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Are Luxury and Sustainability Compatible?

Introduction

We live in a world where we are constantly bombarded through the media with messages about the threats facing the future of the planet, from climate change to water shortages. Citizens are exhorted to 'do their bit' to save the planet, whether that be by doing more recycling or taking the bus to work rather than using their own car for their daily commute.

As industries concerned with fun, rather than the necessities of life, we are under particular scrutiny about the impacts we have through everything from the carbon emissions of airliners, to the use of water resources, to the impact of tourism on wildlife.

Considerable efforts have been made by NGOs and these industries to communicate with consumers about sustainability issues in tourism, hospitality and events. People have been exhorted to buy locally made souvenirs, but not bits of animals, not have their towels washed, and think about offsetting their carbon footprint by funding the planting of trees with an additional voluntary payment.

Most commentators have doubted very much whether the luxury segment would respond positively to these messages. After all, is luxury about opulence based on ostentatious and excessive consumption – that is almost its definition. And on a positive note, high spending tourists create more jobs and sustain more livelihoods per head than other tourists, so there is an up side to their existence.

However, it is the luxury sector that flies in private jets and rides in large limousines, has villas with private pools on the edge of deserts, eats highly priced rare and endangered species and so on, making this sector perhaps the major threat to sustainability in tourism. Therefore if we are to make tourism, hospitality and events more sustainable, we need to get the luxury consumer on board

and willing to modify their behaviour. But will a high end consumer tolerate the absence of air conditioning in a hot climate or other changes to the product that will reduce the quality, or indeed the glamour, of the experience?

In this chapter I will suggest that at least some luxury customers could be persuaded to modify their expectations and behaviour, if such modified behaviour could be made fashionable and status-enhancing. Throughout this discussion the widest possible definition of sustainability will be used, encompassing environmental sensitivity, economic viability and social equity.

Figure 11.1 sets out some of the dimensions of sustainability that we will then look at in the context of luxury.

Sustainability in tourism, hospitality and events

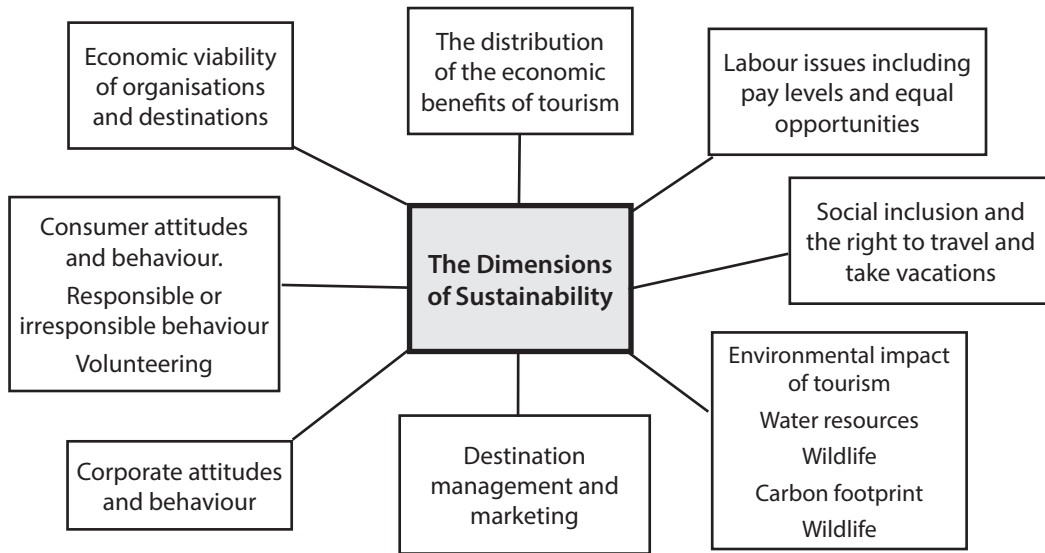


Figure 11.1: Dimensions of sustainability in tourism and hospitality that are relevant to the luxury market.

Let us now discuss what some of the issues identified in Figure 11.1 mean in relation to the concept of luxury in tourism, hospitality and events.

In terms of the economic viability of organisations and destinations, the luxury consumer is very important given their level of spending. For this to happen the organisation or destination needs an offer which is attractive to such consumers and this segment is becoming increasingly demanding. However, as we noted earlier in this book, luxury is not an absolute and is to some extent ‘in the eye of the beholder’, so that any organisation or destination that can persuade consumers that it offers luxury will be able to grow its business and thus ensure its viability.