

Introduction: Pathways and Pitfalls in the Search for Sustainable Tourism

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Introduction

The growing, even accelerating, concerns about the status of the world environment initially triggered by such publications as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the Club of Rome report (Meadows *et al.*, 1972) were coalesced by the Brundtland Commission's *Our Common Future*, which argued that survival of the human species depended on adoption of a new paradigm of economic development termed 'sustainable development' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This paradigm was significantly different from previous calls for environmental protection and economic progress in the sense that it represented a combination of both, while attending to quality-of-life needs. The Commission argued that the only effective method to protecting the environment, addressing economic progress, alleviating poverty and preserving human rights was through a developmental paradigm that 'provided for the needs of the present while ensuring that options for the future were preserved'.

The Brundtland Commission report served as a catalyst for discussing the future of human society and ways of ensuring that development is sustainable over the long term. The report was favourably received in many academic and policy circles around the world, and as a result stimulated a great amount of discussion. Yet, many questions have been left unanswered: How does one conserve the environment, provide a more equitable distribution of income among those living at the present, and ensure that there is equality in

access to quality of life? Can we optimize all three goals, or are there trade-offs involved? If so, what are they? How does one provide for the needs of the present while preserving options for future generations? Who represents future generations and their needs in these decisions? What is supposed to be sustained? What is the role of different economic sectors, non-government organizations, and government institutions in seeking sustainability? What is the role of ethics and science in sustainability policy? How can development be sustained? Can sustainability be achieved within existing institutional and political-economy frameworks and processes? How does one develop and apply a science of sustainability while promoting more public participation in government decision-making?

Academic fields such as agriculture, ecology, economics, management, political science, psychology and community development have made progress in developing research and policy on the meaning of sustainability and sustainable development. In this widely scattered search for purpose, a variety of themes have developed, including sustainability as ecosystem maintenance, preservation of natural capital, provision for intergenerational and intragenerational equity, sustainable development, redistribution of political power, and maintenance or restoration of the resiliency of human-environment systems. These different themes have made communicating about sustainability difficult but have also raised important and useful questions about the pathways, interrelationships, and pitfalls to a more sustainable world.

Tourism has not escaped the discussions concerning sustainability. Indeed many texts, including this one, have been challenged to frame the question of sustainable tourism, its dimensions and challenges (e.g. Innskeep, 1991; McCool and Watson, 1995; Stabler, 1997; Wahab and Pigram, 1997; Hall and Lew, 1998; Swarbrooke, 1999; Font and Tribe, 2000). Clearly, tourism has become a global financial power, achieving a planetary presence unequalled by many other economic sectors. As it has grown, so have the criticisms of its environmental, economic, cultural and political consequences (e.g. Cater and Goodall, 1992; McLaren, 1997; Rothman, 1998; Honey, 1999). Tourism is no longer the benign economic development tool that the boosterism of the past purported it to be. Yet, the social and environmental issues associated with tourism development are not necessarily significantly different from those of other methods of development, such as forestry, mining, manufacturing and agriculture. This book is designed to illustrate many of the issues and approaches associated with sustainable tourism development, policy and research. Included are case studies of tourism development, using both quantitative and qualitative methods; analytical frameworks for managing tourism; and chapters addressing critical questions about

the relationship between tourism and sustainability goals. As a whole, the book demonstrates the many dimensions and topics associated with attempts to address the complex issues associated with sustainability and tourism.

In this chapter, we outline several of the pathways and pitfalls confronting tourism as it seeks an appropriate role in the world. These include:

1. The meaning of sustainable tourism – there are several such meanings, which ones are used suggest not only world-views but also have implications for other issues.
2. Integration with the larger economy and linkage with scale of consideration – planners, academics and advocates are increasingly concerned with how tourism development fits in with broader social and economic development goals.
3. The search for indicators – how do we know if sustainable tourism is indeed sustainable without a set of measurable variables that indicate progress?
4. Planning and implementation – sustainable tourism does not just happen, it occurs only with explicit decision-making processes that consider what futures are plausible and desirable and the pathways to them.
5. Forms of knowledge and public participation – achieving sustainable tourism will require a variety of individuals, agencies and programmes, each using different forms of knowledge and each involving those affected by decisions.

We discuss each of these pathways and pitfalls briefly, and then provide an overview of the book.

Sustainable tourism, sustaining tourism or what should tourism sustain? Different meanings, alternative pathways

As with its larger context, the meanings attached to sustainable tourism have varied significantly, with little apparent consensus among authors and government institutions. This leads to two problems. First, sustainable tourism constitutes what is termed a 'guiding fiction': guiding fictions serve socially valuable functions as long as definitions remain vague; they stimulate and organize social discourse around problematic issues, but when individuals seek the more specific definitions needed to guide action, this function breaks down as groups argue over the meaning of terms (Shumway, 1991). The challenge here is to maintain the pathway to sustainable tourism while providing secure venues for public deliberation about meanings and actions.

Secondly, agreement on meanings is a necessary, but not sufficient condition, for making progress on socially problematic challenges. Action in society requires a variety of actors performing in concert (Friedmann, 1973). In tourism development, this includes promotional agencies, governmental planning and zoning institutions, community development groups, local residents, transportation planners, private entrepreneurs and others. Use of different meanings of terminology central to discourse can lead ultimately to conflict and development mistrust. This lack of consensus on meanings is becoming a significant pitfall in the search for sustainability, for the different meanings result from significantly different perceptions of tourism and its role in society. There are at least three different meanings that relate directly to the notion of sustainable tourism that are used in the literature. These meanings reflect a continuum of world-views, from those that are industry centred to those that are more broadly socially centred.

