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Sustainability

By the end of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- Define the key concepts involved in sustainable development
- Critique the inherent contradiction in the term
- Analyse the core concepts of sustainable tourism
- Compare and contrast differing approaches used to achieve sustainable development and/or sustainable tourism.

Introduction

During the early 1980s, it became apparent that major global environmental changes were occurring suddenly and silently and were only beginning to be recognized as an emerging threat by the global scientific community. Scholars and an increasing number of citizens became aware that there was a growing element of uncertainty and risk from human activities on global environments. The establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and endorsed later by the General Assembly of the United Nations was a major step in focusing the global community's attention to the problem. At that time, moderate environmentalists were wrestling with the idea that we can live in a world where economic development and economic pressures for both developing and developed countries would continue. Short-term pressures to develop national economies (along with the social benefits that

derive from it) were considered by policy makers to outweigh long-term potential impacts from that development process. In other words, we failed to ask the question of how can a sustainable economy be developed that integrates both industrial and ecological needs? More recently, advocates of degrowth suggest a more radical change to how the global economy functions. While it is unrealistic to suggest that the solution to our environmental woes would be to wind back the global economy, growing concerns about sea level rise, ecosystem collapse and the emergence of other global ecological crises challenge the idea that it is possible to promote economic growth while maintaining environmental protection.

This chapter explores a range of issues related to sustainable development in general and sustainable tourism in particular. It begins with an overview of the concept of sustainable development before moving onto a discussion of sustainable tourism. The chapter then discusses the range of models and concepts that have been developed to monitor sustainability.

The dilemma of sustainable development

The concept of sustainable development was formalised in 1987 in a report published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987), and then crystallised in the 1992 Rio Summit on sustainable development (Obst, 2016; Torres-Delgado and Lopez-Palomeque, 2012). Sustainable development was defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). This approach contains within it two key concepts: the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs. Sustainability has a number of key principles including:

- **Inter-generational equity** – meaning that the range of activities and the scope of ecological diversity available to future generations is at least as broad as that felt by current ones;
- **Intra-generational equity, social justice and poverty alleviation** – improving the well-being of all residents in a community, and not just benefiting the powerful or the rich;
- **Public participation** – which means that we all share a role to play and that communities need to collectively make decisions rather than having them imposed by external forces;
- **Environmental protection** as an integral component of economic development – economic development without environmental conservation is no longer acceptable;

- **Dealing cautiously with risk and uncertainty** – in situations where environmental impacts of activities are not known, the preferred option is to proceed cautiously or not at all, until the likely impacts can be determined.

But, almost from the beginning the term 'sustainable' was contested (Pearce et al., 1989; Pigram, 1990) and remains so to the present (Biely et al., 2018). As Liu (2003) argues, while the term sustainability is well established, it has been used loosely in the literature, leading Salas-Zapata and Ortiz-Munoz (2018) to conclude the lack of clarity about the concept is a recurring obstacle to its implementation. Carillo and Jorge (2017) add that multiple interpretations of the concept enable it to be moulded to fit the needs of different stakeholders with competing views.

Two competing and polar opposite approaches to sustainability and sustainable development have emerged. The weak sustainability model assumes sustainability can be achieved through a constant wealth approach. The alternate strong sustainability concept is based on the premise of constant natural capital. Both models accept that the world's total asset base is comprised of both natural (ecological and social) and manufactured capital (Islam et al., 2019).

The constant wealth or weak sustainability philosophy assumes that natural capital and manufactured capital are essentially substitutable and considers that there are no differences between the types of well-being they create (Pelanc and Dedeurwaerdere, 2015). It sees economic sustainability as dominating, with the belief that technological advances will resolve environmental issues (Biely et al., 2018). Thus, all that matters is that the total value of the aggregate stock of natural and manufactured capital should be maintained and ideally added to for the sake of future generations (Pelanc and Ballet, 2015). Hence, natural capital can be traded off providing it creates sufficient manufactured capital to compensate for the loss (Islam et al., 2019). This philosophy argues for a business as usual approach.

The constant natural capital or strong sustainability argument, on the other hand, posits that natural capital is non-substitutable, either totally or partially and needs to be maintained. As Islam et al. (2019: 160) note, the contribution of natural capital to the total wealth is unique and critical, so that it cannot be measured in monetary terms and straightforwardly compared with other types of capital, particularly in social cost-benefit analysis. Pelanc and Ballet (2015) also highlight that a distinction must be made between natural and manufactured capital. They point out that natural capital has the risk of irreversibility and thresholds. For example, the extinction of a species is irreversible, while above a certain threshold of pollutants, ecosystems can become overloaded and enter into decline. Importantly, the amount of manufactured capital can be increased or decreased, while natural capital can disappear if it has become stressed beyond the point of being able to replenish itself. Proponents of this view argue we need to do things differently so that the absolute stock of natural capital does not diminish.