

Tourism Research: A 20-20 Vision



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Understanding the value of tourism: a conceptual divergence

Contents

Introduction	2
Philosophy of value	3
Tourism industry stakeholders	5
A divergence of measurement	7
Conclusions	9
References	10



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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

10 Understanding the value of tourism: a conceptual divergence

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Introduction

Across a variety of disciplines, the value of tourism as a measure of management and development success is a core construct of tourism research. Much of the existing tourism scholarly literature focuses on various attempts to measure and understand the value of tourism and its contributions to tourism development, tourism promotion, the tourism experience, various tourist segments, and special events/mega-events. Great disparity exists in the meaning of the term 'value' across these different literatures.

Moreover, over the past two decades, two key structural changes in tourism development and management have impacted the conceptual foundations of the 'value of tourism'. First, the time perspective of both tourism policy and tourism research has shifted significantly over the past decade, becoming increasingly concerned with the future. Two major examples reflect this shift. The framework for tourism planning and development has largely shifted to 'sustainable tourism' (McCool, 2009). One of the key provisions of sustainability is the protection of resources, services, and facilities for 'future generations' (Saarinen, 2006). Also, the tourism services and consumer research literature has largely shifted to concepts of 'relationship management' (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995) and 'customer centricity'. The key provision of relationship management is to shift tourism services management away from the individual transaction toward creation and management of relationships with consumers (Berger *et al.*, 2006). Second, another key provision of sustainable tourism is the growing importance of understanding tourism destination 'stakeholders', defined as the key constituent groups that affect and are affected by the destination's tourism planning and development decisions (Perdue, 2004). While several streams of stakeholder theory exist, the basic premise across these theories is the importance of identifying stakeholder groups and understanding their key concerns (Jones and Wicks, 1999). A key part of determining those concerns is better understanding how each stakeholder group determines and perceives the value of tourism.

Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the conceptual foundations for measuring the value of tourism, specifically focusing on the evolving differences in these conceptual foundations across time and key stakeholder groups. The chapter's focus is not to propose or suggest any movement toward a common conceptual definition or operationalization of the value of tourism. In fact, the chapter demonstrates how the conceptual foundations of the value of tourism have diverged. For the purpose of this chapter, we are broadly defining the 'value of tourism' as the 'relative worth or contribution of tourism to a business, community or society'.

Philosophy of value

The fundamental question of the ontology of value is: 'Are things valuable because we value them or do we value them because they are valuable?' (Frondizi, 1971). If the answer to this question is the former then we can relate values uniquely to personal human preferences. If the answer is the latter, we must assume that values may then depend on preferences of other people, other living things or even non-living things.

Philosophical discussions about value suggest two alternative bases for determining value: an anthropocentric basis and a naturocentric basis (Vilka, 1997: 87). While it is an intriguing notion that other living things might have equal right to the determination of value, it seems impossible to believe that humans could identify those things much less measure their value without imposing human values. The questions of intrinsic value and rights of other living things are interesting, but for this chapter we focus on the value of tourism from a purely human, anthropocentric perspective.

Importantly, we must recognize that a basic tenant of the anthropocentric perspective is that it conceptually gives humans the right to alter nature for utilitarian reasons. This tenant of human utilitarian interaction with nature has, in some cases, led to the reduction/destruction of natural resources. The anthropocentric value of 'things' naturally implies that we, as humans, have the right to alter and change the environment to meet and fit our needs and consumption levels. At some level, this impacts the concept of 'sustainability', leading to an important, future philosophical discussion of 'value'.

Value as a measure of success

Importantly, for the purposes of this chapter, we have taken the position that understanding the 'value of tourism' by itself is relatively unimportant. Rather, we measure the value of tourism as a means of measuring development, marketing and management success. In the private sector, shareholder value is considered the key measure of business success (Kaplan and Norton, 1992). In the governmental and NGO sector, the primary focus is on improving quality of life. In both sectors, 'value measures' are used as a means to either evaluate existing programmes and

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