



# Sustainable development in the accommodation sector: A social dilemma perspective



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## ABSTRACT

This paper identifies and analyses a specific psychological barrier that plays a crucial role in explaining why the tourism accommodation sector so far has only made a limited contribution to sustainable development. This barrier represents a so-called social dilemma and relates to behavioural patterns and conflicting interests of relevant stakeholders and their inability to resolve the resulting lock-in. Through presenting and reviewing the outcomes of three empirical studies and relating them to relevant literature, this paper explores the details of this particular social dilemma. It also establishes promising avenues for moving beyond the current stagnation point. The paper concludes that there is an urgent need for more research into the social, cultural and psychological structures and barriers that lock-in the behaviour of relevant stakeholders. However, it also concludes that actually resolving the dilemma is a shared responsibility of all stakeholders and requires more than just research, for instance setting up galvanising action groups and adjusting tourism and hospitality curricula.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on why the accommodation sector, as an integral part of the tourism industry, has so far made a limited contribution to furthering sustainable development. This is done through presenting and analysing the outcomes of three empirical studies and further refining the resulting insights by linking them to relevant literature. Originally, the first two of these empirical studies were set up to contribute to reducing the carbon footprint of the Dutch accommodation sector. The objective was to use the outcomes to help define an appropriate carbon footprint reduction strategy for the Dutch tourism sector and to develop specific tools for hotels and other lodging businesses to minimise their own individual carbon footprint. However, the preliminary results of these studies highlighted that such a carbon footprint reduction strategy would need to address specific psychological barriers to behaviour change (Gifford, 2011) to stand any chance of making an actual contribution to furthering sustainable development. Therefore, instead of focusing on developing specific (technology oriented) tools supporting a strategy specifically aiming at reducing the accommodation sector's carbon footprint, it was decided to set up and conduct a third empirical study. This third study specifically focused on revealing further details related to the psychological barriers that seem to hinder progress of the sector towards not just carbon footprint reduction but the wider challenge of sustainable development. Through analysing the outcomes

of this third empirical study, and relating them to the outcomes of the first two studies and relevant literature, this paper highlights a specific type of psychological barriers that seem to play a crucial role in explaining the limited contribution of the accommodation sector to furthering sustainable development. These barriers relate to situations in which individual actors, such as businesses, receive higher rewards for a socially defecting choice – for instance, using a lot and non-renewable energy – than for a socially cooperative choice – for instance, using less and renewable energy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions – but all individual parties would be better off if they all cooperate – in this case, through reducing climate change and thus its impact. Such a situation is referred to as a social dilemma (Dawes, 1980). This paper shows that addressing this dilemma (first) is (still) crucial to furthering sustainability processes in today's tourism accommodation sector. It also shows that while this barrier to progress is anything but a 'new' phenomenon, involved stakeholders so far seem to have been unsuccessful in actually overcoming it in practice. Therefore, interesting avenues for doing so, both already known and possible 'new' solutions, are identified and discussed.

The link between sustainability and tourism has increasingly gained importance and attention since the early 1990s, when the tourism industry was declared a priority for sustainable development at the Rio Earth Summit (Bramwell & Lane, 2012). On the one hand, tourism can be, and sometimes already is, directly affected by various complications, such as financial crises, social unrest, economic disparities and the effects of climate change (Njoroge, 2014) that are the result of the fact that progress of our societies to become more sustainable is limited, or slow, at best (Baumgartner, 2011, p. 783).

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Simultaneously, and increasingly so in recent years, tourism has been identified as a potentially significant force in striving for sustainable development, even when fulfilling this potential has proved to be a challenge (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Saarinen, 2006). For instance, with respect to addressing climate change, the international community has so far failed to come to coordinated action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. According to Weaver (2011, p.13), this is the result of “the rudimentary state of knowledge about the relationships between tourism and climate change, an apathetic and fickle travelling public and a reciprocally uncommitted (or superficially committed) tourism industry.” It is clear that some progress has been made and sustainable tourism is slowly but surely evolving from a reactive concept that breathes a fear of change to a field of study that is starting to focus on actual innovation and trying to identify possible benefits associated with sustainability processes (Bramwell & Lane, 2012). However, some areas of enquiry are still overlooked (Weaver, 2011) and real-life sustainable development processes within the tourism sector itself are very much a work in progress.

One of these areas of enquiry is the accommodation sector within tourism or, more precisely, the lodging subsector of the hospitality industry. As noted by Melissen (2013), given both its significant current (negative) impact and its potential to make a (positive) contribution, it represents a sector that definitely requires attention from a sustainable development perspective. This sector is responsible for 21% of the overall tourism carbon footprint, while in 2035 it is expected to account for at least 25% of all tourism-related greenhouse gas emissions (de Grosbois & Fennell, 2011). Simultaneously, hospitality businesses seriously affect the environmental systems they are a part of in other ways as well, especially in the construction phase, for instance based on their significant consumption of natural resources and production of waste and pollution. Hotel guests have also been shown to use significantly more water than they would at home (Bohdanowicz, 2005) and the dispersed nature of this sector often hinders effective policy making and makes it difficult to identify individual polluters and introduce effective regulation (Céspedes-Lorente, de Burgos-Jiménez, & Álvarez-Gil, 2003).

