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Debate: Can Sustainable Tourism include Flying?

Held at the University of Central Lancashire 30th March 2012

Abstract

Can Sustainable tourism include flying? was the question addressed by the debate at the University of Central Lancashire (University of Central Lancashire), UK on March 30th 2012. There was an unexpected degree of consensus among the speakers that tourism had severe environmental impacts, mainly from flying and that many countries currently benefitting from tourism development were likely to suffer from climate change. They also agreed that corporate tourism often diverted funds from destination areas into their own profits. Those arguing for flying stressed the balance of environmental, social and economic benefits, while those arguing against prioritised the environmental damage of increasing aviation. The pro-fliers were optimistic about technological advances in aircraft and fuels but the others doubted their potential to reduce emissions from current or increased levels of aviation. Both sides admitted behavioural change was difficult, but saw hope in recent trends.

Introduction

Organised by the Institute of Transport and Tourism of the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), the debate was based on contributions from four international experts on travel, tourism and sustainability. Arguing that sustainable tourism can include flying were Dr Davina Stanford, researcher and lecturer in responsible tourism at the International Centre for Research in Events, Tourism and Hospitality at Leeds Met University, and Valere Tjolle, sustainable tourism editor for TravelMole, the global online community for the travel and tourism Industry. Opposing the idea that flying and sustainability were compatible were Paul Peeters, a former aeronautic engineer and now Associate Professor of Sustainable Tourism and Transport at NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, and UCLan Emeritus Professor of Tourism, Professor Les Lumsdon, author of numerous books and papers on sustainable tourism and slow travel. The audience was made up of students and staff from UCLan, members of local environmental groups and tourism organisations as well as a number of people watching it on-line through a webcast. Each participant gave a ten minute presentation, followed by questions from the other side and then questions from the floor and from on-line contributors. The debate was chaired by Richard Sharpley, Professor of Tourism Development at UCLan and author of *Tourism Development and the Environment: Beyond Sustainability?*.

Unexpectedly, there was considerable apparent consensus on a number of points in the discussion, particularly on tourism's contribution to climate change and the devastating impact climate change will have on tourism, especially in the developing world. However, it became evident that this consensus concealed very different sets of priorities and recommendations for action. This account first explores the common ground and then considers some of the differences of emphasis and the consequences for action.

Consensus

All four speakers accepted that tourism has environmental impacts and that it accounts for between 5% and 10% of total greenhouse gas emissions, 75% of which result from travel, predominantly aviation. However, Paul Peeters suggested that radiative forcing was a better measure of the impact, and tourism, because of its dependency on aviation, accounted for between 5.2 and 12.5% of radiative forcing (see Scott et al. 2010). All acknowledged that tourism's total impact was set to increase with growing prosperity in China and other economies. Les Lumsdon warned that we were close to the precipice of climate change and that if we fell none of us would be able to cope with the dramatic changes in our lives. Speakers from both sides of the argument felt that the current lack of fuel tax for international aviation was 'feather-bedding' (Valere Tjolle) airlines and disadvantaged ground transport. There was also acknowledgment that the growth of low cost carriers, both in the developed and developing world, challenged any attempt to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from aviation.

There was also agreement that climate change caused by tourism and other human activity was already beginning to affect tourism in some countries such as the Maldives and was likely to be worse for developing countries such as those in the Caribbean and South East Asia. As Valere Tjolle put it, any rise over two degrees will mean '*big trouble*' for all of us.

As well as agreeing on the direction and scale of climate change, the panel were unanimous that many benefits of tourism, particularly in developing countries, were lost to the host destinations because of 'leakages' of tourism revenue into large corporations running global tourism networks. This might be rectified by effective local revenue management (Valere Tjolle and Les Lumsdon) such as in Bhutan where tourists are only admitted if they spend considerable sums while inside the country (Valere Tjolle) but Les Lumsdon warned that his research in Latin America showed that increasing tourism could be accompanied by an expanding gap between the incomes of the poor and rich.

