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Absence and presence of social complexity in the marketization of sustainable tourism

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ABSTRACT

The EU strategy for rural development 2014–2020 proposes a focus on tourism as a solution to bring economic, environmental and social aspects of sustainable development together. Using the case of fishing tourism in Sweden, we discuss the marketization of sustainable development on a destination market. We focus on the discursive and practical tension between ambitions for development and maintenance. In a two-step analysis, we problematize the win–win consensus of sustainable tourism discourse in relation to different stakeholders' competing uses of limited resources in practice. We show how stakeholders understand the stakes of sustainable tourism as either lost opportunities for development due to failed regulation of a natural resource, or as deteriorating social relations due to failed maintenance of socio-cultural values. We argue for the acknowledgement of social complexity in market theoretizations in order to transfer sustainable tourism from the agenda of business potential and traditional marketing to the domain of participatory politics.

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1. A market theorization of sustainable development

Among the ecological, economic and social dimensions of sustainability set out by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), sustainable development research and environmental policy have so far mostly focused on bio-physical and economic aspects. At the same time, environmental policies have been shown to fix environmental issues in a tight association with economic modes of valuation (Alexander, 2005; Fourcade, 2011; Hultman and Corvellec, 2012; Säwe and Hultman, 2013a). One result is that sustainable development has become a subject for marketization (Redclift, 2005). Consequently, the exposure of sustainable development to markets has been theorized as an aspect of neoliberalization manifested as the enclosure of natural resources and the privatization of ecosystem services (Banerjee, 2003; Fairhead et al., 2012; Heynen and Robbins, 2005; Mansfield, 2004).

At the same time, social complexity tends to become ignored in sustainability research (Fleetwood, 2007; Missimer et al., 2010). Peñaloza and Venkatesh (2006), discussing how to better understand processes of marketization, suggested that markets should be analysed as social constructions as a means of including societal, social, cultural and environmental values in market theorizations. By acknowledging a plurality of values, marketization research would join a political change agenda by understanding markets as 'a dynamic, complex co-creation in which multiple actors have influence [but where] economic wealth alone should not determine market valuation because it privileges the interests of some actors over others and advances the economic domain over that of social domains' (Peñaloza and Mish, 2011, p. 26). Accordingly, there are strong arguments to consider in more detail how the different aspects of sustainability are discursively and practically articulated in relation to each other. In line with the acknowledgement of the social character of markets we therefore put particular emphasis on: 'the importance of ecosystem constraints and societal norms, as they are interpreted and employed by actors, as tools in advancing market and policy changes related to sustainability' (Peñaloza and Mish, 2011, p. 26). Markets are imagined and understood differently by different actors, and this implies a need to pay attention to social complexity.

Our ambition is to investigate sustainable tourism through a critical analysis of the absence and presence of social complexity in discourse and practice (Bramwell and Bernard, 2014). We illustrate logics, rationales, conflicts and tensions evoked by the different aspects of sustainability in the case of fishing tourism. The

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particular sustainable development market we study is a geographical one – a market of destinations. By a relational approach, rhetorically acknowledged by the European union as important (EC, 2005, 2011a), we intend to address a 'lack of standing for non-positivistic environmental studies' (Hall, 2013, p. 12). In tourism research, a number of actor-network theory studies have identified this lack and dealt with it by taking a symmetrical approach to human and non-human actants (Franklin, 2004; Gren and Huijbens, 2012; Jóhannesson, 2005; Paget et al., 2010; Rodger et al., 2009; van der Duim, 2007; van der Duim et al., 2013). Drawing upon this 'material turn' in the social sciences with specific reference to environmental issues (cf. Braun, 2006) allows for a focus on ethical aspects of the conditions and effects of tourism. Our argument in this article has the same aim. However, the inclusive and relational approach we adopt has as an explicit empirical focus on social complexity to discuss sustainability and tourism. Hereby, we respond to a call made almost 40 years ago to generate knowledge 'of the meanings of acts and products and the way in which they fit into life pattern[s]' (Tucker, 1974, p. 35) that we see as necessary to avoid reductionist market theoretizations.

Vallance et al. (2011) suggested that the social aspects of sustainability could be analysed by investigating what stakeholders want to maintain and develop when societal conditions change. One aspect of this is 'the preservation of socio-cultural patterns and practices in the context of social and economic change' (Vallance et al., 2011, p. 345). We take this as our starting-point to address the 'complexity of market co-creation [by] attending to the co-creation of meaning and value' (Peñaloza and Mish, 2011, p. 28) embedded in the marketization of sustainability in capitalist economies.

