



# Identifying core indicators of sustainable tourism: A path forward?



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## ABSTRACT

Progress towards a more sustainable tourism sector at an enterprise level has been slow, even though a number of studies have developed a variety of indicators. Indeed, so many indicators have been developed that industry seems to be overwhelmed by choice, leading to inaction, poor decision-making or adoption of the easiest option. Perhaps, simplicity is the way forward. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate a number of studies that have proposed a variety of indicator themes to identify commonalities among them that may serve as a starting point for enterprises to move towards a more sustainable path. Seven key indicator themes emerged, including job creation, business viability, quality of life, water quality, waste management, energy conservation and maintenance of community integrity. The term 'indicator theme' is used for it identifies what needs to be assessed to monitor progress towards sustainable tourism, while simultaneously recognizing that specific measurement metrics may vary depending as they are site, context and enterprise specific.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper argues that a fundamental rethinking of our approach to sustainable tourism at an enterprise level is needed. At present, the tourism and hospitality sectors are overwhelmed by indicators, leading to inaction or selective choices of how to act that essentially embeds existing practice (and non-practice) as 'sustainable', as much by omission as by real action. Instead of producing impressive looking lists of indicators, which are largely ineffective, the authors propose adopting an alternative approach to focus on a smaller set of real, actionable items industry can adopt, embed in its corporate culture and act on in a meaningful manner. Insights into the identification of the core dimensions of sustainable tourism and the identification of the relevant indicator themes under each dimension may come from a meta-analysis of studies published between 2000 and 2015 that have proposed and validated sustainable tourism indicators. In doing so, it may be possible to identify a set of core indicators and associated actionable steps that all those involved in the tourism industry can pursue.

## 2. Sustainability and the tyranny of choice overload

The path to a more sustainable tourism sector is a journey that consists of many small steps, where progress is made incrementally, though not necessarily slowly, and not necessarily sequentially. Sixteen years ago, McCool, Moisey, and Nickerson (2001) felt that key issues relating

to the process (how to progress towards a sustainable path?) and the object (what do we need to sustain?) were unresolved. These issues largely remain unresolved today, in spite of continuous efforts to encourage sustainable tourism (Dodds & Butler, 2010; Williams & Ponsford, 2009). The reasons for lack of resolution are manifest. Time scale is always problematic, for economic sustainability can be measured immediately, while social, cultural and ecological sustainability may only be measured over many years, and in some cases, even generations. Moreover, sustainability is a never ending journey, as technical and managerial innovations along with changes in consumer behavior will always create opportunities to improve performance.

In spite of some small successes, a number of studies identify a range of underlying structural and attitudinal issues that seem to inhibit many businesses from adopting more sustainable practices. Ignorance is common, for while many industry operators are genuinely concerned about sustainability, few really understand the specifics of issues such as climate change, adverse environmental, and social impacts (McKercher, Mak, & Wong, 2014; Muangasame & McKercher, 2014). These issues may be well known, but are not known well. Kietäväinen and Tuulentie (2013), for example, report that climate change is still regarded as an abstract concept that may affect businesses in the long term, but not immediately. Additionally the array of issues to be considered is so vast (Tanguay, Rajaonson, & Therrien, 2013) that many in industry believe the actions of individual operators contribute little (McKercher et al., 2014). The belief that adopting such measures will add to costs and therefore reduce competitiveness is also common (Bramwell & Lane, 2013). Finally, difficulties in identifying and operationalising a set of meaningful and measureable indicators inhibit progress (Cruz, 2003).

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Indicators are the central issue for they also inform matters relating to ignorance, failure to believe one's actions can make a difference and inertia inhibiting action. Butler (1999) reminds us that, without indicators, the term 'sustainable' becomes little more than a meaningless hyperbole. Ironically, the core problem is that we are overwhelmed by too many indicators rather than too few (Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesias, & Vinzón, 2015), with Moldan, Stewart and Plocq-Fichelet (2007, p. xxiv) commenting that "too many indicators, indicator sets and indices have been developed" since the Rio Earth Summit. The attempt by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to encourage a more sustainable tourism sector through the publication of its *Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations: A Guidebook* (UNWTO, 2004) highlights the issue. This manual is over 500 pages long, identifies 13 broad dimensions of sustainability covering over 40 major sustainability issues, ranging from the management of natural resources (waste, water, energy, etc.), to development control, satisfaction of tourists and host communities, preservation of cultural heritage, seasonality, economic leakages, and climate change. It then proceeds to identify more than 150 sub-components and defines over 700 possible indicators.

This publication represents a classic case of choice overload. Choice overload (Schwartz, 2014), occurs when the number of alternatives or choice options is greater than the person's ability to make effective and efficient decisions (Haynes, 2009). The impact of choice overload depends on the complexity of the choices available, how well the options align (alignment or non-alignment) with each other and the presence or lack of a clearly preferred option (dominant choice, non-dominant choice) (Bollen, Knijnenburg, Willemsen, & Graus, 2010; Chernev, Böckenholt, & Goodman, 2015). Non-alignment occurs when a set of discrete choices is presented that are largely unrelated (Gourville & Soman, 2005), while non-dominance occurs when no one option is clearly perceived as being best (Fasolo, McClelland, & Todd, 2007). The likelihood of choice overload occurring is enhanced when the person making the decision is largely ignorant of the issue and, therefore, unable to make an informed choice, for choices always involve some sort of trade-off (Chernev et al., 2015). Sustainable tourism issues as varied as ending sex tourism, to waste management and seasonality are evidence of significant non-alignment found in the UNWTO manual, while the failure to identify core issues reflects non-dominance. In short, while the manual attempts to cover the broad array of sustainability issues facing the tourism sector, it is largely ineffective because it is simply too broad and too comprehensive. Preparing impressive lists ignores the fact that people create mental 'ladders' that rank items and are most likely to act on those items appearing near the top of the list, while ignoring those lower down the list (Ries & Trout, 1986).

