SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: THE LONG ROAD FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Abstract

Predicated on socio-economic changes in the more developed countries, international tourism in less developed countries has become an attractive option for economic development. As international tourism continued to grow however, it became apparent that a range of negative impacts was affected. As a result, sustainable development became a focus for tourism as a development tool. There are several inherent challenges in applying the principles of sustainable development at an operational level in tourism. These include the nature of the tourism industry and product, the fragmented fashion in which critical decisions about tourism are made, and the diverse and often conflicting interests in tourism development held by a broad range of stakeholders. Sustainability under these conditions is an elusive concept and even more of a challenge to implement within the tourism system. This paper considers the pragmatic implications of operationalizing sustainable practices in tourism development vis-à-vis the nature of the tourism industry and product.

Introduction

The post-WWII area saw an unprecedented growth in international tourism. Socio-economic changes in the more developed countries such as
higher incomes, better income distribution, longer paid holidays, improvements in transportation technology and a decline in travel costs, provided the means for people to travel in numbers never before realized. Combined with this was a very positive image of tourism development conveyed by the advocacy platform, and the willingness of the World Bank and other institutions to fund tourism projects (Pleumarom, 1994).

International tourism, with its emphasis on the exploitation of 'free' resources (sun, see, sand and friendly people), became an attractive option for economic development for less developed countries (LDCs). Tourism, unlike other development options such as manufacturing, mining, forestry etc., was widely perceived to be a clean and renewable industry. Because it drew upon 'free' natural, historical, social and cultural resources it was thought to be less capital intensive in its requirements for development. Tourism was seen to have potential to be a major driving force for economic development in many LDCs because of its large potential multiplier and spillover effects on the rest of the economy and its generation of jobs for unskilled and semi-skilled workers. For LDCs with limited exploitable natural resource basis in particular, tourism was a viable development option offering an important opportunity for economic diversification (World Tourism Organization & International Hotel and Restaurant Association [WTO & IHRA], 1999). By the early 1970s it became apparent that the 'smokeless industry' of tourism was not as benign as first thought.

As early as 1973, the potential negative impacts of tourism were being considered (see for example Young, 1973). These early critiques of tourism as a development tool focused primarily on the negative socio-cultural impacts (see for example deKadt, 1979), but as international tourism continued to grow exponentially, it became apparent that negative impacts were affected on the environment and economies of LDCs as well. The initial response to these negative impacts involved a series of initiatives undertaken by public sector bodies to attempt to manage tourism through visitor management techniques. These initiatives were designed to ameliorate the worst of the impacts in the short-term. Overall, these were small-scale, localized initiatives that did not attempt to change the nature of tourism as a whole (Swarbrooke, 1999). They were however, the precursors of consideration of sustainable tourism development.
Sustainable Tourism Development

As a result of the global policies set forth in the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development to the United Nations General Assembly's report "Our Common Future" (otherwise known as the Brundtland Report), and the subsequent United Nations Conference on Environment (popularly known as "The Earth Summit") in 1992, sustainability emerged as a key issue in development. The adoption of Agenda 21 at The Earth Summit further elaborated and expressed the sustainable development approach. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, tourism academics and practitioners also began to consider the implications of sustainable development for their own industry.

Since the Earth Summit, the concept of sustainable development has continued to come under increasing attention from both tourism theorists and practitioners. Its basic premise has received widespread acceptance as a desirable outcome of tourism development. This has been reflected in the proliferation of sustainable tourism development plans, policy statements and guidelines. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) espoused the sustainable approach to tourism, and started to apply sustainable development principles in all of its tourism planning and development (WTO, 1998). The United Nations and its agencies have also addressed the importance of tourism and sustainable development on numerous occasions. In 1997, the General Assembly at its special session to review the implementation of Agenda 21 noted the importance of tourism and requested the development of an action plan specific to tourism development.

