



## REVIEW ARTICLE

# A CRITICAL REVIEW OF TOURISM AND OIL

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**Abstract:** Growing scarcity of oil and increasing oil prices are highly relevant for tourism. This research provides a critical meta-analysis to assess current knowledge of 'tourism and oil'. The interdisciplinary analysis is complex as there are no clear boundaries of the phenomenon, the interpretation of 'facts' is context dependent, and activities relevant to tourism and oil are multi-dimensional. The review suggests that increasing oil prices will have far-reaching impacts on tourism, including changes to people's lifestyles and the role of tourism within these. Presented knowledge of tourism and oil is far from comprehensive and serves as a starting point for further enquiry. In particular, research on the interpretive components of the phenomenon remains poorly conceptualised and ill-understood. **Keywords:** oil, energy, critical realism, meta-analysis. © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

"Can the world cope with the peaking oil supplies? After all, it was the oil miracle that made the twentieth century an unprecedented era for wealth and personal freedom in the developed nations, changing almost every aspect of how we live, travel and eat" (Simmons, 2005, p. 342). As long as 30 years ago at the *International Conference on Tourism and Air Transport* it was asked how much fuel would be available in 15 to 25 years and what substitutes there were available to replace fossil fuels (Raben, 1978). Today, the question of what the economic, social and cultural implications for tourism and the world might be in light of dwindling oil resources is more relevant than ever. Concerns about imminent peaking of oil production are increasing (UK Energy Research Centre (UK ERC), 2009) and have also been incorporated into the three 'hard truths' postulated in Shell's latest Oil Scenarios: (1) rising demand from India and China, (2) a decline in conventional sources of oil, (3) concerns about the climatic impacts of greenhouse gas emissions (Zalik, 2010).

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Tourism is very oil intensive. The aviation industry alone consumes 243 million tonnes of fuel per year; 6.3% of world refinery production (Nygren, Aleklett, & Höök, 2009). The impact of less (affordable) oil is likely to be complex and its analysis challenging, as it has to include many dimensions, for example how tourists respond to price signals, how tourist flows will change, and what role the social and cultural contexts play in the participation in, and operation of tourism. The questions of oil availability and how it might be used, as well as the effects of tourism as distributors of wealth, are geopolitical and ethical. Despite the critical role of oil, tourism forecasts and future studies rarely consider oil shortages or price hikes as serious factors (an exception is Draper, Goodman, Hardyment, & Murray, 2009). This is exemplified in a recent report on 'The Future of Travel and Tourism in the Middle East', which assumes ongoing growth and expansion of global markets (Global Futures, 2007).

It is the aim of this paper to provide a critical review of knowledge related to the interaction between tourism and oil against the background of declining resources and increasing oil prices. It is argued that the approach required has to be interdisciplinary to capture the many dimensions of tourism and oil. By undertaking a qualitative meta-analysis that goes beyond merely summarising literature in this field, but explicitly questions the assumptions behind different studies, knowledge on tourism and oil will be advanced considerably. More importantly, this approach enables a discussion of key limitations and research gaps, and thereby helps to identify urgent research needs. Greater understanding of the implications of reduced availability of cheap oil for tourism will be essential to manage associated risks.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Knowledge Creation*

Tribe (2006, p. 363) argues that tourism knowledge is not necessarily congruent with tourism as a phenomenon, as it is mediated by factors such as person, ideology, rules, ends and position—all spanning the “knowledge force field”. For example, knowledge is likely to be influenced by the motivations of the research, which are often industry-biased, but also relate to “understanding”, “deep insight”, and to the “improvement of human conditions” or “emancipation” (Tribe, 2006, p. 373). The relationship between the ‘phenomenon’ of tourism and oil, the knowledge force field, and actual knowledge is depicted in Figure 1.

Reflecting on the knowledge force field helps to understand better the limitations of knowledge created. Limitations are either of a disciplinary or paradigmatic nature, or they simply reflect knowledge gaps. Paradigmatic limitations are most fundamental. Positivism, for example, excludes the possibility that research is value-laden and thereby rejects questions of moral or power relationships, all of which are relevant in the study of tourism and oil. Positivism assumes that true

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