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The future of tourism: an interview with Dr Daniel Wright about the genre of science fiction

Ian Seymour Yeoman and Daniel William Mackenzie Wright

Abstract

Purpose – As the *Journal of Tourism Futures* celebrates its 10th Anniversary, Dr Ian Yeoman (Hotel Management School Leeuwarden) interviews Dr Daniel Wright (University of Central Lancashire) about the future genre of science fiction and his publications.

Design/methodology/approach – A personal interview.

Findings – Science fiction research is about asking difficult questions, the questions we feel uncomfortable asking and answering. Science fiction is a powerful medium to imagine the future, which students love as it is provocative. In the interview, Dr Wright reflects upon his own writing from immortality to the end of the world.

Originality/value – The power of science fiction, as a genre of transformation, skepticism and thinking out of the box, is often missing in futures studies and scenario planning.

Keywords Future of tourism, Journal of Tourism Futures, Science fiction, Transformation, Dystopia

Paper type Viewpoint

Ian Seymour Yeoman is based at the Hotel Management School Leeuwarden, NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, Netherlands. Daniel William Mackenzie Wright is based at the School of Business, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK.

Daniel Wright

I am Daniel Wright, Senior Lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, UK I have a Ph.D. in post-disaster tourism management and development. I have published widely in the subject area of tourism futures, exploring some of the more challenging issues facing the future of tourism. My research covers wider societal, environmental and technological matters. Many of my publications have attracted wide media attention, given the dystopian and science fiction genre of my research.

Ian Yeoman

How would you describe yourself as a tourism researcher?

Daniel Wright

Like most researchers, I have an interest in a specific subject area. In Preston, we have the Institute of Dark Tourism Research [1] at the University of Central Lancashire, and this influenced my original research interest into disaster and dark tourism, which was the focus of my Ph.D. However, it was picking up a teaching module called Tourism Futures at the time where my interest around researching the future was ignited further, and it was also some of your own work, to be honest. I really became interested in exploring the future of tourism and mainly the value of it. Futures studies casts a kind of shadow or a lens on what we're doing

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today in terms of driving potential futures, so that there is an element of creativity and innovation.

I really like scenario planning. I really like narrative writing and writing stories about the future that bring people closer to the future, something that I think is still growing in academic literature. So, I feel that creativity is important.

Ian Yeoman

Why do you like difficult topics?

Daniel Wright

I like controversial and edgy topics. I am drawn toward those as a researcher. I think they're important. I think there's value in them and across society to ask difficult questions, and they certainly bring the classroom to life. Future studies inform my teaching as a practice. We get into some very good debates around some of the subjects, and it really encourages students to explore areas that sometimes other people might think are a little bit difficult or edgy.

Future studies casts an image on what we're doing today to ask difficult questions about our human behavior and how that might be impacting or kind of driving the future. This is my goal as a researcher.

My aim is to assist and encourage other researchers and to encourage students and industry practitioners by asking the difficult questions and being prepared about what could be coming, sometimes negative and sometimes positive challenges that are happening in the external environment.

Ian Yeoman

What do you love about future studies?

Daniel Wright

I think what I love about the futures field is that it allows me to explore different topics, you know, from my research I've gone down many different avenues, like yourself, but more importantly, you've looked at those macro elements outside of tourism and then exploring how they could impact, penetrate or change the industry. I think that's important to me because it keeps my enthusiasm around tourism research alive.

The idea of exploring different topics over time, it's kind of important and I take that into life today. There is no other field of research in tourism when you can look at 2030 or 2040 and say something fun or interesting. I just like it.

Ian Yeoman

What do you mean by edgy research?

Daniel Wright

Good question. Edgy research is, I guess, sometimes something that may be seen as uncomfortable for some people to discuss. I think my first paper that was edgy was about cannabis and tourism (Wright, 2019). I just feel sometimes it doesn't fit within the ordinary, traditional kind of research or within the university research context.

There was growth and interest about the use of cannabis, and I said "well, actually this is a great time to write a paper on it and to ask questions about it".

The question was "how does cannabis become implemented in a country?"

Then bring tourism into that, because obviously, as you know yourself living in Holland, where there are more relaxed rules than we have in the UK, I feel like it's important to have those conversations.

Maybe when I say edgy, I feel like they're easy, because when I speak to them with other staff, they feel uncomfortable around those questions. As in, controversial, as in not the mainstream topics to be talking about that everyone else seems to be focusing on tourism these days.

