

7

Whose Needs and What is to be Sustained?

Michael Hughes and Angus Morrison-Saunders

Introduction

This chapter explores sustainable tourism development and collaboration in relation to the needs of tourists and of host communities. It is a collaboration of two academics operating in parallel, although occasionally intersecting, fields of study: tourism, and sustainability assessment. Through combining our knowledge and pursuits in each field, we work towards a shared goal that hopefully transcends what could be accomplished alone.

Our approach is to explore the notion of human needs as it is expressed in the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987) definition of sustainable development and the UN World Tourism Organisation (WTO) appropriation of the definition for sustainable tourism development. Our starting point is thus to unpack the key terms employed in these definitions prior to drilling down more specifically into analysing needs in the context of sustainable tourism development and collaboration. In so doing, many inter-related facets of sustainability thinking and of tourism understanding are revealed. Our method is principally a literature review amounting to a theoretical exploration of concepts, illustrated with published examples from practice. Our analysis leads us to propose an alternative definition of sustainable tourism development that emphasises the priority of 'host community' needs that better aligns with the spirit of the WCED definition.

On sustainable development and sustainable tourism development

Ultimately, the definition of sustainable development, in its various guises, rests on the core idea of meeting human needs for enduring wellbeing (Morrison-Saunders & Hughes, 2018; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

The World Health Organization (1995) referred to wellbeing in the context of individual and community health. Drawing on the principles of this definition, wellbeing can be defined as a holistic concept that includes a state of positive physical health, mental health and social function, not just the absence of disease or social dysfunction. Enduring wellbeing means that this positive state persists potentially forever. But as the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) definition of sustainable development makes clear, the notion of meeting human needs is the precursor to realising well-being. In the context of tourists, this begs the question as to whose needs and exactly what is to be sustained?

This World Tourism Organisation (1998) defined sustainable tourism development as development which meets the *needs* of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future (adapted from WTO, 1998). The United Nations World Tourism Organisation updated this definition to read:

“Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (World Tourism Organisation, 2018).

This definition invites collaboration between the three human stakeholder groups identified within it, along with the representatives of the environment. In this chapter we especially focus on exploring the needs of visitors and of tourism host communities. We take it as a given that needs of the tourism industry (e.g. economic viability) and that of the provisioning environment (e.g. conservation of natural and cultural heritage values) are relatively easily understood concepts.

The WCED definition of sustainable development and the WTO definition of sustainable tourism correspond in the main to a sustainability discourse of “pragmatic integration of development and environmental goals” (Pope, et al., 2017: 210). Dryzek equates this conception to “having it all” (1997:121) whereby the development and environmental goals are addressed in tandem with the aim of realising positive outcomes in both simultaneously “not just locally and immediately, but globally and in perpetuity” (p.121). It is often represented as three intersecting circles representing separate environmental, social and economic pillars with ‘sustainability’ being denoted as the ‘sweet spot’ in the centre where all three circles overlap. In practice achieving this ‘win-win-win’ within each of the sustainability pillars simultaneously is extremely unlikely and difficult to accomplish. Rather what tends to ensue is a balancing act which focuses on compromises and trade-offs (Gibson, 2006) seeking to deliver merely a “positive balance of benefits over sacrifices” (Gibson, 2013: 3). We return to the matter of trade-offs later on.

The WCED (1987) specifically identified and sought to address disparities and inequalities in the world wide distribution of wealth. It was recognised that there is pressing need for development that will bring millions of people out of abject poverty; a condition which is a key determinant of unsustainability. In this regard the definition of sustainable development and of sustainable tourism development arising from it also draws upon a discourse of sustainability as a process of directed change or transition (Pope et al., 2017). The starting point is thus that current global conditions are undesirable and consequently the goal is not to sustain 'business as usual' but to seek positive change. In this context, the pursuit of sustainable tourism development intended to meet the needs of tourists and host communities will deliver positive advancements or gains for each.

Collaboration is defined in this book as being more than simply cooperation, but the joint (integrated) effort of individuals to achieve a common objective. However, Liburd and Edwards (2010) noted that sustainable tourism development does not have a static or achievable goal, seemingly creating a conundrum. While sustainability is often framed as something that is uncertain and to be achieved at some point permanently in the future (Morrison-Saunders & Hughes, 2018), the common broad goal arguably is to meet human needs. How these needs are defined, and by whom, is fundamental to the process of sustainable development. In the remainder of this chapter we focus on the notion of 'needs' as central to the definition of sustainable development and how this relates to the notion of achieving a common objective in the context of tourism.

Tourism = Leisure time + voluntary travel

We are well aware that any tourism definition adopted here could spark a reaction by anyone who happens to read this text. Further, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the complex academic discourse on tourism, tourists and the identities and meanings attributed to these concepts (see McCabe, 2005). Given that caveat, our argument in this chapter requires a general understanding of tourism as it relates to meeting human needs. As a starting point, we draw on the wisdom of tourism scholars to note that tourism is often defined to include people undertaking voluntary travel that includes temporarily leaving home and staying overnight somewhere other than at home for one or more of a variety of reasons (Gunn & Var, 2002; Hall & Lew, 2009; Leiper, 2004). Consideration of needs in the context of the tourist relates to the physical resources and infrastructure (for example, accommodation, transportation etc.) available to them and the kind of care (for example, services) that they will receive at their host destinations – both of which can contribute to their overall wellbeing. We return to this point below.