Tourism and sustainable development goals: Research on sustainable tourism geographies

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Abstract:

Since the turn of the 1990s many international development and policy-making organisations have perceived the tourism industry with its local and regional connections as a high-potential tool for putting sustainable development into practice. Recently, the capacity of tourism to work for sustainable development has been highlighted in relation to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted in 2015. This connection underlines the importance and responsibility of tourism as one of the world's biggest industries to contribute and make a difference to sustainable development both locally and globally. The SDGs define the agenda for global development to 2030 by addressing pertinent challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, and peace and justice. Tourism geographers and allied disciplines have held strong and long-term interest in sustainability issues and have contributed significantly to this emerging and highly policy-relevant research field. Existing scholarship on sustainable tourism demonstrates the rich body of research that provides a fertile and critical ground for studies on the SDGs by tourism geographers and other social scientists in the future.

Keywords: sustainable development, sustainable tourism, SDGs, governance, tourism research, tourism industry

Introduction

Tourism represents a tool for change. For individuals, families and social groups, tourism is an activity providing a way to take a break from everyday life, enjoy a change of routine, and connect with new

places and people. For entrepreneurs and businesses, tourists and tourism phenomena are vehicles for making a living and creating surplus and commercial growth. Through this, various changes occur in the socio-ecological and economic environment – both good and bad. Governments and authorities see the tourism industry as an instrument to maintain and create new economic activity and employment, leading to local and regional development. Since the turn of the 1990s many international organisations and policy-makers have increasingly framed the tourism industry and its local and regional development connections as high-potential tools for putting sustainable development into practice. This prospective connection between the idea of sustainable development and the industry serving the needs of tourists and localities has created the widely used and discussed concept of sustainable tourism, referring to tourism development that aims to meet "the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future" (World Tourism Organization, 1993, p. 7).

In a way, the core of the connection between tourism and sustainable development lies in the production and consumption of tourism, which is largely driven by the tourism industry's role to serve the needs of non-local people, i.e. tourists and visitors, in the tourism system. This production and consumption creates positive and negative externalities for localities and the environment. Because of the challenges of balancing these, while also integrating the needs of the tourism industry with the common good aim of serving current and future generations, sustainable tourism thinking has become very popular in academic tourism research, with high policy relevancy (Hall, 2011; Saarinen & Gill, 2019). In this respect, the capacity of tourism to work towards sustainable development has recently been highlighted in connection with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Hughes & Scheyvens, 2016). This connection underlines the importance and responsibility of tourism, as one of the world's largest industries, to contribute and make a difference to development and sustainability on a global scale. Basically, the UN Sustainable Development Goals are a strategy to create and realise a better and more sustainable future for all of us. One key question is: how can the consumption and production of tourism play a constructive role in this strategy?

This paper serves as an introduction to the *Tourism Geographies* Virtual Special Issue (VSI) on *Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals*. As indicated by Scheyvens (2018) only a few tourism scholars thus far have engaged with the issues related to the SDGs. The SDGs were established

relatively recently, in 2015, but global concern over tourism and sustainable development targets has been a focus of tourism research since the 1990s (see Bramwell, Higham, Lane & Miller, 2017). The Millennium Development Goals (UN MDGs) preceded the SDGs by several years and provided a context for tourism research focusing on the relationship between tourism and development in the Global South (see Saarinen & Rogerson, 2014). Indeed, despite limited engagement with the SDGs specifically, there has been a long and evolving research interest in sustainable development in geographical studies on tourism.

From this perspective, this VSI aims to provide a context for research on the SDGs in tourism by introducing a selected collection of previously published articles focusing on tourism and sustainability in *Tourism Geographies*. This rich body of research provides a fertile and critical ground for studies on the SDGs in the future. Before introducing the selected articles published in *Tourism Geographies* during the period 1999–2018, the SDGs are briefly introduced with a reference to the role and capacity of tourism for development. The idea of development refers to qualitative dimensions in social and economic processes, such as quality of life and well-being (Saarinen, Rogerson & Hall, 2017). In this respect, development has two connected threads of meaning: development as a discourse and an ideal, and development as a concrete material process (see Lawson, 2007). The SDGs integrate these two threads by emphasising concrete targets and the idea that states that no one should be left behind (United Nations, 2015). The agenda also indicates the need to rethink the current economic growth ideology with respect to social well-being and environmental needs in development. This is a highly timely and urgent matter in the context of a global tourism industry that reaches new growth records every year!

Sustainable development goals

The United Nations member states ratified the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). These goals define the agenda for global development to 2030 by addressing challenges related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, and peace and justice, for example. Specifically, there are 17 goals (Table 1) and 169 specific targets, which are set to transform the world by 2030. They relate to earlier United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but in contrast to those, the SDGs are truly global by nature. Instead of having a main focus

on the challenges of the Global South, as was the case with MDGs., the SDGs holistically include Global North dimensions in their development agenda. This is crucial as many of the global development challenges depend on the impacts and actions taking place in both the Global South and North, such as climate change mitigation and adaptation, and global partnerships.

