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Testing take-up of academic concepts in an influential commercial tourism publication

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Abstract

Many independent travellers read and rely on the *Lonely Planet*® destination guidebooks. In 2006, the company published two global selections which effectively define its perspectives on concepts such as adventure, cultural and ecotourism, responsible tourism and triple-bottom-line approaches. By analysing the content of these volumes, we can test whether information reaching individual tourists is congruent with relevant theoretical constructs. Broadly, it is: but it is less precise, comprehensive or up to date than published research, and relies more on example than synthesis. In addition, *Lonely Planet* has a strong emphasis on social aspects, reflecting the concepts of responsible tourism or community ecotourism rather than the environmental concerns associated with ecotourism more strictly defined. Opportunities such as this, to analyse the affects of academic tourism research on commercial tourism publishing, are relatively rare.

Keywords: Adventure; Code; Destination; Ecotourism; Guidebooks; Responsible

1. Introduction and methods

A key feature of any science is the testing of models and hypotheses against observations. In the social sciences, this generally involves observations of human behaviour. In tourism studies, it involves testing the actual behaviour of humans as tourists, against theoretical models for that behaviour. One of the more powerful measures to test any model is to use that model to predict the outcome of a disturbance or intervention in the system under study, and then to test those predictions against observed changes when that disturbance actually occurs. In the tourism industry, some such disturbances are generated externally, and some internally. External disturbances include, e.g.: fuel price rises; increased security risks from terrorist attack or armed conflict; increased health risk through disease epidemics; or increased access opportunities through new infrastructure or technology. Internal disturbances include, e.g.: construction of new tourist accommodation or attractions; development of new activities; or new marketing campaigns, including the wide variety of ecolabelling, branding and certification schemes.

Academic research and writing about tourism may in itself be viewed as an intervention in the behaviour of humans as tourists and tour providers. Most academic analysis of the tourism industry is a one-way street: academics observe tourists and the tourism providers, but the latter pay little attention to such analyses, which in general, necessarily lag behind the changes in human society and behaviour which they set out to study. This contrasts with many of the natural sciences, for example, where changes in human society and behaviour are driven in part by new technologies and policies, which in turn are derived from new scientific information obtained by academic analysis of the natural world.

Cases where the tourism industry may have changed specifically in response to academic analysis should therefore be of particular theoretical interest. In such cases, academic writings may be seen as an intervention in the tourism industry, whose results may then themselves be subject to academic scrutiny. One such case is described here.

There has been a considerable volume of academic writing on the closely related topics of responsible tourism,

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ecotourism, and similar concepts, much of it devoted to defining terms (Fennell, 2001; Medina, 2005; Weaver, 2001). There have also been a number of attempts to compare individual commercial tourism products which market themselves using these labels, against academic or government definitions, to see how well or poorly they comply (Buckley, 2003a). In theory, tourism ecocertification schemes make the same comparison, but within a commercial rather than an academic framework; and there are also academic analyses of the degree to which such ecocertification processes and ecocertified products comply with academic definitions (Black & Crabtree, 2007; Font, 2002; Font & Buckley, 2001).

Recently, a new and different opportunity has become available to test the commercial uptake of academic theory in tourism. The very well-known tourism publisher *Lonely Planet*® has published two books which include both text descriptions, and product selections, illustrating *Lonely Planet's* concepts of relevant terms. By examining the content of these volumes we can test the degree to which an influential commercial tourism organisation has adopted academic views on a particular tourism topic. As noted earlier, such opportunities are relatively rare. The *Lonely Planet* books themselves make little direct reference to academic publications, which are largely inaccessible to independent travellers not affiliated with academic institutions. They do, however, refer extensively to readily accessible websites of organisations espousing ecotourism and similar concepts, and those organisations, in turn, embody the results of academic research in their views and representations. The analyses presented here do not test what mechanisms may have been involved in the transfer of academic concepts to these commercial tourism publications. They do, however, test to what degree the academic concepts are ultimately reflected in those publications, whether by direct or indirect routes.

Lonely Planet® guidebooks are relied upon routinely by independent travellers worldwide as a key to accommodation, transport and activities in particular destination regions. The guidebooks have moved increasingly upmarket in recent years, featuring luxury as well as backpacker options, and commercial tours as well as budget options. This may be part of the company's competitive publishing strategy. Alternatively, this may simply reflect the ageing of its original customer base, who may now be cash-rich but time-poor rather than time-rich but cash-poor.

During 2006, *Lonely Planet* published a set of 82 case studies in ecotourism under the title of *Code Green* (Lorimer, 2006). Under the title *Blue List*, it also published a set of 26 top-10 lists under a wide variety of themes, including ecolodges and extreme environments, nature and remote areas, adrenalin rushes and sustainable tourism, treks and wildlife watching (Lonely Planet, 2006).

From a methodological perspective, there are three types of relevant content in the two *Lonely Planet* volumes. Firstly, there are sections of text which express the views of *Lonely Planet* authors directly. These include, for example, the introductory pages and a number of text boxes in each book. Secondly, the selection of case studies and top-10 lists in themselves reveal *Lonely Planet* perspectives. And thirdly, at least in *Code Green*, each case study includes a list of credentials, effectively reasons why it was selected.

Here, therefore, all three of these components are analysed to determine whether *Lonely Planet*® uses these concepts in the same way as academic researchers.

2. Results

2.1. Criteria and definitions

Code Green claims to be about so-called responsible tourism rather than ecotourism as such (Lorimer, 2006, p. 9). Responsible tourism is a rather vague term, at least potentially susceptible to the same shortcomings as the chemical industry's "Responsible Care" initiative, critiqued by Gunningham and Grabowsky (1998). The term does not appear to have been analysed in the research literature to the same extent as ecotourism, though it has been promoted by particular authors such as Chemish (1998), Sirakaya, Sasidharan, and Sonmez (1999), Goodwin and Francis (2003) and Medina (2005). The only detailed definition available seems to be that propounded by Goodwin's International Centre for Responsible Tourism (2006). This is summarised in Table 1, with some minor paraphrasing, and compared with the precise definition of responsible tourism as used in *Code Green* (Lorimer, 2006, p. 9), and also with published definitions of ecotourism and community ecotourism.

According to the concept put forward in *Code Green* (Lorimer, 2006, p. 9), responsible travel "can be more-or-less defined as travel that takes into consideration… 'triple bottom line' issues". The precise ways in which *Code Green* expresses triple-bottom-line issues are summarised in Table 1. *Code Green* is vague as to how such a triple-bottom-line should actually be assessed, but some of these technical issues have been considered by Buckley (2003b). In most formulations of this concept, however, the economic component of the triple-bottom-line refers to commercial viability. *Lonely Planet*, in contrast, seems to mean an economic contribution to host communities through local retention of revenue. This is an equally significant but conceptually distinct issue, often considered as part of the social rather than the economic bottom line (Buckley, 2003b).

2.2. Text boxes

Code Green contains a number of text boxes covering issues, institutions and quandaries, which independent travellers might face in their quest for responsibility. On the social side, for example, it describes the role of the International Porter Protection Group in the Himalayas, an organisation dedicated to the welfare of porters and climbing Sherpas and supported by a number of trekking