Tourism

There were interesting differences in the characterisation of tourism. The speakers in favour of sustainable tourism including flying focussed on the experience of tourism for the individual and the host destination. Valere Tjolle stressed the importance of travel and tourism for people to have first-hand 'dis-intermediated' experiences of different countries and peoples. The commitment of 'eyes, ears, noses' promoted understanding and ultimately world peace. He emphasised the spiritual roots of tourism through pilgrimage and the spiritual nature of some tourism, including the Haj, but also the growing popularity of holidays such as walking the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain. Les Lumsdon challenged the notion that we all have to travel far to fulfil our desires for holidays, when most of our needs could be met by closer destinations and were so for most people up until about 50 years ago.

For Davina Stanford, flying enabled many migrants to maintain family and social ties with the home community. She quoted John Urry (2007, p238) 'face-to-face talk sustains the normal patterns of social life that involve long periods of distance and of solitude. So far face-to-face communication is the richest, multi-channel medium because it engages all the senses: 'all the technology in the world does not...replace face-to-face contact'. One of the questioners wondered if easy access to flying

might also encourage dispersal and migration, because people would find it easier to maintain those contacts.

The strongest arguments about the benefits of flying were about the benefits to destinations in developing countries. According to Richard Sharpley, tourism is one of the most important forms of voluntary wealth transfer from rich to poor. Davina Stanford used the examples of small island developing states (SIDS) to show how tourism can bring stable revenues to countries with few other resources. She demonstrated the importance of tourism to employment in several Caribbean countries and how tourist figures included large numbers of migrants returning as tourists. Valere Tjolle saw the potential of tourism to combat poverty and particularly help minority groups and women.

Paul Peeters questioned the assumption that developing countries would be most hit by any reduction in tourist flying. In a model, which limited flying distances to 3,000 kms, he had explored the consequences for a number of tourist destination countries and found many, such as the UK and Mozambique, would benefit as fewer of its residents would spend their holidays abroad and people from neighbouring countries visited instead of making long haul flights. Both developed and developing countries were among the countries likely to lose and to gain tourists. The net impact on the global tourism industry would be neutral, because within certain limits the number of trips is determined by GDP per capita and not by the attraction or number of destinations (see Peeters & Landré, 2012). He talked about the 'myth' that most tourism was international or involved flying when in fact only 16% of tourism was international and about 17% of trips, including domestic, were by plane. However, flying accounted for approximately 3750 billion passenger kilometres whereas car travel accounted for less than 2500 billion passenger kilometres due to the longer distances covered by people travelling by air.

Les Lumsdon used a completely different portrayal of tourism, which he saw not as an activity benefiting destinations or individuals nor a social phenomenon, but as a business geared to making a profit on an industrial-scale mass production process. 'They batch people onto cruise liners, aircraft, beaches, hotels and café quarters. Its supply chain aims at cost reduction and it is an industrial sector which uses a lot of energy'. He blamed organisations such as the World Tourism Organisation and the Tourism Council for supporting the aviation and tourism industries with 'growth' as their mantra and quoted an advert for BAA saying 'the route to economic recovery is a flight path'. With such cultures and language framing the debate about sustainable aviation, he doubted the ability of governments, often advised by specialists from the industry, to change course.

Sustainability

Not surprisingly, there were also different slants on what 'sustainable' means. Those in favour of flying stressed the social aspect of tourism both for host communities and for the traveller. Valere Tjolle defined sustainable tourism as '*just and equitable trade with economic benefits for the destinations: tourism which honours and prospers destination cultures, promotes social benefits and exchanges and in particular promulgates peace and assists in the environmental stewardship of the destination*'. Davina Stanford agreed that sustainable tourism had to balance aspects of the 'triple bottom line': social, economic and environmental.

The concern of the speakers opposed to flying was chiefly about the environmental impacts of flying, particularly greenhouse gas emissions. Paul Peeters referred to thresholds of the three aspects rather than balances, labelling them people, profit and planet. He explained how tourism which exploits people, say through sex tourism, fails people, similarly, very low budget tourism fails the profit criterion and tourism which involves long distance flying fails the planet. He described how the growth of aviation was incompatible with attempts to reduce the world's carbon emissions to limit climate change and showed the results of calculations to model how tourism could reduce its emissions by 70% by 2050. These gave two economically optimised solutions: reduce aviation to an absolute essential or maintain current levels, without growth and switch all other tourism travel to train or coach (see Peeters & Dubois, 2010). No solutions with further growth of aviation could be found.

