

Legends and Legacies

# Are We There Yet on Sustainable Tourism?

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Internationally, tourism and the ability to travel have been shaped by technology and engineering, human interest, economic conditions and prosperity, and bi- and multilateral agreements across countries. In our lifetimes (we are both late baby boomers), two significant innovations have dramatically changed the face of tourism—jet airlines crossing ocean airspace and the rapid expansion of airline carriers and airport infrastructure (1950s and 1960s); and the invention of the World Wide Web and early adoption of online travel agents and corporate online reservation and purchase systems (1990s). Nudged in between these two events was the Bruntland Report “Our Common Future” by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 that took a serious look at the impacts of industrial and human activities on the planet. Tourism was flagged in this report and the concept of sustainable tourism from which our current thinking originates was born.

We found some early papers by our peers on tourism and sustainability that laid a foundation for the development of sustainable tourism as an industry and academic endeavor. Vincent May, a professor at Bournemouth Polytechnic, published a paper in *Tourism Management* (1991) that highlighted tourism as a growth and development industry. He approached the sustainable tourism challenge from an environmental perspective suggesting that planning and development take the eventuality of scarce natural resources seriously, as many tourism providers depend on pristine and beautiful environments. The tourism industry needs to exhibit care and stewardship for natural features for future generations, but also the health of the social-cultural and economic sides of communities. He advocated for monitoring, measuring, and evaluating environmental conditions. A few years later in an *Annals of Tourism Research* note (2001), James Ko, from University of Technology in Sydney, compared human and ecosystems in a way to show too much attention on just human systems or ecosystems, or low levels of attention to either, results in unsustainable tourism. Sustainability

is only achieved if high levels of attention and investment in both development and operations occur.

Have we achieved high levels of sustainability that the tourism industry can brag about, particularly in this year, the United Nations International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development? In 2013, Kelly Bricker, Rosemary Black, and Stuart Cottrell compiled examples of how tourism practitioners and academics contributed to the 2015 Millennium Development Goals. Organizations, certificate programs, education, case studies on corporate social responsibility, research providing evidence of positive and negative impacts, and award-winning conservation programs are some of the ways that sustainability is progressing forward. In 2017, an industry collaboration between three firms issued a global destination sustainability index white paper recognizing city leaders in achieving sustainable tourism. The list highlights mostly European cities (e.g., Gothenburg, Reykjavik, Zurich), with only one U.S. city (Houston) making the top 25 list and with a score of half of the top European cities' scores.

We see a shift toward sustainable tourism, but sustainability comes in many shapes and sizes and the tourism industry has many tentacles. Even in the U.S., where we are perhaps not performing well compared to the tourism industry in other countries, we see a small change in attitude by communities and tourists toward being more mindful and responsible. An ASU master's student recently completed a study on trip planners and tourists to Sedona, Arizona. Two-thirds of the respondents understood being sustainable includes environmental, social, and economic values and actions that can improve the health of the planet. The study revealed that consumers were highly mindful, which involves thinking and caring about one's impact on communities. But when behaviors were measured, prospective tourists indicated much lower levels of intentions to consume sustainably while on vacation. For those who vacationed in Sedona, actually buying or behaving sustainably during their Sedona visit was at low levels. This study, and other studies our students have done, continue to suggest that our disposition, and more importantly action, toward being a sustainable consumer and tourist falls short.

Tourism, domestically and internationally, is projected to grow exponentially. The United Nations predicts travel demand will grow 50% in the next 15 years. More people from developing countries who may have never traveled outside their own country will add millions to the already 1.2 billion international visitors. China is the most rapidly growing outbound travel market. It is a fact that we will continue to see Internet-based companies growing the supply of all forms of tourism products. Similar to ride- and home-sharing companies, all aspects of the unused capacity of the tourism industry are put up for sale on the Internet. Additionally, new public and private investment and development in transportation, lodging, and attraction sectors will place increasing pressures on natural and human resources.

Today, 30 years after the Brundtland Report, we can share successes and case studies achieved in sustainable tourism. There are definitely niche areas of the tourism industry or with certain traveler types that define the small, but growing, movement in more thoughtful and positively impactful tourism. But this is just moving to the "second step" of what is a very long staircase to reach Ko's ultimate sustainability level. With mass tourism, most consumers are less conscience about being sustainable while away from home (and maybe at home too). There is a substantial amount of "green" washing

too where businesses label themselves “eco” or “responsible” but still heavily impact natural and human resources to the detriment of human and natural communities. Also, few providers can both scale-up their operations to achieve economic growth, green-up to achieve smaller footprints on the Earth, and culture-up to minimize negative sociocultural consequences.

Three emerging ideas as alternatives to traditional tourism are “staycations,” the removal of the tourist label and becoming a “localist,” and a compensatory model where consumers manage their daily and vacation net consumption to stay under an allotted level. Staycations emerged as a way to overcome high gas prices and instead to make a vacation close to home. Traveling fewer miles in a car or avoiding air travel is one way to reduce carbon levels and slow the expansion of more highways and interstates. In the Global Destination Sustainability report (2017), tourists are suggested as a dying breed. The City of Copenhagen claims “the end of tourism as we know it” and proclaims “localhood for everyone.” Copenhagen tourism managers see a future where locals and visitors interact around shared local experiences building a new heightened cultural exchange and place appreciation. A compensatory model suggests that someone who acts sustainably at home by riding his/her bike to work or school every day or using public transportation, for example, would be allotted more consumption while on vacation. In contrast, someone who drives a personal car to work every day alone would use the consumption allotment faster and have to reduce consumption on vacation. If consumers travel beyond their allotment, then a tax is assessed. This model could lead to new revenues to pay for sustainability programs and market trading, much like exists in carbon markets used by industries.

At this point in time as we recognize the year of sustainable tourism, what are the leading initiatives and tools that the tourism industry and destinations around the globe have created and implemented to facilitate a more sustainable future? How have universities and technical schools developed training, research, and outreach that has led to human capacity building at scales that reach both community- and business-level sustainability, as well as country and global scales? Most can agree that a sustainability focus at any level leads to better conditions for the environment and humans, and many sustainability initiatives save money and attract consumers that live and travel with sustainability as part of their personal values.

In 2018, all of us in tourism need to reflect on past efforts but quickly turn to inventive thinking for the future to navigate the opportunities and uncertainties of the expanding tourism industry. We must start innovating and acting at a faster rate and visualizing what the third and fourth steps on what might prove to be a 50-step flight of stairs actually looks like. If we can add niches or segments together as we climb the sustainability staircase, then maybe the consumers who comprise the mass tourism market can be transformed into more responsible consumers. We are not there yet, but we are climbing upwards.