Sustainable-responsible tourism discourse — Towards 'responsustable' tourism

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ABSTRACT

Despite several decades of academic and practical debate on tourism sustainability, its application in practice remains difficult. The dominant tourism discourse on *sustainability* (theory, seen as a concept) and *responsibility* (practice, understood as appropriate action) calls for a solid understanding of the process of how a responsible destination actually implements a sustainability agenda, which this paper aims to provide. In this context, we explore theoretical perspectives from political economics and behavioural economics to offer a well-reasoned integrated sustainability–responsibility model comprising three stages: Awareness, Agenda and Action. This Triple-A Model complements the sustainability indicators debate and provides advice on how to continuously implement the sustainability concept and move from market-value-led and environmentally laissez-faire tourism towards more environmental- and social-value-driven responsible tourism. In addition, this paper discusses the existing sustainability and responsibility nomenclatures and their use and contributes relevant conclusions on the current understanding of sustainability and responsibility in European and UNWTO practices. The term *responsustable tourism* is suggested to join two existing terms and demonstrate that the current understanding of responsible tourism behaviour is based on the concept of sustainable tourism.

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1. Introduction

Concern over the natural and social environments has generated research debate on tourism–environment relationship. This debate gained momentum in the early 1970s when George Young argued that the impacts of tourism are both a blessing and a blight (Young, 1973) and Claude Kaspar, a Swiss-based tourism researcher, called for a new "dimension of [the] tourism debate" (Kaspar, 1973, p. 139), which he termed *environmental ecology*. Later, Swiss ecologist Jost Krippendorf (1984) challenged the sense of mass tourism in his book entitled "Vacation People" ("Ferienmenshen" in German, translated as "Holiday Makers" in English (Krippendorf, 1987)) and began the search for alternatives. Tourism critics in the 1980s called for "… more responsibility for the effects of travel and behaviour on host environments, both physical and human" (Butler, 1995, p. 5). This interest in "more responsibility" led to so-called alternative tourism forms and concepts which have been given many names, such as alternative, soft, quality, eco, responsible, minimum impact tourism, green and ethical tourism, with all of them representing an alternative to the mainstream mass tourism that has been becoming environmentally, socially, ethically and politically intolerable (Mihalič, 2006; Swarbrooke, 1999). In general, global environmental concern culminated in "Our Common Future", as defined in the Brundtland report (WCED, 1987), which brought the global environmental debate and the notion of sustainability to the forefront of global and local social and political thinking and agendas. The tourism sustainability debate, e.g., the debate regarding use of the term *sustainability*, following the "Our Common Future" legacy began in the early 1990s with Edward Inskeep (1991) who defined five main criteria for *sustainable tourism*, which addressed the economic, environmental and social responsibility of tourism as well as its responsibility towards tourists (visitor satisfaction) and global justice and equity. Some of his criteria received little recognition in the following debate, which also originated in the Brundtland legacy and culminated in the next decade. The United Nations' organisations, including the UNWTO, primarily supported the three-pillar (environmental, socio-cultural and economic) concept of sustainable tourism. This concept became the focus of mainstream academic tourism literature and programmes and the input of many tourism strategies and policies, resulting in a recognised global trend towards sustainable tourism development.

However, sustainable tourism research, documents and actions have recently been increasingly accompanied by the notion of responsible tourism. Examples include the new European document entitled the "Charter for Sustainable and Responsible Tourism" (TSG, 2012), and two recent books called "Responsible Tourism" (Leslie, 2012a) and "Taking Responsibility for Tourism" (Goodwin, 2011).

The trend towards sustainability has been studied and accepted by many researchers. On one hand, the sustainability concept has served for some as a magic wand pointing towards more sustainable, environmentally and socially friendlier tourism developmental models and forms (Ritchie and Crouch, 2000; Swarbrooke, 1999). On the other hand, the concept has been persistently criticised for being flawed and inadequate (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). In other words, the sustainability discussion has helped draw attention to the need for a balance between economic and environmental interests in tourism. Its actual penetration into strategies and policies has resulted in many good practices and improvements such as energy savings, recycling, a reduction of waste and emissions and attempts to improve the livelihood of the local population. However, there is also significant evidence of the opposite effect. Wheeler argues that the "intellectually appealing" concept of sustainable tourism has little practical application because it has turned into a public relations tool for addressing the criticism of the impact of tourism while allowing essentially the same behaviour as before (Wheeller, 1993, p.121). Indeed, a consensus on the efficacy of sustainable tourism development remains elusive (Chettiparamb and Kokkranikal, 2012), and its implementation in practice remains difficult, leaving much of the tourism industry "… alarmingly unsustainable" (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010, p. 117).

