

Achieving Sustainable Tourism: Possibilities, Practice and Pitfalls

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Introduction:

In 1990 I came to the city of Edinburgh to give the opening address at Scotland's first Conference on Sustainable Tourism, held at Queen Margaret University College under the far-sighted management of Frank Howie. Since then, part of my life has been spent helping to develop research into sustainable tourism through founding and co-editing the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, now entering its 16th year, and ranked 4th out of the world's 77 peer reviewed tourism research journals. Nearly one thousand papers have been submitted to the journal in those 16 years. Another part of my life has been spent tackling the often thorny problems of implementing sustainable tourism, through consultancy and advocacy. That process has included advising on the creation of the world wide Green Globe programme, to set up national schemes in UK and elsewhere, working with regional and local governments in many countries and with communities, companies, agencies and interest groups on all continents except Antarctica. I write and speak, therefore, as a hybrid, a personality split between theory and practice, with a broader background in rural development, architectural conservation, heritage management and geography.

What is Sustainable Tourism ?

Much of the early work on sustainable tourism concentrated on definitions. There are many. The following is a useful start:

Sustainable tourism is a positive approach designed to manage and reduce tourism's negative impacts in the interests of all parties involved - host habitats and host communities, tourists and the industry itself. It seeks a balance between development and conservation. It seeks the best form of tourism for an area, taking into account its geography, ecology and its culture. That may mean development, limits to growth, or in some cases no growth at all. It seeks not just to plan for tourism, but to integrate tourism into a balanced relationship with broader economic, conservation and social goals. It sees tourism as a tool for conservation and economic well being, rather than just as an end in itself. A long term vision and strategy is essential. That vision should be thought out with the stakeholders, not just for those stakeholders.

In tangible terms sustainable tourism may need less fuel/emissions intense transport systems – to and from and within destinations; fewer but longer holidays; access restrictions to sensitive areas; behavioural / life style changes; partnership working to ensure both market success and holistic development; higher charges to cover better quality accommodation and food provision, and higher management costs. Above all it needs the painful processes of thought, understanding and change.

What Sustainable Tourism is not:

Sustainable Tourism is not restricted to small scale developments. It is not restricted to rural areas. It is not just an ecotourism concept, although it can encompass ecotourism. It can be applied to all forms of destination, including mass tourism.

Sustainable tourism is not a fixed set of rules. It is a concept or approach. Its application varies according to levels of development and geographical situations. It is not a quick fix. It is an ongoing concept, not a one time concept.

Why and how did Sustainable Tourism develop ?

The post war boom in tourism created negative outcomes in many parts of Europe as early as the 1970's, notably in the Alps and the western Mediterranean. While tourism was a capable economic development tool, it had strong negative environmental, cultural and social impacts. It was not planned or operated holistically. It tended to operate on a short term growth and decline cycle. It tended to retain its proceeds in visitor source market areas rather than in destination areas. It was rarely used as a tool for conservation or for sustainable development. It went along with the fundamentally selfish, short term and hedonistic approach common to many holidaymaking pursuits.

Sustainable tourism began, in the 1970s, as a reactive concept to the above issues, trying to stop negative change. Only gradually did it become pro-active, trying to create positive change. Many commentators – professional as well as amateur – enjoy criticising tourism. The key to achieving sustainable tourism is, however, to carry out analytical review and criticism, and then to implement effective management techniques.

What has been achieved so far:

Progress in sustainable tourism to date has concentrated on:

- Discussions and definitions, and devising basic assessment / evaluation programmes.
- Testing a range of individual management techniques, notably a range of visitor management programmes, especially those for protected areas, more sustainable accommodation provision, transport centred research and the creation of partnership programmes.
- Local and individual projects, often innovative, some very short term.
- Local Sustainable Tourism Strategies, usually written by local governments.
- The Green Globe programme, launched by the World Travel and Tourism Council, continued in various parts of the world on a limited scale, notably in Australia, and a number of other similar certification programmes, including the Green Tourism Business Scheme.
- Research and case study work: a wealth of knowledge exists on some issues, much remains to be done, even more remains to be implemented.

Why has Sustainable Tourism been so slow to develop ?

Despite the hopeful start 30 years ago, sustainable tourism is only now becoming an accepted, growing and achievable concept. A number of reasons for slow progress can be outlined:

- *No driver or imperative:* The tourism industry has not been driven either by government or market forces to achieve a more sustainable form of tourism. Governments have been shy to encourage or require change. The market for tourism remains strongly driven by price and fashion factors, and both the market and the industry remain very conservative.
- *Society* has not understood the need for sustainable development of most kinds. Sustainable development requires change, thought and investment: all are difficult to achieve. Sustainable living needs behavioural change by all stakeholders. Behavioural change is hard to bring about.
- *Few short term benefits* accrue to the development of more sustainable forms of tourism: in the long term, as the London dockers famously told the economist John Maynard Keynes, “we are all dead”.
- Sustainable tourism is a *very Reithian concept*. Lord Reith’s aim to educate society for its own good finds limited acceptance in a consumer society.
- *Knowledge and success exemplars* are available, but are unknown outside a small number of aficionados. A remarkable amount of very valuable work has been carried out by the Australian Sustainable Tourism Research Centre, for example, but is unknown outside Australia.
- *Denial.* Most tourists are in denial about their environmental and cultural impacts. Recent research shows that the majority of air travellers, for example, sincerely believe that others should refrain from travel – not them. And research also shows that most young people have come to believe that travel is a fundamental right, not a privilege. Serious questions about freedom, political problems and the functions of the market economy are raised.
- *The Concept of Social Marketing*, of using marketing techniques to encourage behavioural change, rather than increased consumption of existing products, is in its infancy – and little understood by tourism marketing agencies, or the media. The media’s role in the sustainable development / sustainable tourism story is an especially critical but a rarely researched one.
- *Partnership building* is also in its infancy – and partnership work is essential to get the greatest benefits from the sustainable tourism approach. For example, few in the public transport sector understand the concept of sustainable tourism – even though they would benefit from it; few in the heritage or farming sectors understand and try to implement the concept.
- *Growth* is a key idea within society and within the tourism industry. The sustainable development concept questions some forms of growth, and growth in some places. We have not come to terms with those issues.

