

# 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 at least 35 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, 2020), 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 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".*