Table 1 The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Goal 1: No Poverty: Economic growth must be inclusive to provide sustainable jobs and promote equality.

Goal 2: Zero Hunger: The food and agriculture sectors offer key solutions for development, and are central for hunger and poverty eradication.

Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being: Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages is essential to sustainable development.

Goal 4: Quality Education: Obtaining a quality education is the foundation to improving people's lives and sustainable development.

Goal 5: Gender Equality: Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world

Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation: Clean, accessible water for all is an essential part of the world we want to live in.

Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy: Energy is central to nearly every major challenge and opportunity.

Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth: Sustainable economic growth will require societies to create the conditions that allow people to have quality jobs.

Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: Investments in infrastructure are crucial to achieving sustainable development.

Goal 10: Reduced Inequality: To reduce inequalities, policies should be universal in principle, paying attention to the needs of disadvantaged and marginalised populations.

Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities: There needs to be a future in which cities provide opportunities for all, with access to basic services, energy, housing, transportation and more.

Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production: There needs to be responsible production and consumption.

Goal 13: Climate Action: Climate change is a global challenge that affects everyone, everywhere.

Goal 14: Life Below Water: Careful management of this essential global resource is a key feature of a sustainable future.

Goal 15: Life on Land: Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss.

Goal 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions: Access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable institutions at all levels.

Goal 17: Partnerships to Achieve the Goal: Revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.

Source: United Nations, 2015

The 17 SDGs in Table 1, along with a numerous specific targets, provide a plethora of topics and issues for tourism scholars to focus on, and opportunities for the tourism industry and tourists to contribute to. Related to this, the United Nations General Assembly established 2017 as the 'International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development', highlighting the importance of international tourism in fostering development and better understanding among people everywhere (UNWTO, 2017). According to the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, the industry could specifically work towards the following three SDGs: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (SDG 8); Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 12); and Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development (SDG 14). These are high-profile and important goals for tourism to focus on, but they only provide a limited perspective on the relationship between tourism and sustainable development.

Based on the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, the World Bank Group (2017), for example, has expanded the connection between tourism and the SDGs. In their list of 20 reasons why tourism works for development, the five core pillars are: (1) sustainable economic growth; (2) social inclusiveness, employment and poverty reduction; (3) resource efficiency, environmental protection and climate; (4) cultural values, diversity and heritage; and (5) mutual understanding, peace and security. These pillars greatly expand the potential connections between tourism and the SDGs, and each pillar provides a context of reasons why tourism can work for sustainable development. Under the sustainable economic growth pillar, for example, tourism stimulates GDP growth, increases international trade, boosts international investment, drives infrastructure development, and supports low-income economies. The interpretation of these reasons, however, becomes problematic as there seems to be a confusing relationship between development as an ideal and framework, and growth as an action and emphasised target: all of these connections focus on the growth ideology associated with current neoliberal economic thinking. They are also in potential conflict with some of the other SDGs, such as climate action (Goal 13).

Indeed, while many international development agencies, such as the UNWTO and the World Bank, consider (sustainable) tourism as a designated tool for achieving the SDGs and "benefitting communities in destinations around the world" (World Bank Group, 2017, p. 5), academic responses have often been more doubtful and critical in regard to the tourism industry's potential role in contributing to sustainable development. There is a widely shared view that the industry has the capacity to contribute to sustainable development, but to do so requires stronger (external) regulatory measures that go beyond self-regulation by the industry itself (see Mosedale, 2014), which often seems to be primarily focused on sustaining the tourism economy and its rights to utilise natural and cultural resources in destination regions. This potential incompatibility between external and internal modes of regulation has led to criticism among scholars of the very applicability of sustainable development thinking to tourism (see Scheyvens, 2009; Sharpley, 2000). From this critical perspective, tourism is seen as a global-scale growth industry, which hides "its unsustainability behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it appears so sustainable" (Hollenhorst, Houge-MacKenzie and Ostergren, 2014, p. 306). Thus, the growth of the industry, referring to growth in GDP, international trade, investments and infrastructure, for example, may not necessarily lead to (sustainable) development for localities where tourism takes place (see Schilcher, 2007).