2. The introduction of social complexity to the market of sustainable tourism

Presently, the EU strategy for rural development 2014–2020 proposes non-agricultural activities to realize goals of social inclusion and territorial justice (EC, 2010, 2013; McDonagh, 2012). In this change process, there is an emerging focus on tourism as a solution to bring the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development together (EC, 2011b). A result of tourism becoming a preferred development path is that policy discourse prioritizes values such as attractiveness, quality and social capital (Governmental Offices of Sweden, 2010; Swedish Board of Agriculture, 2012). This raises issues of how such intangible values are defined and measured. How are socio-cultural characteristics and practices valued, developed and maintained? According to what logics are resources valued? Who values what? What are the various reasons for different stakeholders to maintain and develop socio-cultural practices? What becomes represented as sustainable in sustainable tourism?

As indicated by these questions, the very concept of 'sustainable tourism' is in itself problematic. We argue that one way to critically unpack sustainable tourism can be found in the transition from strategy to practice. Hägerstrand (2009, p. 27, our translation) describes this transition as a crucial moment:

> The material world within reach for humans is not fundamentally changed through words but through handling. Word-makers might have the power, but in order for that which is decided to become more than vibrations in the air, somebody, somebodies or everybody must engage in the substance of the material world.

From the perspective of government initiatives and strategies, tourism is driven by a commercial logic. The objective is to displace consumption between continents, countries or regions as a means of 'exporting' place-bound resources, or between urban and rural areas to facilitate territorial justice. On all scales except the truly global, tourism strategy can be regarded as a zero-sum game. Destinations compete with each other, and tourists are the limited resource over which they compete. The means used to catch tourists are often labelled 'locality', 'uniqueness' and 'authenticity' – pure marketing devices in so far as every actual place can be said to be local, unique and authentic. Tourism marketing and tourism strategy are top-down constructions, by necessity setting real-life complexity aside in order to be effective. This might be problematic: perhaps not for tourists but for local inhabitants. It threatens to ignore the social aspects of sustainable tourism, without which sustainable tourism itself becomes a pure marketing device.

The objects being commodified in tourism are often traditions, place-specific assets and landscape features (George et al., 2009; Hultman and Hall, 2012). However, these resources are impossible to frame within a traditional economic valuation paradigm through demand and supply models (Fourcade, 2011). But by proposing tourism as a priority for rural development – considering its commercial rationale – economic growth is given precedence and becomes the defining parameter of sustainable development. Social sustainability is assumed to result from monetary input to rural communities through displaced consumption. In a discursive sense, welfare and territorial justice follow from the reduction of the complexities of social reality.

An alternative mode of understanding sustainability can be gained from employing a bottom-up perspective. This is a way of framing sustainability objectives 'so that they seem more consistent with that which people value and would like to preserve … in order to explore how residents interpret and incorporate concerns about the places in which they live and the world around them.' (Vallance et al., 2011, p. 346). We will demonstrate how sustainability is associated with different values by a stakeholder approach to tourism development. We have chosen a geographically delimited coastal fishery and two stakeholder groups – anglers and subsistence fishers – as an illustrative case.

Coastal fisheries management in EU policy combines the issues of an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable rural development, natural resource management and funding for development projects through stakeholder participation. This combination forms the rationale for our choice of a case, together with the fact that fishing tourism is an area identified by the national government as a crucial growth sector in Swedish tourism, conditional upon the sustainable exploitation of a common good. According to professional fishers, anglers and subsistence fishers, sustainable fishing relies upon place-bound knowledge and practical experience – competences that from their own respective perspectives are being systematically ignored by authorities (Hind, 2014; Säwe and Hultman, 2012, 2013b). Hägerstrand (2009, p. 74, our translation) expressed this problem in a straightforward manner:

> Catching and hunting demand a perception about places and routes of the prey, but such knowledge is not generated from a direct omnipresent gaze but demands accumulated experiences over a longer period of time.

In this context of coastal fisheries, we interpret 'a direct omnipresent gaze' – although, or perhaps because, being an abstract concept – as the ideal and ambition for fisheries bureaucracy relying on modelling sciences such as biology and economics. This ideal becomes articulated in the formation of policy discourse (word-making) (Säwe and Hultman, 2013a). In contrast, we equal 'accumulated experiences over a longer period of time' with

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