Despite the attention given to it, sustainable tourism development has proved to be difficult to define and operationalize. As Harrison (1996; p. 72) stated, "by combining development (inevitably a value laden concept) with sustainability (which is allegedly non-operational and reformist) we thus arrive at the doubly vague concept of sustainable development, only then to focus on one aspect of this dubious process-that of sustainable tourism". The concept of sustainable tourism is variously interpreted as a process of tourism development and/or an outcome of tourism development. This lack of consensus on its meaning and application has led to the suggestion that "defining sustainable development in the context of tourism
Sustainable Tourism Development has become something of a cottage industry in the academic literature of late" (Garrod & Fyall, 1998, p. 199).

This notwithstanding, a range of definitions of sustainable tourism development have been proposed. These definitions generally fall within two categories - those which focus on sustainable tourism as an economic activity, and those which view tourism as an element of wider sustainable development policies (Sharpley, 2000). Although both of these approaches to defining sustainable tourism development have merit, what they fail to do is to build a theoretical link between the concept of sustainable development and the particular context of tourism. There appears to be an unquestioning acceptance that the principles and objectives of sustainable development can be applied to tourism. As a result, several fundamental questions about tourism's role in development in general and the validity of the concept of sustainable tourism in particular, fail to be addressed (Sharpley, 2000). This paper considers the pragmatic implications of operationalizing the principles of sustainable development in relation to the context of tourism.

**Tourism - The Industry, the Product and Its Organization**

In the past 50 years, tourism has been marked by extraordinary expansion. In 1950 there were 25 million international tourist arrivals recorded. By 1999, the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2000) estimated that there were in excess of 664 million international tourist arrivals and that international tourism receipts for that year (excluding international fare receipts) reached US$ 455 billion. Tourism is continuing to grow and it is predicted that by 2010, there will be one billion international tourist arrivals annually. To place the total phenomenon of tourism in perspective, it is estimated that international tourism accounts for only 20% of all tourist activity. The rest comprises domestic travel (WTO & IHRA, 1999). Tourism, it can be argued, is now the world's largest economic sector.

The economic importance of tourism is indisputable. Tourism is one of the five top export categories for 83% of countries and the main source of foreign exchange for at least 38% of them. In 1998, international tourism and international fare receipts accounted for approximately eight percent of total export earnings on goods and services worldwide. Total international
Sustainable Tourism Development

Tourism receipts (inclusive of international fares) amounted to an estimated US$ 532 billion, surpassing all other international trade categories (WTO, 2000). Tourism is the only international trade in services in which the LDCs have consistently had surpluses compared with the rest of the world. Between 1980 and 1996, LDCs' positive balance in the travel account rose from US$ 4.6 billion to US$ 65.9 billion. This was driven primarily by the growth of inbound tourism to countries in Asia, the Pacific and Africa (WTO & IHRA, 1999).

The global tourism sector is currently dominated by industrialized economies from which most of the world's tourism flow originates. The tourism demand from people in more developed countries however, is leveling off. Developing economies, particularly the more dynamic emerging economies (such as India) have been experiencing an increased demand for travel. This has led to a rapid growth in domestic and interregional travel. The economies of East Asia and the Pacific alone accounted for about 15% of global tourist arrivals in 1997 (WTO & IHRA, 1999). The full impact on global tourism of these emerging economies is as yet unrealized. The sheer volume of tourist movements raises significant challenges to any notion of sustainable development.

The Tourism Industry

Tourism is often spoken of in terms of being an industry. Tourism however, is not a single industry in the traditional sense. Tourism comprises a range of products and services, whose boundaries for inclusion are poorly defined. From an economic perspective, an industry is defined as being a group of independent firms, all turning out the same product, sameness being defined in terms of their substitutability expressed as the cross-elasticity of demand. It is clear that the focus of 'industry' includes: individual business establishments grouped together; revenue received by the economic units; and, the production and sale of a common product (in terms of substitutability) (Davidson, 1998). Superficially, it is understandable how tourism has been conceptualized in terms of these factors. In reality, tourism defies the straightforwardness of this approach.