However, a key task for research in tourism is a need to find *sustainable solutions* for the industry, and despite all the criticism and frustrations (see, Liu, 2003; Sharpley, 2009), moving away from sustainable tourism thinking has turned out to be a very challenging task (McCool & Bosak, 2016; Saarinen & Gill, 2019). Sustainability is widely utilised by tourism policy-makers and institutions when defining the goals and governance models for the tourism and development nexus (Hall, 2011). Those models and processes should interest us as they do not only define global discourses on tourism and development but also local realities and practices. Thus, it is important for tourism scholars to try to influence those policies in a way that they would better – and hopefully truly – meet the needs of sustainable development, i.e. quality of life and the well-being of people and the environment. Based on the current scholarship in tourism, this calls for less focus on growth ideology referring to tourist numbers, international trade and foreign direct investments (FDI). It is great that approximately one third of service exports and every tenth job in the world is based on tourism (WTTC, 2017; UNWTO, 2018), for example, but we should also ask what kind of employment tourism creates (SDGs 8 and 10) and for whom, and who is included in development based on tourism (SDGs 5 and 10), especially in

the Global South. In this respect, the United Nations Conference and Trade Development has indicated that 'tourism employment is not gender neutral in Africa, as women and men do not necessarily have the same opportunities in and benefits from the sector' (UNCTAD 2017, p. 90). Indeed, as noted by the UNWTO (2017, p. 4), to make positive contribution to the SDGs 'a well-designed and managed tourism sector' is needed. All this calls for action and practices beyond policies and well-meant statements towards structural analysis and changes that consider 'the material inequalities generated in the tourism economy' (Bianchi, 2009, p. 486).

In her recent commentary, Scheyvens (2018: 341) has called for tourism geographers in particular, and scholars in general, 'to consider how we might utilise the SDGs to analyse the linkages between tourism and sustainable development in a wide range of contexts and at different scales.' Although research on the specific framework of the SDGs and related targets is still in an emerging phase, tourism geographers have held a strong and long-term interest in sustainability, and many of the core issues in the SDGs, including poverty alleviation and inclusive development (Goals 1 and 10), responsibility in tourism (Goal 12), tourism and climate change mitigation and adaptation (Goal 13), and the sustainable use of natural resources in tourism (Goals 14 and 15), have been relatively intensively studied. Obviously, some research fields on the SDGs in tourism geographies are still developing, and some are probably even neglected. Based on the selected articles, this Virtual Special Issue aims to demonstrate the rich body of geographical research on sustainable tourism published in *Tourism Geographies* since 1999. By doing so the volume provides a basis for developing the research on the SDGs in the future.

Sustainable tourism geographies: introducing selected papers

From day one (i.e. volume one, issue one), *Tourism Geographies* has focused intensively on sustainability issues in tourism. The following articles selected for the Virtual Special Issue cover theoretical and conceptual discourses in sustainable tourism, policy issues in respect of the SDGs and UN MDGs, sustainable tourism indicators and governance models, sustainable tourism planning, and new theoretical and conceptual avenues in relation to sustainable development in tourism. The 16 selected papers outline interesting and versatile insights into sustainable tourism geographies that combine both theoretical and empirical studies, although much more had to be left out due to space

considerations. The selection emphasises key topical coverages with time and regional dimensions, with papers from different years and geographical and socio-political contexts.

Richard Butler's (1999) widely-read review article on sustainable tourism sets the stage for other articles that came after it. Butler introduces the background and development of the term, including connections with the ideas of carrying capacity. The paper reviews the environmental focus of sustainable tourism and emphasises the need to include the human element in core discussions and analysis in sustainable tourism. Butler argues that there is a need to distinguish between sustainable tourism and the development of tourism in the principles of sustainable development. Allan Williams and Armando Montanari (1999) focus on a specific theoretical aspect of sustainability: regulation theory. Their perspective is on self-regulation and its limits in the pursuit of sustainable tourism, which links interestingly with a recent paper by Regina Scheyvens and Robin Biddulph (2018) on inclusive tourism development and what would make the tourism industry more inclusive. Scheyvens and Biddulph refer to the SDGs and challenges in market-driven responsible tourism and how the production and consumption of tourism could regulate itself towards inclusiveness.

Jarkko Saarinen and Christian Rogerson (2014) provide a background to the tourism and SDGs nexus by reviewing the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (UN MDGs) that preceded the SDGs. They discuss the potential contributions of tourism to the UN MDGs, specifically in terms of poverty alleviation, and how the relationship between tourism development and the UN MDGs has been framed in the tourism literature and what issues should be focused on after the UN MDGs. Here, they identify several promising research avenues for interrogating tourism impacts for development, such as inclusive business models. Emma Hughes and Regina Scheyvens (2016) take a step further by focusing on business responsibility in the post-2015 era of tourism planning. They take a critical stand towards corporate social responsibility (CSR). Instead of hegemonic 'Tourism First' planning, they call for a 'Development First' framework for CSR that would be holistic, sustainable and people-centred in focus. María José Zapata Campos, Michael Hall and Sandra Backlund (2018) take an inclusive and responsible tourism analysis approach to a specific multinational company's role in sustainable tourism development and CSR work. They demonstrate how the tour operator's sustainability work also results from organisational responses, which do not only emerge from more inclusive practices within the

industry, but also anticipate future normative pressures (e.g. legislation). These social and structural pressures are crucial for the adoption of more inclusive practices in the tourism industry.