Why has Sustainable Tourism moved up the Public Agenda now ?

The fundamental reason is the recognition that climate change is happening, that its consequences could be seriously damaging, and that a series of changes are required to our existing life styles. Those changes could affect tourism and its growth. The media’s new interest in green issues, and new anti-travel, anti-tourism pressure groups have developed. It is important to remember, however, that sustainable tourism has an agenda much broader than reducing transport based

environmental impacts. It must also be recognised that wider pro-nature, pro-heritage interests are growing in many (but not all) societies and parts of society.

What would be the benefits from achieving sustainable tourism ?

The Industry could benefit from some cost savings, (though there would also be expenses), from a new competitive edge and USP, from a longer term relationship with its markets and regulators, and from learning more about its customer needs in order to make sustainable tourism attractive. There is also the critical question for many “long haul” / air travel dependent destinations, amongst which some would count Scotland, of the need to develop a green insurance policy in the face of the scapegoating of air and other high emission transport media.

The Physical, Cultural and Natural Environments all need sustainable tourism to protect their assets, to justify public expenditure on their conservation and enhancement, to build a political lobby base, and to pay for their activities.

Host Communities are quick to complain about “conventional” tourism, but need tourism income and the vitality that tourism brings. They too need to understand and implement sustainable tourism programmes to maintain their positions, compete in both a conventional and a green future, and to protect themselves from tourism’s negative impacts.

The Consumer / The Market would benefit from long term environmental improvements, and could benefit from less stressful, and more satisfying holidays. But they have to face a requirement for life-style changes, of more intellectually and physically demanding holidays, and of some restrictions. The market needs to be offered tangible benefits, however, that they can relate to and enjoy: in a market driven society, the consumer is king.

The Public Sector would benefit from achieving its stated goals of environmental protection and emissions reductions. But, as for other stakeholders, there are no free lunches here. Public Sector planners and regulators will have to learn to better understand the industry and its markets, and to learn new, and often demanding flexible working methods and techniques in marketing, interpretation, management, partnership and participation techniques

The Wider World would benefit from a long term holistic approach to tourism development and management. The concept of Sustainable Tourism as a tool for wider socio-economic and environmental good, with social justice and inter-generational equity goals, is central to benefit development.

And what are the challenges ?

To sell the concept to all the stakeholders: The famous phrase “no gain without pain” applies here. The pain involved in behavioural change means that the principles of social marketing, and communications theory must be understood and used – in other words, carefully targeted benefits from implanting sustainable tourism must be made clear to all stakeholders, and notably to the market.

To create positive image: For many the green image frightens or is seen at best as eccentric. That image needs to be redefined as fashionable, beneficial, rewarding and valuable. “Clean, Green New Zealand” has had its problems, but it has delivered market results.

To implement the concept - the partnership issue: Partnerships for change are political buzzwords. Partnerships can deliver strong sustainable destination management. In practice, however, poor partnership management too often leads to lengthy meetings with low level outcomes. Partnership management needs to become a recognised skill.

To certify partnership and success: The fear of greenwash needs to be addressed by strong but flexible certification and monitoring systems.

Knowledge transfer is essential – to take the fear out of change, to satisfy hunger for success, to make transitions possible. Visit Scotland has a special potential role here, in both market knowledge transfer and in technical skills support.

Two special challenges stand out:

The transport dilemma: The transport issue has moved into sustainable tourism's driving seat. It has brought the concept to the public's attention. But it presents dilemmas. High cost transport could destroy tourism quite swiftly. Not least, and especially for Scotland, it could seriously undermine the fast growing short break market. Further, the transport industry tends to stand clear from the main body of tourism interests. It is a curiously self contained system. Transport systems that can seamlessly, easily and comfortably move visitors more effectively than car or air transport are essential; they are also very difficult to create. Pricing issues, capacity constraints, political minefields, customer care problems and new thinking by managements and users are all involved.

The Öko Schickeria: It is essential that sustainable tourism becomes fashionable. The term Öko-Schickeria is a German language phrase that describes high profile fashionable people, usually not poor, who take to flaunting environmentally symbolic actions and items. They wear expensive recycled trainers, eat organic foods, drive hybrid cars. They are essential profile raisers. But symbolic actions and gadgets do not solve our problems: real life style changes are much more difficult to get across to the industry, its markets and the political classes.

Conclusions:

This paper has set out the background to the development – and non-development - of sustainable tourism over the last thirty years. It outlines the challenges involved in taking sustainable tourism forward. Set against that perhaps depressing list of difficult issues, there is the new climatic imperative for lifestyle change, real political and media interest in the issues involved and the likelihood of some government action. It is also quite clear, perhaps for the first time, that the issue of sustainable tourism cannot be solved by tourism interests alone. It encompasses wider societal change as well as intra-industry changes.

The way forward for the tourism industry as a whole is, however, clear. It must take the initiative to respond to the challenges before being forced into unwelcome and potentially damaging changes by the media, governments and, most worrying of all, market forces. How tourism is currently responding to these challenges will emerge during the following presentations. How Scotland could respond in the future will be outlined in the final session: Peering into Green Futures.

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