

Lecture 12: Towards sustainable tourism



OR



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Outline of the lecture

- The concepts of sustainable development and sustainable tourism
- Economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts of tourism
- Three dimensions of sustainability in tourism
- Carrying capacity and other tools of sustainability in tourism
- Tourism and sustainable development?



The concept of sustainable development

- The concept of **sustainable development** was defined by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (UN WCED) (the so-called Brundtland Commission) in 1987
- The objective was to establish a common ground between the growing need to protect the natural environment and the persisting will to pursue economic development
- **Sustainable development** is defined as “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (*UN WCED 1987: 43*)
- The concept assumes that economic growth should continue but that it should be appropriately adapted to ensure that the capacity of the planet to provide raw materials is not overstretched

(Gregory et al 2009, Hardy et al 2002, UN WCED 1987)

“Sustainable development” and “sustainable tourism”

- The concept of SD provoked important questions about the impacts which tourism and the accompanying developments produce
- It became a chance to address the tensions between the **economic** gains produced by tourism and its **environmental** and **socio-cultural** costs
- It also sparked the need to look for sustainable forms of tourism
- **Sustainable tourism** is one “which is economically viable but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment and the social fabric of the host community”
(Swarbrooke 1999: 13)
- According to the WTO, **sustainable tourism** should make optimal use of environmental resources, respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities and ensure long-term economic operations to bring benefits to all stakeholders (Page and Connell 2006)

Important questions about sustainability...

- The concept of sustainability is charged with power, i.e. it reflects the interests and values of those involved:
 - ➔ What is being sustained? By whom? For whom?
 - ➔ Do all interest groups understand sustainability in the same way?
 - ➔ Do all interest groups have the same aspirations and intentions?
 - ➔ Who decides what sustainability means and entails?
 - ➔ Who decides how it should be achieved and evaluated?

(Mowforth and Munt 2009)

- All these questions fully pertain to tourism where:
 - Overall positive impacts rarely compensate for overall negative impacts
 - Trade-offs between economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts are inevitable
 - Different groups of actors have different interests

Economic impacts of tourism

(discussed extensively in the previous lecture!)

A few important things to remember:

- Tourism is an important source of income for numerous local communities
- As an industry, tourism is relatively easy to establish
- Most tourist supply is spatially fixed
- The natural environment is a key asset on which the tourism industry relies
- Although with exceptions, economic impacts of tourism are mostly positive

Environmental impacts of tourism (negative)

- Scaring / disrupting / killing animals and destroying vegetation and animal habitats
- Soil erosion, trampling and other forms of physical damage to the environment
- Water / air / noise pollution
- Littering
- Increasing the burden on resources, including fresh water, energy/fuel, building materials, etc.
- Detrimental visual impact on natural landscapes

(Williams 2009)



Environmental impacts of tourism (positive)

- Increased conservation of landscapes and ecosystems as tourist attractions
- Establishment of protected areas such as national parks
- Revenue from tourism can be invested in greener technologies, site restoration, ground repairs or various other environmental initiatives

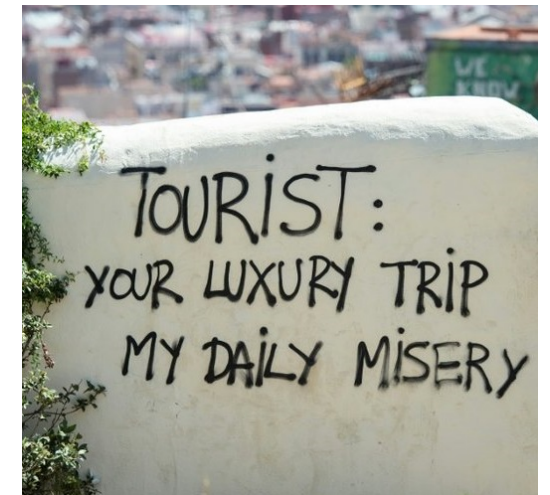
(Williams 2009)



Socio-cultural impacts of tourism (negative)