Regina Scheyvens and Janet Momsen (2008) discuss tourism and poverty reduction in the Small Island States (SIDS) context. They suggest a broader development approach to sustainability governance that would not merely focus on economic growth-orientated policies and indicators but also social and environmental sustainability. For this to happen, they argue that governments need to establish stronger regulatory policies and a stricter planning environment for tourism if sustainable tourism and poverty reduction are to be included as developmental targets. In respect of development targets, monitoring the impact of tourism is key. These sustainable tourism indicators are reviewed by Anna Torres-Delgado and Jarkko Saarinen (2014). They note that indicators of sustainability have been widely adopted in tourism planning and governance in principle, but their effectiveness in achieving the ideals of sustainable tourism development is less evident and there are problems associated with data availability and baseline knowledge. There is a need to develop theoretically sound strategic indicators, as otherwise it is a major challenge to achieve practical applications. Mercedes Marzo-Navarro, Marta Pedraja-Iglesias and Lucia Vinzón (2015) aim to create such applications for sustainability indicators of rural tourism from the perspective of local residents. Based on a case study, they developed measurement models of the social sustainability that are accessible to tourism managers.

One key aspect in sustainable tourism development is governance, as 'destinations wanting to promote sustainable tourism are more likely to be successful when there is effective governance' (Bramwell, 2011, p. 461). Anna Farmaki (2015) identifies this need by evaluating the effectiveness of regional tourism governance in Cyprus. She analyses a public–private network among regional tourism organisations (RTOs), and her empirical findings reveal several challenges for regional network governance. In this respect Farmaki concludes that network governance cannot be considered separately from the socio-cultural, economic and environmental factors of the socio-spatial and political context. Alison Gill and Peter Williams (2014) take sustainable tourism governance to a resort scale by analysing the transition in governance from growth to sustainability in the Canadian resort of Whistler. The key focus in their evolutionary economic geography analysis is the issue of affordable employee accommodation. Their findings demonstrate how, through 'mindful deviation' from a growth

model approach, local entrepreneurs were able to employ the collective agency of the community to address the pressing need for affordable housing.

Sonya Graci (2013) analyses governance from the perspective of collaboration and partnership development in sustainable tourism. For her, a major obstacle for sustainable tourism governance is the lack of collaboration among stakeholders. She applies collaborative theory to tourism development on the island of Gili Trawangan, Indonesia, by examining a multi-stakeholder partnership with a demonstrative example of successful collaboration that has led to the implementation of innovative sustainability governance initiatives on that tourism intensive island. Similarly, Anna Spenceley (2008) evaluates factors that are perceived as essential for sustainable tourism development and governance in trans-frontier conservation areas (TFCAs) in southern Africa by utilising a Delphi approach with a wide selection of regional tourism experts. The resulting factors relate to governance issues and sustainable tourism indicators. Further related to governance and sustainability indicators, Lei Tin Ong, Donovan Storey and John Minnery (2011) examine the growth of coastal tourism development and sustainability practices on Boracay Island in the Philippines. They highlight the need to employ a broader socio-economic and cultural focus in tourism governance, concentrating on the management of change on the 'number one beach' of the Philippines.

The final two papers open new avenues in studying tourism, sustainable development and the SDGs. Alan Lew, Pin Ng, Chin-cheng Ni and Tsung-chiung Wu (2016) base their approach on resilience, which has characterised recent discussions on tourism and local development. They review some of the key similarities, differences and indicators of sustainability and resilience thinking. For them, returning to the core definitions of conservation and adaptation helps to identify similarities and differences and to create indicators for understanding how these two frameworks apply to tourism development. They focus specifically on community responses to change with an empirical research case from rural Taiwan. Finally, Patrick Brouder (2017) utilises evolutionary economic geography (EEG) to understand change in tourism destinations from a sustainable tourism perspective. Like resilience thinking, the evolutionary economic geography approach has received increasing attention in the past few years among tourism geographers. Brouder critically reflects on past EEG research in tourism geographies from a sustainable development perspective, and calls for theoretically informed empirical analysis on evolutionary economic geographies of sustainability in tourism development. Brouder

reflects on pro-growth governance models and regional institutional legacies that hinder the development path towards sustainable tourism and illustrates these challenges using two Canadian case examples (Niagara and Whistler). While the EEG perspective can help to integrate sustainable tourism analysis to structural thinking in political economy studies, Brouder also argues that a sustainable tourism perspective can resolve some of the burning issues in EEG theory. This calls for developing EEG theory within sustainable tourism geographies, including a structural analysis of change in the tourism industry, tourist behaviour, policy-making and governance that considers both discursive and material justice, along with needs in linking tourism to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

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