Ian Yeoman

How do you reconcile skepticism in edginess with reality?

Daniel Wright

People either don't want to see what will happen or don't believe that it will happen. I think, the last few years have shown us that challenging moments can confront us.

Ian Yeoman

How do you bring those two together?

Daniel Wright

We explore current trends that are taking place today and justify the potential skepticism that could become a reality. History shows us that edgy thoughts, difficult thoughts, often have become a reality.

Ian Yeoman

How do other people see your research?

Daniel Wright

That's a good question. I think they'd say that I've carved out a good niche for myself in the area that I'm exploring.

Ian Yeoman

What value do others see in your research?

Daniel Wright

Value is an important message. It's what value people see. I guess from a social science perspective, the value probably is not as strong as some of the hard sciences. Futures research stuff sometimes might not be taken as seriously as other case-study based research, which is more current or has an immediate impact on society, where there's immediate recognition of some sort of impact, be it policy change or something.

Ian Yeoman

What would be some of the research questions that you would like a Ph.D. student to follow within your domain?

Daniel Wright

There are so many avenues a Ph.D. student could go down. However, one area could be the validity of futures research. A second, could be how do you justify futures research? I guess, most research is looking at the future in some form or another. It's when the depth of time increases that the skepticism increases, so looking for ways to explore these issues around value.

Ian Yeoman

Why do you publish within the *Journal of Tourism Futures*?

Daniel Wright

I guess it's because it's unique. It's bold and creative. It fits well with my own kind of interest within exploring the future, and it is forward thinking.

I find it a forward-thinking platform as a place to publish, partly because a lot of the other research that takes place within the journal. I find it dedicated to exploring the future of tourism, aligning innovative, challenging ideas with kind of long-term perspectives, which are important. And I guess those long-term perspectives and a trend analysis approach aren't always accepted by some of the other journals. So, I think it's important that the journal allows that. It has good academic rigor.

Having worked with the journal as an Associate Editor as well for many years now, I find I've gone through quite a few stages where it's been reviewed and re-reviewed and come back with more feedback, so I know the rigorous process that it takes to get published in the paper, which I think is important from an academic perspective. There's a strong peer review process, which I think enhances the credibility and, importantly, I think the long-term impact factors across the academic community.

The futures approach allows for an interdisciplinary approach to research as well. Just pick up any journal and you can see the kind of swaths of ideas that are brought into the research that people undertake and how they explore different topics beyond tourism.

And I think people really embrace that beyond, you know, looking at technology, sociology, the environment and politics. All of these areas are suddenly brought into the discussion around tourism, which I think really suits my style of writing. Ultimately, I think it has a good reach, has a global audience of people who publish in it and, thus, a global reach of people who read it. And I think that the international readerships are really important in order for me to share my message. The journal reaches a wide audience of researchers, students and practitioners, because it is open access with no fees.

Ian Yeoman

Let's discuss some of your publications. You must be one of the only academics in the world to talk about unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and aliens (Wright, 2022) in the paper *Encountering UFOs and aliens in the tourism industry*. Where did the idea come from?

Daniel Wright

I could have just been sitting down watching a movie around aliens. It could have been just from any one of those movies, but I think I was sitting there thinking "God, you know, humans and I have a fascination around UFOs, as anybody does". Who doesn't have a fascination on whether we live alone?

Has anyone really explored this or given us any indication around the UFO tourism market? I started looking into it and found loads of research. We travel for so many reasons as we do to explore our own individual motivations around UFO's.

Some go to extreme lengths for spiritual purposes, to see if they can communicate with UFOs. Others just go to a McDonald's as its allegedly shaped out of a UFO spaceship. Others go to locations where alien films were made. So, the whole landscape was not understood and I just thought, you know, we have so much interest.

There are thousands of books written about UFOs, but the literature was just lacking. So, I thought, "I'm going to map the landscape".

Ian Yeoman

And what was the contribution it made do you think?

Daniel Wright

A novel and original contribution through setting the foundation in the literature and using a framework of understanding motivations of tourists to different types of UFO tourism attractions. So yeah, just that real fundamental basis of setting the scene of UFO tourism and understanding why people travel or are motivated. That's from a theoretical point, but from a more practical point, it was again for practitioners, giving them an idea that, you know, this does exist in so many varied forms and that the supply of experiences can play a significant role in shaping the market.