- Commercialisation and commodification of local cultures and traditions
- Increased tensions between values and lifestyles of tourists and host communities
- Popularisation of various anti-social, socially frowned upon or illegal activities such as gambling, prostitution or various forms of crime
- Noise, crowd, increased traffic
- Creation of new social structures

(Williams 2009)



Socio-cultural impacts of tourism (positive)

- Reduction of cultural barriers and increased knowledge and understanding of other cultures, values, traditions and lifestyles
- Strengthening the local community's social cohesion, civic pride and national and cultural identity
- Preservation and revitalisation of cultural heritage (including built environment, crafts, rituals, performing arts and even languages)
- Social empowerment and opportunities to become financially independent

(Canavan 2014, Williams 2009)



Tourism and economic sustainability

- Economic sustainability in tourism is usually defined in terms of economic gains that are retained by the local community and whether they are sufficient to cover the costs of catering for tourists, to mitigate the effects of their presence in the area and to offer a sufficient income to the host community
- As such, economic sustainability (i.e. if tourism is profitable to the host community) is often used to compensate for environmental, social and cultural damages that tourism causes
- However, how economically sustainable tourism is will always depend on the level of foreign capital's penetration, financial leakages and how, depending on various power relations, the income is redistributed and re-invested

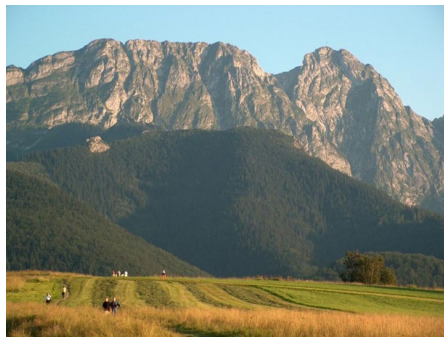
(Mowforth and Munt 2009)



Tourism and environmental sustainability

- Environmental sustainability in tourism is usually understood in terms of bringing negative impacts of tourism on the natural environment to a minimum or ensuring that they can be reversed and the natural environment restored
- Tourism often destroys the most important asset on which it rests, but... different forms of tourism have different environmental impacts
- Some impacts may be temporary or short-term (i.e. coincident with the tourist season) and they will always depend on the nature of the destination

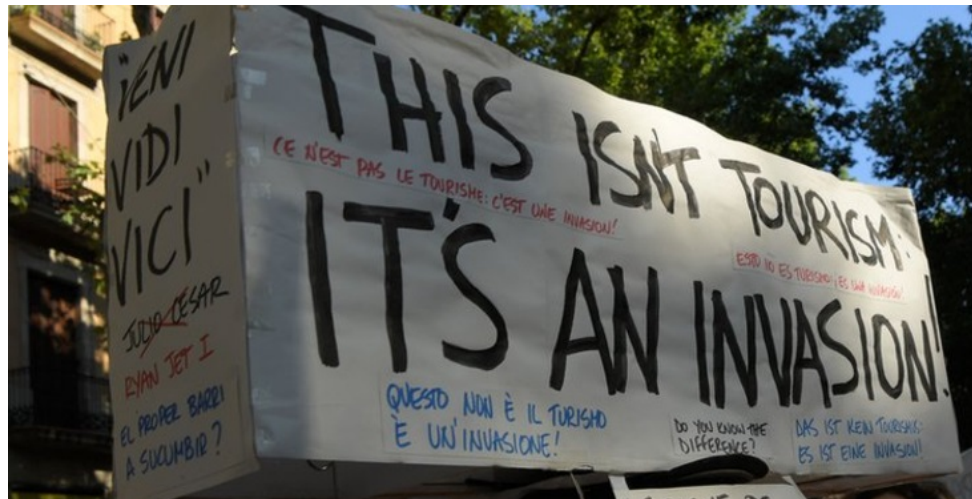
(Mowforth and Munt 2009, Williams 2009)