Firstly, tourism does not comprise a single 'type' of business, nor does it lend itself to the grouping together of similar business. Likorish and
Jenkins (1997), suggest that tourism comprises three kinds of business or "trades": (1) the primary trades, which are most commonly associated with tourism (e.g., transport, tour companies, travel agencies, accommodations, catering facilities and attractions); (2) the secondary trades that help support tourism, though are not exclusive to tourism (e.g., retail shopping, banks and insurance, entertainment and leisure activities, personal services); and, (3) the tertiary trades, which provide the basic infrastructure and support for tourism (e.g., public sector services, food and fuel, manufacturing). The inherent challenges accompanying the variable boundaries of what comprises the tourism industry are further exacerbated when the nature of the tourism 'product' is also considered.

### The Tourism Product

Conceptualizing tourism as an industry also infers the production and sale of a common product. But what is the tourism 'product'? Unlike other items for consumption, tourism is not a single, tangible product. The tourism product is composite in nature and includes tangible and intangible aspects. There are three distinct tourism 'products': the tourism experience; the place product; and, tourism products (O'Fallon, 1994). The tourism experience (the macro-level product) comprises all that the tourist sees, uses and experiences as part of their tourist encounter. The place product is the tourist destination as the point of consumption of certain components of the tourism experience. Finally, the tourism product refers to the individual products such as accommodation, attractions, restaurants and souvenirs.

The tourism product can be further differentiated by its characteristics. These characteristics themselves are not distinctive. In composite however, they make tourism a unique type of 'product'. As suggested above, tourism comprises a range of tangible and non-tangible products. Tourists purchase a number of tangible inputs (e.g., airline seats, hotel room, meals etc.), but they also purchase intangible 'products' as part of their experience (e.g., scenery, climate, friendliness of the host population, heritage etc.).

Consumption of the tourist product is non-rival. Tourism related purchases generally grant the tourist a right to use a particular product as
opposed to the right to own it. Therefore, the sales to and consumption of these goods by the tourist does not diminish the availability of ‘stock’ over time. Moreover, the product may be ‘multi-consumed’ by more than one individual or group at a time; thus a tourist is not always purchasing exclusive rights to use a good. Even though the same product is being consumed simultaneously, the individual consumers (tourists) may perceive that they are using unique or different products because they are emphasizing different characteristics.

Because of the intangible and service nature of many of the tourism products, they cannot be inspected prior to purchase or consumption. Once consumed the product is gone, and cannot be returned if ‘damaged’ or the ‘incorrect fit’. Another reason tourists cannot ‘sample’ the product before purchasing is that much of the tourist product is immobile. Tourism cannot be taken to the consumer; the tourist must be taken to the product. Also, like all service goods, much tourism related goods are perishable and cannot be stored if unused.

Frequently, tourism products are complimentary. One element of supply cannot replace another. For example, transportation to a destination is not substitutable for a night’s accommodation. Tourism is a form of complimentary demand whereby tourist demand is for a ‘bundle’ of goods and services, not for any single product - the various elements of the tourist product cannot survive without each other. Finally, demand for tourism-related products is particularly vulnerable to exogenous forces, or demand shifters, such as political instability or changes to foreign exchange rates (O’Fallon, 1994).

As discussed above, the conceptualization of tourism as an industry and a product is broad in scope and complex in nature. This complexity is further reflected in the fragmented way in which tourism is organized.

**Levels of Organization, Distribution of Power and Involvement**

Critical decisions about tourism development are made at local, national, regional and international levels. Despite the apparent vertical integration of these levels, decisions are often made in a mutually exclusive fashion, with little or no consultation or collaboration. Governments, non-
governmental organizations (NGOs) and various professional and industry organizations, which often have diverse and conflicting interests in tourism development, further overlay this organizational structure. Additionally, within each of these levels exists the ‘plant’ that comprises tourism (i.e., commercial enterprises that provide services such as accommodation, transportation and tour operations). Finally, the tourists, the ‘consumers’ of the tourism ‘product’, comprise the demand side of tourism. They enter the system with unique and diverse ranges of motivations, attitudes and values. Each one of these components and levels in the tourism system must be considered in the operationalization of sustainable development practices.

