



TRADITIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM STUDIES

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Abstract: As sustainability has become an important policy issue in tourism, it is arousing growing discussion and criticism, and an increasing need to understand the nature of the limits of growth. This paper analyzes how these limits are approached and evaluated in discussions on a local scale. The purpose is to recognize that behind the different understandings of them lie distinct traditions that are different in their focuses. These are referred to as resource-, activity-, and community-based traditions of sustainability. Further, the relationship between sustainable tourism and sustainable development is critically discussed. **Keywords:** sustainable development, carrying capacity, community-based tourism. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Résumé: Traditions de la durabilité dans les études de tourisme. Á mesure que la durabilité est devenue un sujet important dans la politique du tourisme, il a suscité des débats et des critiques croissants aussi bien qu'un plus grand besoin de comprendre la nature des limites de l'expansion. Cet article analyse comment on approche et évalue ces limites dans des discussions à l'échelle locale. Le but est de faire reconnaître que derrière les différentes façons de comprendre les limites, il y a diverses traditions qui diffèrent sur leur objectif. On parle des traditions de durabilité basées sur des ressources, des activités ou la communauté. En plus, le rapport entre le tourisme durable et le développement durable est analysé avec un oeil critique. **Mots-clés:** développement durable, capacité de charge, tourisme basé sur la communauté. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, the impacts of tourism have received increasing attention in discourses and studies on related development. The industry has a tremendous capacity for generating growth in destination areas. On the other hand, its increasing impacts have led to a range of evident and potential problems and of environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political issues in destinations and systems, creating a need for alternative and more environment- and host-friendly practices in development, planning, and policies.

During the 90s, the issue of sustainability entered a discourse which started to direct the economic and political structures that constitute

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the present larger context of the tourism system, the industry and its development (Bramwell and Lane 1993; Mowforth and Munt 1998). The major academic concern over its negative effects dates back at least to the 60s, however, and to the tradition of research into carrying capacity. Over two decades, this idea formed a basis for approaching and managing negative impacts, but after the period of enthusiasm from the late 60s to the early 80s, it was realized that carrying capacity could be problematic both in theory and in practice (O'Reilly 1986; Wall 1982). By the early 90s, this issue was largely replaced in research and development discourses by the idea of sustainable tourism.

Nowadays sustainability can be linked to almost all kinds and scales of tourism activities and environments (Clarke 1997), but there is also increasing criticism of the idea, its practices, and its usability (Garrod and Fyall 1998; Hunter 1995; Liu 2003; Sharpley 2000). Surprisingly, many challenges outlined for sustainable tourism appear rather similar to past issues concerning carrying capacity. Therefore, it is easy to agree with Butler (1999:15) when he asks critically whether the current ideas and discussions of the former are anything new.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the idea and nature of sustainable tourism and especially how the limits of growth are characterized, known, and set in principle. The work is conceptual in nature, but rather than providing a comprehensive definition of the concept or accepting any single definition of sustainable tourism, or carrying capacity for that matter, the purpose here is to recognize that behind the different understandings of the limits of growth there lie several distinct traditions that differ in focus and in their relation to the resources used in destinations. These traditions are characterized by different ontological ideas of the general nature and character of the limits of growth, different epistemological perspectives on them, and how they can be known and defined. The analysis is based on previous studies of tourism and its limits of growth. Although the impacts of the industry are increasingly global, the main focus of research, management, and policy activities has been on local character and its consequences, which is the scale of analysis adopted here. However, there is a growing need to recognize global-scale issues and responsibilities in development as well. The conditions under which (sustainable) tourism could represent a tool for wider sustainable development are discussed in the conclusions.

Need for the Limits of Growth

The demand for more environmentally sensitive and sustainable practices in tourism grew rapidly in the 80s, on the strength of several long-term, interrelated processes in Western societies which were manifested during that decade. The term and idea of sustainability was transferred to tourism from the ideology of sustainable development following the publication of the Brundtland Commission's report *Our Common Future* in 1987 (WCED 1987). There had been some academic and policy discussions on sustainability and the limits of growth

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