1. Sustaining tourism: how to maintain tourism industry businesses over a long time frame

This view suggests that the primary task is to build and manage a set of tourism businesses that can maintain themselves over a long period. This view is narrow in the sense that the objective of sustainable tourism is the tourism (and recreation) industry and included business firms. While maintaining the health of individual businesses may be viewed as a worthy social goal, this perspective does not necessarily recognize tourism as a tool to enhance economic opportunity, protecting a community's cultural and natural heritage, and maintaining a desired quality of life. This view of sustainable tourism would place great emphasis on maintaining promotional programmes that ensure that the number of tourists visiting an area continues to rise. In this sense of sustainable tourism, the more tourists, the better. This view, of course, neglects to see tourism as an input, as a method of enhancing social and economic welfare.

2. Sustainable tourism: a kinder, gentler form of tourism that is generally small in scale, sensitive to cultural and environmental impact and respects the involvement of local people in policy decisions

This view comes from an argument that there are finite biophysical and social limits to tourism development. It recognizes that tourism, as any other economic activity, can overwhelm a community with negative social and environmental impacts. Thus, sustainable tourism, closely allied with the notion of ecotourism, is small in scale, designed to

benefit local peoples and communities, and protect resources upon which the tourism and recreation industry is built. Within this view, there remains considerable divergence of opinion, with some authors suggesting that sustainable tourism represents the conduct of individual tourists, others maintaining that it is ethical behaviour on the part of tourism- and recreation-based businesses, and still others suggesting that it focuses on the amount of social and environmental impact. A larger question, however, concerns unnecessary, normative and counter-productive distinctions between sustainable tourism and mass tourism that often accompany this meaning. Much of the globe's tourism may qualify as mass tourism, but the central question of sustainability concerns how the negative social and economic impacts of human activity can be reduced. Given that most tourism would probably be defined as mass tourism, it follows that the greatest progress in reducing impacts would be to address mass tourism, not ignore it.

3. What should tourism sustain? Tourism as a tool for development

This view sees tourism as a tool of social and economic development, as a method to enhance economic opportunity, not as an end itself. This question is similar to Gale and Cordray's (1994) question, 'What should be sustained?', in a natural resource management context, to which they gave nine different answers, primarily focusing on various ecosystem characteristics. In this sense, tourism is integrated into broader economic and social development programmes (Hunter, 1995; McCool *et al.*, 2001) and can be viewed as a method – similar to many definitions of ecotourism – to protect the natural and social capital upon which the industry is built. By asking this question, we view tourism as a tool, which at times may be important to a community and other times not so important. In this sense, we are not speaking of protecting cultures for their value to the tourism industry, but because of their value to their peoples (Robinson, 1999). It may be possible under this view that tourism is not sustained over a long period, but is used as a method to accumulate income and government revenue that can be used later for other development tools. Tourism would be viewed as part of a larger policy framework designed to achieve a sustainable society. In addition, the type of tourism in this view may not necessarily be small in scale.

These alternative views of sustainable tourism carry significantly different implications for social and economic policy, selection of indicators, public participation and the planning processes needed to encourage tourism development in the private sector. They reflect

differing perspectives on the concept of sustainability.

We prefer to use the third approach to studying sustainability and tourism. It seems that it more properly places tourism as a means and not an end to economic development. It allows tourism to be considered as one of several alternatives that can help a community overcome its weaknesses and preserve its strengths. It views tourism as a tool and not as an end.

Integrating tourism into broader social and economic development processes

To think of tourism in any of these meanings except for the first, means that tourism is integrated into development decisions in the larger social and economic context. Sustainable tourism as a kinder, gentler form embraces not only growing societal concerns over social and environmental impacts but also a moral commitment to future generations. It promotes softer forms of tourism, but fails to address where the largest gains in impact reduction – particularly environmental consequences – can occur. Determining what tourism should sustain requires more explicit consideration of social goals and values.

Tourism is a method that society, in many places, has decided can be used to enhance economic opportunity. Far too often, however, its ultimate goal of enhancing economic opportunity has been neglected in favour of unbridled boosterism, with few acknowledgements of tourism's negative social and environmental consequences. In the US, state-level tourism agencies are generally involved solely in promotion activities, through advertising, 'fam tours' and the like, without significant responsibility in other areas of marketing, such as pricing and product development. This focus on promotion only fails to capture the important positive and negative consequences of tourism in identification of goals and policy implementation.

The fragmented and disjointed nature of tourism development remains an important pitfall in seeking a more sustainable world. State and local promotion agencies (e.g. destination marketing organizations, visitor and convention bureaus), for example, often have little planning relationship with local government agencies, usually are focused on promotion, rather than marketing (which includes 'product protection and development') and generally have little influence over private investment in tourism infrastructure, services and opportunities. The variety of agencies and organizations with competing, if not conflicting, goals makes the coordinated action needed for achieving sustainability difficult. One agency may promote protected areas as a tourism destination while another is responsible for managing the tourists and their impacts when they arrive. Such compartmentalized

decision-making remains a great obstacle to integrated planning and development.

Since tourism development and promotion are collective decisions (in the sense that government agencies provide the funding), knowledge and attitudes of the public are important considerations in policy articulation and implementation. Attitude data have been collected for many years in a variety of situations. The data show general support for tourism, but concern about equity in funding the cost of services needed by tourists, about excessive use leading to crowding of favourite recreation areas, and about the ability of tourism to provide jobs that pay good wages. This type of information can assist promotion agencies review the impacts of their advertising efforts and suggest new ways to enhance opportunities for tourism development.