Also playing a critical role in sustainable tourism development is the distribution of power influencing the nature of development within the industry. With the increase in transnational corporate (TNC) interest in tourism and the emergence of global alliances in all aspects of the tourism product (e.g., airlines, hotels, tour operators etc.), it is not clear where the power lies to promote and enforce sustainable practices. The profit driven, immediate economic return orientation of the tourism industry is often in direct conflict with the need to protect the social and environmental resources that are coming under increasing pressure. The industry is in effect, destroying the product(s) it seeks to promote. Sustainability under these conditions is an elusive concept and even more of a challenge to operationalize within the system.

Finally, the interests and needs of the different stakeholders in tourism must also be taken into consideration. Stakeholders in tourism comprise a broad range of participants who have both rights and responsibilities within the system. Six main stakeholder groups have been identified as having interests in sustainable tourism (Swarbrooke, 1999):

- **The public sector**--This stakeholder group includes supra-governmental bodies such as the European Union (EU), national governments, local authorities and quasi-governmental organizations (such as national tourism organizations)

- **The tourism industry**--As discussed above.
• **Voluntary sector organizations**—This includes pressure groups such as Tourism Concern, and tourism professional bodies such as the International Association of Travel Agents (IATA)

• **The host community**—Those who reside at the tourism destination and as a result, form part of the tourism "product".

• **The media**—This includes both travel and non-travel media.

• **The tourist**

There is a need for partnership and cooperation between the various stakeholders in tourism. However, it must be realized that stakeholder groups, from the community to the international level, have different goals in terms of tourism development. This global-local nexus can result in competition for limited resources, issues of (in)equity and distribution, and the need to balance the costs and benefits of various actions (Milne, 1998). For example, within the South Pacific region alone, environmental and economic policy decisions are made on nine levels, including global, regional, national, sectoral, local government, community (village or sectoral such as fishers and farmers), corporate, family, and personal. Stakeholders at each level have different needs, goals, viewpoints, and information access. Applying key principles for sustainable tourism to this scale of participants and their varying needs is extremely complex. It also requires that the attitudes of both the demand side (tourists) and supply side (industry) be changed.

**Sustainable Tourism - Just What Is Being “Sustained”?**

The World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as tourism development that "meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future...leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems" (WTO, 1998, p. 21). As stated, the principles advocated in this definition are almost impossible to operationalize.
A surplus of wishful thinking and a lack of realism and pragmatism in the sustainable tourism debate (Swarbrooke, 1999) has led to critical questions failing to be addressed, such as those posed by Luke (1995, p. 21-22),

Sustainable for how long: a generation, one century, a millennium, ten millennia? Sustainable as what level of human appropriation: individual households, local villages, major cities, entire nations, global economies? Sustainable for whom: all humans alive now, all humans that will ever live, all human beings living at this time, all living beings that will ever live? Sustainable under what conditions: for transnational contemporary capitalism, for low impact Neolithic hunters and gatherers, for some future space-faring global empire? Sustainable development of what: personal income, social complexity, gross national product; GNP frugality, individual consumption, ecological biodiversity?

Although a very commendable ideal, sustainable tourism is fraught with other challenges, both in terms of definition and operationalization. Tourism is a complex and fragmented phenomenon that despite its critical role in the global economy does not conform to classical definitions of industry and product. Its organization and administration is complex and the needs of different stakeholder groups are conflicting. Given this context, how can tourism be sustainable, and what is it that should be sustained? Wall (1997, p. 45) extends the questions posed by Luke (1995) by considering the application to tourism in particular,

But what is this greater good and what is to be sustained and who is to decide this? ...Should one be trying to sustain individuals, communities, regions or nations; experiences for tourists, incomes for businesses or lifestyle for residents; individual enterprises, economic sectors or whole economies and production systems; economic activities, cultural expressions or environmental conditions? Should all existing tourism developments be sustained or is it preferable that some be allowed to decline gracefully to be replaced by other activities? And should these new activities be touristic
so that one could speak of sustainable tourism even though the form of tourism has changed and the new form might not contribute to the broader goal of sustainable development? Must all tourism developments be sustainable, or can one envisage situations in which tourism is advocated as a temporary, intermediate means to achieve other, longer-term goals?

