15 Tourism and Sustainability

Introduction

Sustainability is a concept used with increasing frequency in relation to tourism. It is often linked to terms such as 'green' tourism or 'ecotourism' and may also be considered to be a form of 'alternative' tourism. However, despite being used for over 30 years, the term sustainability, has not been well defined, which does not stop it being used often. To a certain extent, it can be argued that sustainability is now an overused term and is open to abuse (Mason, 2016), particularly from sectors of the tourism industry, who use it as a marketing term in an attempt to indicate that their product is worthier than another's.

Sustainable development

The modern usage of the term 'sustainability' would appear to date from the late 1980s and is associated strongly with the Brundtland Report of 1987 (Holden, 2000). In this report, the term *sustainable development* was used. The Brundtland Report focused on the environment, linked this with global development, and was largely concerned about resource use associated with what was seen as too rapid development and hence, considered unsustainable.

Five years after the Brundtland Report, at the Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the concerns that were expressed in the Brundtland Report were once again evident. The Earth Summit set out a programme for promoting sustainable development throughout the world. This was to be achieved using the main ideas contained in what became known as Agenda 21, and as Holden (2000:164) indicates, this is an: 'action plan laying out the basic principles required to progress towards sustainability'. Unlike much thinking about sustainable development up to the early 1990s, the particular approach of Agenda 21 is to involve local communities in a 'bottom-up', or grass roots, approach to their own development.

However, the concept of sustainable development was not fully defined in either the Brundtland Report or at the Earth Summit. This means that private organizations, governments, non-government organizations (NGOs) and academics may each have had then, and continue to have, very different views on

the meaning of sustainable development and this is a very significant issue in relation to concerns about how to apply the concept in specific geographical contexts. Nevertheless, the Brundtland Report stressed that sustainable development is intended to be a dynamic concept, and does not mean preservation of the environment, but a process with the focus on conservation and not preservation.

Holden (2000) suggested that although there is a diverse range of views on sustainable development, they can be generally classified into two camps; there are 'techno-centric' views and 'eco-centric' views. The **techno-centric view** suggests that problems can be quantified and solved largely through the application of technology. The **eco-centric view** places great emphasis on 'quality of life' rather than measurements of economic growth that use terms such as 'standard of living' and other quantitative terms. The differing views of the spectrum of techno-centric and eco-centric ideas are shown in Figure 15.1. Here the eco-centric view is represented under the 'deep ecology' heading which follows from the ideas of Doyle and McEachern (1998). In the late 1990s, the techno-centric view was recognized by most commentators as being the dominant one globally (see Bartelmus, 1994), hence it is represented as such in Figure 15.1. However, it should be noted that Fig 15.1 shows a *spectrum of views* and there are many views lying between the extremes.

Dominant world-view	Deep ecology
Strong belief in technology for progress and solutions	Favours low-scale technology that is self-reliant
Natural world is valued as a resource rather than possessing intrinsic value	Sense of wonder, reverence and moral obligation to the natural world
Believes in ample resource reserves	Recognizes the 'rights' of nature are independent of humans
Favours the objective and quantitative	Recognizes the subjective such as feelings and ethics
Centralization of power	Favours local communities and localized decision-making
Encourages consumerism	Encourages the use of appropriate technology
	Recognizes that the earth's resources are limited

Figure 15.1: Differences in views of development between the 'dominant world-view' and 'deep ecology' (adapted from Bartelmus, 1994)

Sustainable tourism

Given that there is a range of views on sustainable development, perhaps it is not surprising that there is also a number of different perspectives on sustainable tourism. The WTO (1998) attempted to define sustainable tourism and suggested that it is:

> *"tourism which leads to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be filled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems".*

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The WTO definition indicates a number of important dimensions of sustainable tourism, including economic, social, cultural and ecological. However, it is important to be aware that at the time that the WTO created its definition of sustainable tourism, there were two major ways of viewing the world. These different views – a more appropriate word would be *paradigms* – had important underlying perspectives that contributed to the views being different. One paradigm suggested that economic factors were most important and should underpin thinking about sustainable tourism; the other had it that ecological factors were more important when defining the concept (Mason, 2016). These paradigms not only have important underlying differences, but the consequences of each is important in terms of what type of tourism is developed. The economic paradigm, which until very recently most people would accept as being the dominant view, and is very similar to the techno-centric view indicated in Figure 15.1, would suggest, for example, making a profit, job creation and income generation as key principles, whilst the ecological paradigm (similar to the eco-centric view in Figure 15.1) would include, for example, minimising habitat disturbance, promoting animal species conservation, and maintaining landscape aesthetics, as major principles.

