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The Challenge of Sustainable Tourism

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

- Define the key concepts involved in sustainable development and sustainable tourism
- Critique the inherent contradiction in the term
- Identify and discuss models that offer some scope to assist tourism to be managed in a more sustainable manner

Introduction

From its early beginnings, travel and tourism has created a range of adverse social, cultural and environmental impacts (Lane, 2017). And, over the same period, policy makers, land use planners and more recently academics, have tried to develop protocols to optimise the economic benefits of tourism while minimising its costs. These efforts have met with only modest success, with Cave and Dredge (2020) arguing they have failed due in part to the massive growth of tourism and the political economy under which it operates. The challenge is even greater today as the world is facing problems caused by population growth, pollution, continued exploitation of non-renewable resources, growth in demand for goods and services, including tourism, and climate change. The climate crisis in particular is emerging as the key threat to long-term sustainability and will require a switch to net-zero emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the very near future if the problems caused by rising global temperatures are to be averted. It may even require a transition away from the current neoliberal “take, make and dispose” approach to resource use, to one based on economy-wide recycling of resources.

The magnitude of the task of transitioning to a global tourism industry that is truly sustainable is enormous. Between 1924 and 2023 the global population quadrupled from 2 billion to 8 billion people, placing significant pressure on the Earth's fixed stock of non-renewable resources as well as its renewable resources. Growing demand for travel has added to the problem. International arrivals increased from an estimated 25 million in 1950 (Rosselló & Santana-Gallego, 2014) to reach an estimated 1.3 billion in 2023 (UNWTO, 2023) with the potential for even further growth as middle-class demand for travel expands in rapidly developing economies including China and India.

Tourism, as a sector that accounts for 8% of global carbon emissions (Lenzen et al., 2018) will be expected to contribute to strategies to deal with these problems. A number of models and frameworks have been developed over past decades aimed at managing tourism at a more sustainable level. Most, though, have met with limited success. This chapter reviews our attempts to transition to a more sustainable tourism sector.

Sustainability

The ideas of 'sustainable development' and 'sustainable tourism' are not new, with Hall et al. (2015) positing that the creation of national parks in the late 19th century represented the first primitive form of sustainability. Lane (2017) indicates that the development of the concept of sustainable tourism can be traced back to the 1970s, when the impacts of unregulated tourism in parts of Europe provoked much concern among academics.

■ The dilemma of sustainable development

The paradigm shift occurred with the formalization of the idea of 'sustainability' in 1987 when *Our Common Future* was published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987). The issue crystallised further in the 1992 Rio Summit on sustainable development (Obst, 2016; Torres-Delgado & 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). In essence, it represented the convergence between the economy and environmentalism (Hardy et al., 2002). 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 ability of the Earth's ecosystems to meet present and future needs.