These are questions that are exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to answer, yet are essential if the ethos of sustainable development is to be applied to tourism.

Further confounding the problematic of sustainable tourism is ambiguity surrounding the use of the term itself. Sustainable tourism is often popularly conceptualized as a more ‘elite’ form of tourism and the term is frequently used interchangeably with others such as alternative tourism, ecotourism, ‘soft’ tourism, ‘green’ tourism and the like. The reality of tourism however, is that in 1999, there were over 664 million international tourist movements, of which approximately 80% could be defined as ‘mass tourism’. This polarization of sustainable tourism away from mass tourism does little to address the real issues of sustainable tourism development.

Potentially, sustainable tourism could become a divisive force in society if there continues to be a value based distinction made between 'good' tourism (the so-called alternative forms of tourism) and 'bad' tourism (mass tourism) (Swarbrooke, 1999). The interchangeability of ecotourism with sustainable tourism in particular, displays an inadequate understanding of both terms as not all forms of ecotourism are sustainable and not all sustainable tourism takes place in natural areas. It could be suggested that an ecotourist can be more demanding than the mass tourist, who may not desire to visit endangered species in remote locations can. Additionally, the needs and wastes of the mass tourist may be more readily planned for and managed in large numbers incorporating economies of scale (Wall, 1997).

The relationship between sustainable tourism and ecotourism needs to be critically evaluated and recognition needs to be given that the latter can be diametrically opposed to the former (Swarbrook, 1999; WTO & UNEP, 2000). For tourism to be sustainable, all forms of tourism (not just
elite forms of alternative tourism) must move towards the goal of sustainability (deKadt, 1992; Krippendorf, 1987; WTO & UNEP, 2000).

Cooperation, Collaboration and Integration

Sustainable tourism is about sustaining both the industry as a whole (particularly its economic benefits) and the attributes of the product (social, cultural, environmental and economic) on which it is based. An inherent challenge in doing this is defining what actually comprises the industry and the product. As discussed previously, it has been suggested that the tourism industry consists of three types of businesses: the primary trades related directly to tourism; the secondary trades that support tourism; and the tertiary trades that provide the basic infrastructure and support for the industry. Given this definition, ostensibly, almost any business could be included under the auspices of the tourism industry. Likewise, the tourism product is equally difficult to define, and includes an inestimable range of tangible and intangible goods, services and experiences.

To further complicate this context, tourism is an integrated system in which the constituent parts are linked. A change in one part affects the other parts. This infers that sustainable tourism requires a holistic approach (Leiper, 1990; Swarbrooke, 1999). The high level of cooperation, collaboration and integration required to achieve a holistic approach to sustainable tourism on any meaningful level is obvious. This level of cooperation however, is very elusive. Sustainable tourism is in many ways about the competition for and distribution of finite resources, so in this respect, requires a political solution. A balance must be struck between tourism and other existing and potential activities. Trade-off between sectors may be necessary in the interests of the greater good if sustainable development is to be achieved (Wall, 1997). For example, one of the underlying principles for sustainable tourism is to use natural, social and cultural resources in a sustainable manner. At the household level, a family may accept a proposal worth millions of dollars for a mine to be located on their property. The financial survival of their neighbor however, may depend on a tourist nature walk through a portion of the rainforest that will now be destroyed by the development of this mine. At a community level, the income generated by employment and sales of goods and services associated with the mine outweighs the economic ability of the nature tour.
Thus, from a socio-economic perspective, the use of natural resources is compromised for financial gain.

This sequence can also be repeated at a national level. Development activities from any one sector compete with development activities from all the other sectors (e.g., agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism). At times, what is believed to be a goal at a national level for bringing about economic development and poverty alleviation, may in fact compromise the utilization of natural resources, remove development opportunities for the poor, or increase costs of labor. This particular issue is common place in less developed countries.