The net result is a tendency to avoid acting (Park & Jang, 2013), to choose simple alternatives that require little personal investment, continue with habitual or routine actions (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; Chernev, 2003; Griffin, Liu, & Khan, 2005; Iyengar & Kamenica, 2007); or to pick and choose options that suit one's narrow personal interests, even though they may not be in the best interests of others (Miller & Twining-Ward, 2005). Picking and choosing emerged as a key barrier to the effective implementation of the 7 *Greens* tourism policy in Thailand, where so many items were identified that operators could claim to be 'sustainable' by 'cherry picking' items, without actually changing their business practice (Muangasame & McKercher, 2014). In short, bigger is not necessarily better. So many indicators have been developed that they obfuscate the issue, rather than clarifying it.

An alternative school of thought suggests the identification of a limited set of core actions that can be adopted fairly easily and embedded in the corporate culture, and to define meaningful indicators to assess progress to achieving targets (Gourville & Soman, 2005; Bollen et al., 2010). A small set of secondary actions can be added at a later date for those who have deeper knowledge of the issue (Fasolo et al., 2007). This strategy has worked well for organizations such as Shangri-La

Hotels in Bangkok which invested about US\$400,000 to install a solar hot water heating system, with the net result that it has reduced its LPG consumption by 30% over annum (Pimolsindh & Traisupa, 2012). TUI Travel, one of Europe's largest tour operators has identified sustainability and corporate social responsibilities as core values, with the result that it has reduced carbon emissions per passenger/km by 10% for the past six years and at the same time has delivered 10 million fairer and greener holidays (TUI Group, 2015a). TUI group has achieved this result through a number of core actions including operating carbon efficient airlines (i.e. TUI fly, Dreamliner), promoting greener and fairer holidays, and providing sustainable tourism skills and education to school children through the TUI's Eco-traveler education programme (TUI Group, 2015b). Scandic Hotels has also succeeded in cutting its waste production per guest room by two-thirds and its water consumption by half (Cuenllas, 2014) through its core programme, *The Resource Hunt*, that focused on three core actions of sorting waste, reducing unnecessary water use, and dimming or turning off corridor lights to save energy (Goodman, 2000; Cuenllas, 2014).

Key features of effective indicators are relevance, availability of data to evaluate them, and the feasibility of comparing results over time (Blancas, Gonzalez, Lozano-Oyola, & Pérez, 2010). Moreover good indicators have the added advantage of separating central from peripheral issues which tend to obscure priorities and hence retard progress (Keeble, Topiol, & Berkeley, 2003; Manning, 1999). Again, simplicity is the key. The tendency to develop overly ambitious sets of indicators may be politically appealing but accomplish little more than greenwashing. Moreover, the combination of funding constraints, lack of commitment and support, lack of proper implementation and action framework, unclear goals and outcomes, unclear definition of stakeholder roles, and little development of systematic measures of assessment for enterprises is a recipe for failure (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2015; McCool & Stankey, 2004; Miller & Twining-Ward, 2005; Schianetz, Kavanagh, & Lockington, 2007; Larson & Poudyal, 2012).

The time has come to take a step back and look at what has already been proposed, rather than constantly creating new indicators. Much excellent research has been conducted, but it has tended to be on an ad hoc and piecemeal basis. Little attempt has been made to integrate these studies to see what common themes and sub-themes emerge that may be useful in identifying a smaller set of core, actionable sustainable tourism indicators that can be adopted by industry. Broad issues of how these indicators can be measured can also be developed from a review of past studies, although it is recognized that specific measures for each indicator may vary from business to business.

### 3. Method

A meta-analysis of 27 studies that have proposed sustainable tourism dimension and indicator themes that were published between 2000 and 2015 is undertaken. Gretzel and Kennedy-Eden (2012) note that meta-analysis has the potential to offer new insights into a collective body of research. Doing so can provide a degree of scientific rigour that cannot be achieved by any single study (Crouch, 1995). Effective meta-analysis studies begin with a clear definition of the research question and research hypotheses or propositions (McKercher, Wang, & Park, 2015).

Studies were selected based on the criteria determined by the research questions. In particular, they had to be relevant and potentially applicable at an enterprise level, even though some may have adopted a broader perspective. Identified indicators also had to be validated through either expert opinions (i.e. Delphi technique) or by stakeholder inputs (i.e. interviews, workshops or surveys) to ensure their relevance. An initial search for candidate papers was conducted on online databases, such as Google Scholar, Google, Scopus and Web of Science using the keywords "indicators of sustainable tourism," "sustainability," "sustainable tourism," and "indicators of sustainability." The papers included in this study are summarised in Table 1.

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