



SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: RESEARCH AND REALITY

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Abstract: Social and environmental impacts, responses and indicators are reviewed for the mainstream tourism sector worldwide, in five categories: population, peace, prosperity, pollution and protection.

Of the ~5000 relevant publications, very few attempt to evaluate the entire global tourism sector in terms which reflect global research in sustainable development. The industry is not yet close to sustainability.

The main driver for improvement is regulation rather than market measures. Some tourism advocates still use political approaches to avoid environmental restrictions, and to gain access to public natural resources.

Future research priorities include: the role of tourism in expansion of protected areas; improvement in environmental accounting techniques; and the effects of individual perceptions of responsibility in addressing climate change. **Keywords:** indicator, development, enterprise, environment, community, social. © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism researchers first turned their attention to social and environmental issues almost four decades ago (Allen, Long, Perdue, & Kieselbach, 1988; Brougham & Butler, 1981; Cater, 1987; Cohen, 1978; Farrell & McLellan, 1987; Liu & Var, 1986; Smith, 1977; Turner & Ash, 1975; Young, 1973). Research using the specific term sustainable tourism, however, commenced barely two decades ago (May, 1991; Nash & Butler, 1990). The first decade yielded compilations (Coccosis & Nijkamp, 1995; Hall & Lew, 1998; McCool & Moisey, 2001; Stabler, 1997; Swarbrooke, 1999), and basic frameworks from backgrounds in tourism (Butler, 1999; Clarke, 1997; Hall & Butler, 1995; Hughes, 1995; Hunter, 1997), economics (Driml & Common, 1996; Garrod & Fyall, 1998) and environmental management (Buckley, 1996). The second decade yielded a number of reconceptualisations, and a series of critiques including Sharpley (2000), Casagrandi and

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Rinaldi (2002), Gössling (2002), Liu (2003), Saarinen (2006) and Lane (2009).

As we enter a third decade, this review takes stock of progress by assessing the scope, focus and outcomes of academic research publication in sustainable tourism, against the practicalities of sustainability in the commercial tourism industry. Its basic premise is that the key issues in sustainable tourism are defined by the fundamentals of sustainability, external to the literature of tourism research. This premise relies on the axiom that both the tourism industry, and sustainability, are real-world phenomena. Therefore, this review does not attempt to deduce internally-generated research themes from analysis of bibliometric patterns in sustainable tourism publications. Instead, it constructs externally-generated themes by applying the key components of sustainability to tourism, and uses these to evaluate the sustainable tourism literature. This yields two outcomes. Firstly, it uses the results of research to assess the current sustainability of the tourism industry. Secondly, by comparing relative research effort against industry significance, it identifies priorities for future research.

This is a review specifically of the tourism research literature. Research in science, environment, resource management, global change, human health, economics and development policy is also relevant to sustainable tourism, but for reasons of space and focus, is not detailed here. The literature of tourism is large, >150,000 items in total, with ~5,000 relevant to sustainable tourism (CIRET, 2012). Because of space constraints, this review can cite <250 individual items, i.e. <5% of the relevant literature. It largely omits topics which have been reviewed recently, such as water consumption and climate change (Gössling et al., 2011; Weaver, 2011). It examines the mainstream commercial tourism industry: recreation, ecotourism and responsible tourism are considered only where relevant. It first defines a framework for evaluation, under five main themes. It then compares the tourism research literature against that framework. For each theme, it summarises outcomes of all relevant research to date, supported by a representative selection of critical citations. Finally, it compares research effort and results against real-world progress and significance.

The five themes used for the evaluation framework are: population, peace, prosperity, pollution, and protection. The rationale is as follows. The fundamental concern of sustainability is that aggregate human impacts threaten the survival of humans and the ecosystem services on which they depend (Pereira, Leadley, Proença, Alkemade, & Scharlemann, 2010; Persha, Agrawal, & Chhatre, 2011). Impacts have grown, ultimately, because biological evolutionary pressures promote continuing human reproduction and competitive consumption. Sustainability requires modifications to human society so as to reduce its aggregate impacts. Impacts depend on: (a) the size and distribution of the global human population; (b) its social organisation, including economy, governance and civil society; and (c) the consumption, pollution, and/or protection of nature as a result of such social organisation. World population is a key predictor of current and future human impact on the planet. Peace is a global measure of successful

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