Because of increased international competition amongst destinations and the presence of large and increasingly powerful transnational corporations (TNCs) (primarily in accommodation and tour operations sectors), there is increasing concern that the regulatory competence of the nation State is now being superseded by the power of big business (WTO, 1999). It needs to be recognized that the future of tourism is likely to be determined for the most part by the tourism industry, which is dominated by the private sector.

To address this escalating imbalance between public and private sector interests, the WTO recommends that governments guide the formation of regulations in a fashion congruent with the primary principles of sustainable tourism (e.g., investment guidelines for TNCs, encouragement for environmental and social impact assessment, encouragement of transfer of information and technologies from TNCs to the local context and encouragement of local human resource utilization) (WTO, 1999). This however, emphasizes the formulation of sustainable tourism strategies, rather than rendering explicit how these strategies can be implemented. This also places a great deal of faith in public sector planning despite such planning having been discredited in recent years because of its apparent failures (Swarbrooke, 1999).

A Good Idea in Theory, But…

The concept of sustainable tourism development arose out of recognition of both the economic importance of tourism, as well as its realized and potential impacts. In essence, tourism was beginning to destroy the products it sought to promote. Sustainable tourism was promoted as a
means to address these issues. It was embraced with minimal consideration of the theoretical link between the concept of sustainable development and the particular context of tourism. There was an unquestioning acceptance that the principles and objectives of sustainable development could be applied to tourism. Consequently, several fundamental questions about tourism’s role in development in general and the validity of the concept of sustainable tourism in particular, failed to be addressed. As a result, sustainable tourism can be accused of being an inadequate concept, raising more questions than it can answer.

The nature and scope of tourism precludes any easy answers to this problematic. Responses to sustainable tourism development commonly represent two basic schools of thought: (1) concern with the promotion of sustainable development, despite its challenges, and, (2) concern with the condemnation of the industry. The latter approach argues that sustainable development is a myth and that it is impossible to promote tourism whilst at the same time maintaining a good quality environment. The former accepts that tourism is potentially destructive, however, acknowledges that tourism will continue to be a significant global phenomenon. Therefore, there needs to be some way of developing tourism in unison with the broader environment (Niles, 1991).

Few people would now dispute that tourism is a 'smokeless industry' as was once thought; though arguably, its impacts are more benign than other extractive forms of development. Given the economic importance of tourism many accept that it is in the continuing interests of tourism to ensure the longevity of the resources on which it depends. There is a need to achieve a balance between commercial and broader environmental interests. Because of the complexity of the tourism industry and product, and the fragmented way in which tourism is organized, sustainable tourism is inconsistent with the developmental aspects of sustainable development. The dependent nature of tourism production on a global scale and the characteristics of tourist consumption do not fit easily with the principles of endogenous, alternative development. This suggests that the principles of sustainable development cannot be transposed directly onto the context of tourism.

Notwithstanding these significant questions and challenges, tourism remains one of the most significant phenomena in contemporary society.
Assuming that current forecasting is accurate, it is also a phenomenon that will continue to grow in both size and socioeconomic importance. There is no strong empirical evidence that sustainable tourism is an achievable goal. At the same time however, many of the principles of sustainable tourism are valid and play a vital role in drawing attention to the global nature of tourism and its impacts (Sharpley, 2000).

No single type of tourism is inherently more sustainable than another. To suggest otherwise precludes critical consideration of the salient issues. The concepts of sustainable tourism, as difficult as they are to operationalize, do encourage consideration of long-term perspectives, foster notions of equity, encourage the critical evaluation of tourism, promote an appreciation of the importance of inter-sectoral linkages and facilitate cooperation and collaboration between different stakeholders. This represents significant progress towards sustaining tourism as a whole, as well as a progression towards more conscientious forms of tourism that sustain and maintain the attributes (social, cultural, environmental and economic) on which the tourism industry is predicated.

Inevitably any form of [tourism] development can only be judged sustainable or unsustainable after a long period of operation, when it can be ascertained if the demands of the activity have not prejudiced the needs of what were future generations when the development began” (Butler, 1998, p. 31).

References