Over the years, hospitality practitioners have made progress with respect to introducing particular ‘green’ practices, but struggle to make further progress, especially with respect to (simultaneously) addressing all relevant environmental, economic and social aspects of sustainability (Melissen, 2013). Research on sustainable hospitality has almost exclusively focused on developing, implementing and reviewing particular technological innovations to reduce water and energy use and waste (Holcomb, Upchurch, & Okumus, 2007; Read, 2013), implementation of environmental policies (Choi, Parsa, Sigala, & Putrevu, 2009), and ways to introduce and abide by certification schemes (Bonilla Priego, Najera, & Font, 2011). Even though progress has been reported on in relation to all of these aspects, the overall uptake of sustainability measures in the hospitality industry remains limited. Actual performance ‘on the ground’ does not always live up to the ambitions and goals put forward by industry leaders (Font, Walmsley, Cogotti, McCombes, & Häusler, 2012; Holcomb et al., 2007). Many barriers to introducing additional sustainability measures seem to be based on a lack of knowledge and incorrect assumptions. In fact, Ricaurte (2012) claims that hospitality professionals seem to think that more sustainable operations are too expensive, that guests do not care about sustainability, and that the hospitality industry can afford to postpone, or even avoid, taking (coordinated) steps in a more sustainable direction.

Researchers and practitioners in the hospitality sector have so far found it especially difficult to address the social or sociocultural component of sustainable development. This component refers to aspects such as social equity, liveability, health equity, community development, human rights, labour rights and social justice. Even though the hospitality industry is often referred to as a ‘people-business’, it has a questionable reputation with respect to working hours, working conditions and (financial) rewards for its employees (Kusluvan, Kusluvan, Ilhan, &

Buyruk, 2010). Social sustainability efforts of hospitality businesses beyond the boundaries of their own organisation are usually based on philanthropy (Holcomb et al., 2007) and mostly take the form of sponsoring charities and non-profit organisations, in-kind donations and volunteer work by employees (de Grosbois, 2012). All this while hospitality businesses are actually in a unique position to make a more structural positive contribution to all aspects of sustainable development processes, based on the fact that these businesses cannot but be closely linked to, thus significantly impacting, the local social, economic and ecological systems in which they operate. Beyond the environmental links described earlier, these businesses “employ local residents, provide and procure services and goods to local buyers and from local suppliers and [thus] significantly contribute to local and regional [social and] economic development” (Melissen, 2013, p. 819).

The above provides the context for this paper. The subsequent sections focus on identifying and analysing a specific (psychological) barrier – the social dilemma – that seems to play a crucial role in explaining why the accommodation sector has not made a bigger contribution to sustainable development. This is done by presenting and analysing the outcomes of the three empirical studies mentioned earlier: (1) a multiple case study of 16 accommodations, (2) a real-life hotel room experiment, (3) a Delphi study, designed to explore and analyse the attitudes and opinions of involved stakeholders. The results of these studies are then further explored and refined by relating them to relevant literature. The final section then builds on this analysis by not only highlighting the main findings but also establishing promising avenues for advancing sustainable hospitality, both in practice and research.

## 2. Three empirical studies

The three empirical studies described in this section were originally designed to contribute to the reduction of the carbon footprint of the Dutch accommodation sector. These studies were part of an overall project entitled *Traveling Large 2.0*, which was set up and executed in cooperation with, amongst others, the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (De Bruijn, Dirven, Eijgelaar, Peeters, & Nelemans, 2013). As the remainder of this section will show, the outcomes of the first two studies indicated that developing a carbon footprint reduction strategy and accompanying toolbox for the Dutch tourism sector need to account, more explicitly than the original set-up of *Traveling Large 2.0* encompassed, for a specific underlying barrier to reducing the sector’s carbon footprint. In fact, these outcomes resulted in an adjustment of the set-up and focus of the third study, i.e. the Delphi study, to allow for additional observations related to this barrier and addressing the full scope of actions involved with pursuing sustainable development.

### 2.1. Empirical study 1

This multiple case study established the carbon footprint and water use of tourism accommodation providers in the Noord-Brabant region of the Netherlands. Purposive sampling was done in order to ensure a sample of (conference) hotels, group accommodation providers and bungalow parks that represents different sizes, levels of luxury (star rating) and environmental certification (Green Key). Other types of accommodation, such as bed & breakfasts and campsites were excluded from the sample to keep it at a ‘manageable’ level of homogeneity. A variety of booking sites, individual hotel websites and the Dutch Green Key website, as well as personal networks, were used to create a preliminary list of over 100 accommodation providers that would be interesting to include in the study. From this preliminary list, 16 businesses were randomly selected to provide quantitative data regarding their energy and water use. These data were used to calculate water, gas and electricity consumption per m<sup>2</sup> of floor area, per guest night, and per guest night multiplied by the guestroom floor area to total floor area ratio, to mitigate differences in size and structure. The combined gas and electricity usage is expressed in the amount of associated CO<sub>2</sub>

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