consumption (albeit maintaining levels of demand to those destinations where tourism plays the most significant role in local development). The question then (to date largely not addressed in the literature) is if and how this might occur; does the potential for reducing the consumption of tourism to sustainable levels, as opposed to transforming how tourists consume tourism, exist? As this paper now goes on to discuss, some propose that not only is there greater evidence of a shift towards green consumerism in general (Kumar & Ghodeswar, 2014) but also that the younger, post-millennial generation in particular displays environmental credentials that point to a fundamental shift towards more sustainable consumption. Hence, the potential for reducing overall levels of tourism consumption might be manifested in the attitudes of post-millennial towards tourism consumption.

Towards sustainable tourism consumption?

For more than two decades it has been suggested that tourists are becoming more environmentally responsible and more aware of their role as tourists. Poon (1993), for example, famously referred to the emergence of the "new" tourist who is more environmentally sensitive and who proactively seeks experiences that are less impactful on the destination environment and community. Others argue that evidence of the emergence of

the “good tourist” (Popescu, 2008) lies in the increasing demand for “alternative” forms of tourism such as ecotourism, agritourism, and volunteer tourism. More specifically, it is assumed that increasing demands for “responsible tourism” reflects tourists’ environmental values as revealed in surveys of their tourism consumption intentions (e.g. Goodwin & Francis, 2003).

Whilst the growth in demand for alternative, allegedly more socially-environmentally benign forms of tourism is undeniable, less certain are the motives and environmental values of those participating. For example, the “eco” credential of ecotourists have long been questioned (Duffy, 2002; Sharpley, 2006) whilst, similarly, the extent to which volunteer tourism is driven by a sense of altruism is widely debated (Lyons et al., 2012). At the same time, research has demonstrated that tourists tend to be unwilling to adopt sustainable consumption behaviours and nor do they believe it their responsibility to do so (Miller et al., 2010), whilst even those who typically adopt (or claim to adopt) green consumerist behaviour at home do not do so whilst on holiday (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). In a similar vein, more recent work reveals that many contemporary tourists are not only aware of the consequences of their participation in tourism but also often express their eco-shame or guilt; nevertheless, they either encounter barriers to realizing their desire to travel more responsibly or transfer that responsibility to the travel industry (Mkono & Hughes, 2020; see also Mkono, 2020).

The important point is, however, is such studies to date focus on the extent to which people are willing to adapt their behaviour as tourists; little or no attention has been paid more generally to the significance of tourism as a form of consumption and, arguably, why tourists are less willing to adapt their behavior (specifically, reduce their consumption of travel and tourism) compared with other forms of consumption (Sharpley, 2019) – although the “flygskam” movement originating in Sweden points to a nascent shift in attitudes. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that the younger, post-millennial generation (“Generation Z”) might be in the vanguard in a shift towards more sustainable tourism consumption. A number of surveys, for example, reveal that post-millennials are particularly concerned with the environmental and social consequences of their consumption and the need to address climate change (OC & C, 2019; Porter Novelli/Cone, 2019) and, in particular, display strong ethical and environmental values in their consumption decisions (Noor et al., 2017; Yasmin, 2019). At the same time, however, it should be noted that those aged between 18 and 34 are more likely to spend their money on travel and tourism than other age groups (Varricchio et al., 2019).

In order to address this apparent contradiction and whether indeed the post-millennial generation might adopt more sustainable (tourism) consumption, a small exploratory study was undertaken amongst university students, 106 of whom fell within the 18-25 age range (Roberts, 2020). The results were, in some respects, unsurprising. Over 90% of post-millennial respondents claimed to be environmentally aware although their environmental actions tended to be limited to recycling and the use of re-fillable bottles and cups; fewer than 30% engaged in so-called thrifting (for example, borrowing or buying second hand rather than buying new). Some 94% claimed to be worried about climate change; more than 90% considered global warming to be the greatest challenge facing the planet. Yet, with regards to tourism consumption in particular, 76% suggested that they have a right to consume tourism, 83% travel more if money was no object and a similar proportion believed that low-cost airlines are a good thing as they allow more people to travel. In addition, a majority of respondents indicated that tourism is essential to their happiness whilst, of significance to this paper, a common response was that only cost or legislation would encourage them to fly less.

Conclusion

Though exploratory and small-scale, the study summarized above not only supports the findings of other research – that the adoption of sustainable (reduced) tourism consumption is unlikely to materialize – but also that, despite evidence of greater environmental awareness and activity amongst the post-millennial generation more generally, this does not apply to their consumption of tourism in particular. Reflecting on this, and the wealth of research that has been conducted in the area of sustainable tourism in the last twenty years, two conclusions can be drawn from this that influence how we address issues of sustainable tourism consumption in research going forward. First, assumptions about ‘responsible’ tourism consumption cannot be made; rather, there is a pressing need for research not into how to render the supply of tourism more sustainable but into the significance of tourism as a form of consumption in general and why the “need” for tourism appears to supersede environmental concerns in particular. And second, the only means of achieving the necessary de-growth in tourism consumption, as argued for in this commentary, is through regulation. That is, all the evidence suggests that voluntary reductions in the consumption of travel and tourism are unlikely to occur and, hence, sustainability in tourism (and more generally) can only be achieved through what has been referred to as benign dictatorship (Dresner, 2002).

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