The first part of the WTO definition also makes it clear that achieving sustainable tourism, whether it is based on a largely economic or a mainly ecological set of principles, requires management. In other words, sustainable tourism has to be worked at, and planned and managed appropriately to achieve what is required, and it is unlikely to occur without this human intervention.

One relatively early view on sustainable tourism, that has been in existence for at least a quarter of a century, is that of a sustainable tourism industry (Coccossis and Papairis, 1996). In this view of sustainable tourism, the development of tourism is one alternative amongst several options, and seen as more acceptable than other more environmentally damaging activities such as logging or mining (Holden, 2000). However, Hunter (1996) indicates that little allowance is made in this view for the cumulative impacts of tourism on the environment. Hunter (1996) suggested a number of other perspectives and contexts in which the environment is more or less central in concepts of sustainable tourism. He suggests that there is another position in which the environment is given more consideration than in the 'sustainable tourism industry perspective' of Coccosis and Papairis (1996). However, even in this position, the environment comes second to attempts to develop tourism, but Hunter (1996) stated this position may be defensible in communities that are heavily dependent on tourism and where any changes would lead to significant threats to the community.

Hunter suggested a third form of sustainable tourism that he termed 'environmentally-led tourism'. In this form, a high quality tourism experience is equated with a high quality environment, and there would be a strong link between the success of the tourism industry and environmental conservation. Unlike the former example of product-led tourism, here the environment is prioritized and forms of tourism are developed that are not damaging to it (Holden, 2008).

Hunter (1996) suggested a fourth scenario, which he termed 'neotenous' tourism, in which very little, or no, tourism is permitted. This could occur, for example in relation to particularly environmentally sensitive areas.

Underlying much of what has been stated above, but not made explicit, is that statements on sustainable tourism should be linked to value judgments. Hence, it is important to be aware that the interpretation of the term 'sustainable tourism' is very closely related to the political context in which the term is being applied. Butler and Hall (1998) argue that it is impossible to separate a particular concept of sustainable tourism from the value system and political context in which it is being used.

If, in early definitions of sustainable tourism, to counter the dominant economic focus of the times, the environment became central, during the early-mid 1990s, socio-cultural factors were also linked closely to the concept. By the last decade of the 20th century, sustainability was usually assumed to refer to the specifically environmental and cultural aspects of the visitor destination area. Today it is possible to suggest that it is artificial to consider only these aspects from the total of all elements that make up the tourism experience. Hence, 'tourism sustainability' has an economic and organizational dimension, as well as socio-cultural and environmental aspects, and as the WTO (1998) definition indicates, also has an important aesthetic dimension.

One of the early thinkers on tourism sustainability was Innskeep, and his views give an indication of how sustainable tourism was conceived in the early years of the last decade of the 20th century. Innskeep (1991) suggested that, in relation to practical applications of concepts of sustainable tourism, there are a number of assumptions that underpin these concepts, and these as indicated below:

- It is possible to define and achieve the type of tourism you want.
- It is possible to establish and sustain appropriate levels of visitor flow.
- It is possible to define and promote equity in development and to reconcile any conflicts arising between the different stakeholders involved, such as the tourist, the resident, the industry agent and the government, and that an appropriate balance of interests can be achieved between host and guest and between private interest and public good.
- It is possible to maintain sustainability over the long term.

Drawing on the work of Innskeep (1991), the key ingredients of sustainable tourism can be discerned, and are as follows:

- Non-depleting in its use of local resources.
- Non-intrusive in the way it fits with the local physical, social, cultural and economic environments.
- A user of natural resources that are minimally transposed or re-configured.
- Integrated with the local physical, social, cultural and economic environment rather than being shut-in on itself.

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