Tourism and socio-cultural sustainability

- Social sustainability in tourism is usually understood as the host community's ability to absorb inputs of extra people (for short or long periods of time) and to continue functioning without any long-term social disharmony
- Cultural sustainability is defined as the ability of local people to retain the elements of their culture which distinguish them from tourists

(Mowforth and Munt 2009)



Carrying capacity

- The idea of **carrying capacity** is defined as “the maximum number of people who can use a site without an unacceptable alteration in the physical environment and the social, cultural and economic fabric of the destination and without an unacceptable decline in the quality of the experience gained by the visitors” (*Wall and Mathieson 2006: 33*)
- But... is it possible to determine a number of tourists which an area is able to absorb?
- The capacity of any destination/location/place will always depend on the behaviour of tourists, seasonality of tourism, how the area is managed and governed, how tourism in the area is organised, how vulnerable the natural environment is, how tourists are perceived by the local community and many other factors...

(*Mowforth and Munt 2009, Williams 2009*)

Other tools of sustainability in tourism (1)

Area protection

- National parks, natural reserves, sites of special scientific interests, etc.

Legal and industrial regulations

- National legislation, planning restrictions, taxation, industry-level regulations (e.g. WTO, professional associations), corporate social responsibility (CRS)

Visitor management

- Entry or vehicle restrictions (e.g. in national parks), different pricing structures, channelling visitor flows

Environmental impact assessment (EIA)

- Various quantitative and qualitative methods of evaluating environmental consequences, environmental auditing, eco-labelling, certification schemes

(Mowforth and Munt 2009, Williams 2009)

Other tools of sustainability in tourism (2)

Consultation and participation techniques (i.e. local communities – objects or controllers of tourism?)

- Public attitude surveys and public consultation meetings

Codes of conduct and education

- Popularisation of appropriate attitudes and behaviours

Sustainability indicators

- Resource use, waste, pollution, access to facilities, access to basic human needs, crime etc.

Carbon footprint

- Various methods of controlling and reducing carbon emissions

(Mowforth and Munt 2009, Williams 2009)

Towards sustainable (alternative) forms of tourism...?

- There are many 'new' forms of tourism that claim to be responsible, sustainable, green, no-impact, low-impact or environmentally-friendly...
- This includes: 'ecotourism', 'community-based tourism', 'pro-poor tourism', 'nature-based tourism' or 'ethical tourism'
- Meanwhile, if poorly managed, all these forms of tourism can be as unsustainable as conventional traditional mass tourism
- By contrast, if managed properly, mass tourism can bring less significant impacts on the natural environment than some forms of alternative tourism
- All new forms are often very elitist in social terms
- They also often develop into new forms of mass recreation, thus becoming unsustainable themselves

(Mowforth and Munt 2009, Williams 2009)

Tourism and sustainable development?

- In general, there is a widespread agreement that tourism has the potential to contribute to the sustainable development of a given territory, but...
- Can sustainable development be based solely or mainly on tourism???
- The ecological objectives of sustainable tourism clash with the developmental aspects of sustainable development as much as the environmental objectives of sustainable development are not always in line with tourism as an engine for sustainable economic growth (*Sharpley 2000*)
- The different competing aspects often cannot be balanced and hence trade-offs between different dimensions of sustainability are inevitable (*Hunter 1997*)
- The relations between sustainable tourism and wider sustainable development will always be highly place-specific and depend on the political, economic and socio-cultural context

Summary and conclusions

- The idea of **sustainable development** sparked the concerns over the impacts of tourism and fostered the need to seek **alternative forms of tourism**
- The concept of sustainability is charged with power and it is clearly visible in such a complex industry as tourism
- Tourism impacts on host destinations in **environmental**, **economic** and **socio-cultural** terms both positively and negatively
- Economic gains are often outweighed by environmental and socio-cultural costs (→ **trade-offs!**)
- There are many various **tools of sustainability in tourism** but none is perfect
- **New forms of tourism** may be as unsustainable as traditional mass tourism
- It is not entirely clear to what extent **sustainable development** can rely on tourism – this relation will always be place-dependent

Reading and references

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