Les Lumsdon drew attention to other environmental impacts of tourism such as pollution and the use of fossil fuels, now threatened by diminishing supplies, stating that even without the worry of climate change, tourism is a polluting industry. Tourism's role in protecting local environments was raised by Valere Tjolle, while Davina Stanford quoted a recent UNEP study which claims that loss of biodiversity is as damaging as the risk of climate change.

Both sides agreed that environmental damage was also caused by other forms of tourist travel, such as high speed train and car travel. Davina Stanford gave the example of the disruption caused by the construction of a high speed railway in Italy, where access was reduced during the ten year project, some of it permanently, and contrasted aviation's comparatively small need for ground infrastructure.

1. The role of technological improvements

While Davina Stanford was optimistic that aviation had some potential for technological improvements to both in types of fuel and fuel efficiency, Paul Peeters was sceptical. He pointed out that even research targets fell well short of the fuel efficiency necessary to meet climate change limits, without any growth in current levels of aviation. In his experience, the big gains of technology had now plateaued out to close to what was physically possible. He likewise dismissed the potential of bio-fuels being able to reduce CO₂ emissions by the necessary 80-90%, with problems of land use for bio-fuel crops and water use for algae and estimated that only 30-40% of current emissions can be avoided by biofuels. Les Lumsdon saw more potential for alternative fuels and technology for cars and surface travel, another reason to transfer journeys from flying to surface travel.

Behavioural change

Both Davina Stanford and Les Lumsdon saw glimmers of optimism for behavioural change. Davina Stanford referred to the number of people opting to off-set the carbon from their flights which demonstrated a growing awareness of the problem of emissions from flying. Les Lumsdon referred to the behavioural and attitudinal changes we had witnessed in the last few decades including towards smoking, child abuse, homosexuality and he saw no reason why change would not happen with consumer pressure and government intervention. However, he felt that consumers have to assert more influence and reject much of the symbolism and the values currently projected by the media. He suggested that slow travel, involving less energy intensive, local travel and more attention to the experience of travel was about life-style change for residents of northern industrial countries,

but was probably occurring naturally for 90% of the people in other countries such as China, India and Brazil.

Paul Peeters suggested that engineers held the key to behavioural change, by building more airports they created conditions for more people to fly. Davina Stanford felt that people should fly more responsibly: meaningfully and mindfully, staying longer at destinations and spending more money to benefit host communities.

In Conclusion

The debate exposed very different perspectives about tourism, sustainability and the potential of technological and behavioural change. The speakers supporting the argument that sustainable tourism could include flying appeared to stay within the current paradigm for tourism, stressing the benefits for both destinations and travellers, while advocating curbing some of the excesses of global corporations involved in aviation and tourism. The speakers against flying wanted to change the status quo in a number of ways. They disputed the necessity to travel long distances to satisfy personal desires or to benefit host communities while pointing out the low proportion of tourism that currently involves international travel or flying. They also challenged the tourism growth paradigm as incompatible with the need to reduce CO₂ emissions to prevent catastrophic climate change, which involved questioning values, symbolism and actions perpetrated by the media, governments and the industry for their own self-interest.

While the advocates of flying, albeit responsible flying, concentrated on specific locations and reasonably short time scales, those opposed to flying seemed to take a global perspective, with the need of privileged tourists from industrial countries to reduce their impact for the sake of the planet. They also took a longer time span, particularly focussing on the need to reduce emission from all activities by 80% by 2050.

The main difference, however, was the view of Paul Peeters and Les Lumsdon that the paramount priority was environmental sustainability which had to take precedence over any individual benefits to destinations or tourists, while Davina Stanford and Valere Tjolle looked for more of a balance between the environmental, social and economic benefits of tourism.

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