Ian Yeoman

What was the idea behind *Travel and the climate crisis: Exploring COVID-19 impacts and the power of stories to encourage change* (Wright, 2021b)?

Daniel Wright

It was around COVID-19, clearly. I was sitting at home, as most of us were, and I just thought, you know, society is overwhelmed with the ideas of the natural environment facing unprecedented times and change. I thought that during COVID-19, there was a good opportunity to write a paper to ask, "how do our behaviors need to change during COVID-19".

We saw how things change, where people weren't traveling. We saw how Venice, with a lack of tourists, started to have promised clean, clear waters and natural environments taking shape and fighting back while they were less tourists, and I just thought, well, it's easy to blame tourists, but at the same time, you know, we've created the world we live in, and I just thought, it's not the tourists' fault that they can't travel easily around the world.

In England, we have parents who get fined if they take their students out of school on holiday outside the summer and school term. I just thought, you're just making it harder for people.

So, we need to start changing the story. We need to start changing the stories of society, about how we live, how we travel and giving people new opportunities to travel in different ways. We will have to create new stories about how we live, work and play in order to change our behaviors. The paper wanted to emphasize this importance and value of storytelling as a method of changing human behaviors.

Ian Yeoman

Why do you put power in the title?

Daniel Wright

Because I think ultimately stories are a powerful medium.

I think we are a society made up of stories. I think everything we do is a story. I tell my students every day, when you go home and you speak to the next person, you're about to tell him a story of some sort.

How impactful that story is depends on how you tell that story. So, I think stories are the most powerful things that we have often to make change in our society and we see it every day. If governments want to implement new changes, they start telling us stories about how those changes will be important or impactful and beneficial for its people. So that's why I talk about the power of stories, because I think stories are the most powerful tool.

Ian Yeoman

If you were to rewrite this paper again, would you have done anything?

Daniel Wright

I don't think I would change much, if I'm honest. I think people have gone back to normal post COVID-19, and regenerative tourism has been forgotten.

Ian Yeoman

Another paper was *The Twilight Effect, post-film tourism and diversification: The future of Forks, WA* (Wright et al., 2021). What was the idea behind this paper?

Daniel Wright

I had a student doing a final year project, and they were looking at Folks in the Twilight movies (Happel and Esposito, 2010) in the USA, as it offered a somewhat unique case-study. They came up with a nice idea, but we had to expand on it quite considerably and work quite considerably on the paper. They were looking at movie tours, and they had a fascination on movie tourism, as it is a popular area for students to explore.

The paper was about place and dependency on the Twilight movies. But what happens if those tourists just stop coming or they see a significant reduction in those tourists?

What can they start to do now to diversify to mitigate the potential future drop in movie tourists? What else do they have on offer in the local areas? The paper was a warning for other destinations that might see a massive increase in movie tourists, where they might create a tourism product and experiences heavily reliant on that product. Movie tourism is not often seen as a long-term sustainable tourism product. So we wanted to get people thinking about the product life cycle of the destination.

Ian Yeoman

In the paper *The future past of travel: Adventure tourism supporting humans living on the edge of existence* (Wright, 2021a), you argue *Homo sapiens* could in the near future be faced with an increasingly uninhabitable planet. Why?

Daniel Wright

I was probably sitting there thinking again that much of this was in line with ideas of dystopian futures, as the paper sets the scene of potential devastating climatic changes that are often presented to us by the environmentalists, with predictions that Earth is entering the sixth mass extinction.

"God, I'm a very vulnerable person on this planet". You know, in terms of the skills that I have to survive, if I needed to survive on my own? What resources could I go and get that would keep me alive?

And I thought that this is a comment that probably would resonate with most people living on this planet, you know, how to get food? What about clean water? What if there were no supermarkets?

And so I thought, "adventure tourism is a great area that can offer so many valuable skills to people". Adventure tourism encapsulates a whole load of different types of activities and experiences, be it just walking, climbing, fishing, just being outdoors, a lot of the time in various settings that encourages people to do things outside of their daily routine. The paper is a warning sign, but there is a tourism market here and adventure tourism could be seen as an area of tourism that could upskill people, bringing them closer to the environment and who knows, one day it could save their lives.

Ian Yeoman

Could we talk about the final paper, *Becoming immortal: Future wellness and medical tourism markets* (Wright and Zascierinska, 2022)?

Daniel Wright

I had this idea, and again it was a student who was on her final year doing a futures module with myself. The student now has a Ph.D. and is a colleague?

I love humans. We are such a great species. I see things around robots and transhumanism. This paper was asking the question where are we going? Why are we going there? Where are we heading from there? What responsibility, ultimately, does the tourism industry have on taking humans to a new frontier?

A lot of people are thinking about the future and pondering. People are sitting at home using their own artificial intelligence software. They're starting to realize that we are heading into potentially a different world where humans might not be so important. If we see this growth in robotics, the question is, do we want to get there? This whole dystopian idea, and these warnings that we get, and we've seen it across the biggest industries, corporations and the biggest players, such as Elon Musk and other people saying, "this could be the end of humanity".

Tourism plays a role here, so the whole idea of this paper is that we, in tourism, travel for wellness and medical purposes. Tourism market offers a range of medical experiences for people to seek out. So, we're playing a role in driving these markets for people to go and carry out these experiences and procedures. Tourism offers people the opportunity to carry out procedures that can change us physically, often for positive purposes, sometimes for personal gratification. But what is the long-term consequence? Where does all this end up? What does this mean for our species?

Ian Yeoman

So, what responsibility do we have?

Daniel Wright

We need to warn people about the future and the consequences of the future. What are we doing in shaping the future of humanity itself and are we comfortable with it?

Ian Yeoman

So, what did you say?

Daniel Wright

Tourism is an industry in supporting the change in humanity. It is a tool for allowing people to go and change their physical bodies. We are driving the change of humans from *Homo sapiens* to something else, through medical tourism.

Are we comfortable with allowing this trend to continue or should we put in measures to discontinue or stop this?

Ian Yeoman

What is your assessment of the tourism futures field at the moment?

Daniel Wright

I think it's quite varied. I think it's growing. I think it's exciting, but it struggles to gain weight. I think the speed of change in society that we are seeing means that the attention the tourism futures deserves

to be greater, because I think actually the value is in trying to understand what we're doing now and ultimately it is we who are creating the future more often than the future is just going to exist.

I think it deserves more credit, but I also think that there are a lot of people who consider its value from a lot of different angles. People explore it very differently. Some from a quantifiable perspective and some like me from a science fiction perspective. It's very wide and diverse.

I think, where possible, that we should be encouraged more to consider and research the future, and this genre is still missing but ultimately growing within the academic literature.

Personally, I have being knocked back by the *Journal of Tourism Futures* on several occasions, but I have received constructive feedback on those decisions. I think what's important is giving people the scope to grow and to challenge themselves and to explore things, which are maybe a little bit out of their comfort zone, because it's amazing what can be discovered through the creativity foresight thinking.

Ian Yeoman

Do you have an opinion about the general futures field?

Daniel Wright

I think it's growing. I think it's novel and it's exciting, from where this journal was ten years ago, and I think it's breaking new territory in the sphere of research and demanding attention from audiences, because the research that it produces is innovative and exciting.

Ian Yeoman

What is your future perspective?

Daniel Wright

I think we are a society that has been inundated with all types of literature, be it science fiction or another futures genre. Futures has evoked a curiosity in us as a species and allowed us to become more creative.

We are overwhelmed as a society with visual images about the future. I think for that reason, people really like it. Ten years ago, a colleague wrote a book on dark tourism. I loved it. And now we have just finished a book on the future of dark tourism (Stone and Wright, 2024). My colleague just loved doing it.

So, I think the tourism futures reputation is growing. I think it's partly because people are just interested, and they enjoy it, and they love reading about the future, and they like the challenges that come with reading around topics on the future.

Ian Yeoman

Why do you get out of bed and write about the future of tourism?

Daniel Wright

Because I get to choose a different topic. If my passion or my interest in something is suddenly awoken, then I find excitement in learning and researching new areas, new disciplines and bringing them together within the context of tourism. I like what I am doing. I explore, I learn and I am challenged about the future of tourism and society myself through my own research. Even at 2.00am in the morning, I enjoy it. It fascinates me. I see the future as a comic and scenarios are like comics.

Ian Yeoman

Is there anything else you would like to say about the future of tourism?

Daniel Wright

I think for those who are interested and fascinated by it, just start reading and watching content exploring the future. Go onto the web. Go onto *the Journal of Tourism Futures* and see what people have written, allow your mind to expand and be open minded about what you're reading and be critical about what you're reading as well, and hopefully it will. By doing so, we have a better world, a better future.

Notes

1. <https://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/institutes/beoi/dark-tourism>

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