Tourism stakeholders are applying sustainability practices at a slow pace. Further, some destinations might inaccurately promote themselves as sustainable and increase the expectations of new tourists (Poon, 1989), who are then confronted with the gap between the actual and promised (advertised) sustainability. Extensive lists of sustainable tourism indicators have been created to measure this gap and actual sustainability (EC, 2014; ECETAT and ECOTRANS, 2004; TSG, 2007; UNWTO, 2004). However, although these lists enable actual progress in sustainability performance to be monitored while some (aside from the three-pillar approach) measure political sustainability and customer satisfaction (EC, 2014; ECETAT & ECOTRANS, 2004), they do not provide a measurement tool that can help destinations understand the overall transition process regarding sustainability and responsibility. For this reason, a tool to understand, measure and monitor the process of implementing sustainability is still needed. This is the primary purpose of this paper.

The existence of this paper has been provoked by two interrelated facets of the above debate. The first relates to the never-ending search for new tourism terms on the assumption that a new term will bring more responsible tourism. In this context, interest has been triggered by the recently growing popularity of the term responsible tourism in the tourism literature (Goodwin, 2011) as well as in consulting and political and business practices (TSG, 2012). The actual and academic coexistence of these two key terms can also be well illustrated by the titles of scientific conferences discussing sustainable-responsible tourism development. For example, in early October 2013, on the same days, two conferences were held on the issue, one in Istanbul, Turkey and the other in Barcelona, Spain. The first conference tried to attract participants through the conference title "sustainability" (International conference: Sustainability issues and Challenges in Tourism, 2013), the other by discussing "responsible tourism" (RTD7 Conference: Responsible Tourism in Destinations. Barcelona – Catalunya, 2013). Questions arise as to what does responsible tourism bring to the tourism debate in terms of terminology, concept and tourism type, and how does it relate to sustainable tourism.

The second facet relates to the gap between the appealing conceptual idea of sustainable tourism and its alarmingly slow penetration of action and practice, which is obviously connected to tourism irresponsibility or irresponsible tourism behaviour. In the context of both facets, this paper is interested in the penetration of sustainability and responsibility in the tourism industry and destination practices. Being a conceptual paper, its aim is to integrate existing theoretical and practical understandings and uses of the notions of sustainable and responsible tourism and provide new theoretical perspectives for their well-reasoned and coherent understanding. It examines the theories on the causes of environmental damage and the transition of society to a state in which environmental issues can no longer be ignored, as outlined by the Swiss welfare economist Bruno Frey (1985). His theory is applied to tourism to increase the understanding of the sustainable-responsible tourism discourse and current developments in use of the terms sustainable and responsible tourism. The increased use of the term responsible tourism is discussed, and an attempt to connect it with sustainable tourism is made. Paradoxically, the criticism of the above-mentioned never-ending renaming of tourism has led to a new tourism term. The term responsustable tourism has been suggested, not to offer a new tourism type or concept but as an attempt to join two existing terms to properly articulate the current responsible tourism debate, which is based on the concept of sustainable tourism.

In order to follow the primary purpose of this study, there are three specific aims: first, to understand the notions of responsible and sustainable tourism in a historical, theoretical and practical context; second, to provide a logical model to accommodate the above understandings; and third, to develop a tool to allow actual understanding and implementation of the sustainable tourism concept in a (responsible) destination.

Accordingly, the section "Introduction" explains the relevance and importance of the study. The next section explains the nature of the paper and the methodology applied. The state of the art on the sustainable-responsible tourism discourse is then presented and theoretical and practical evidence of its existence is given. Based on this discourse, the next section provides a model for responsustable tourism. Results and a discussion of the current and a proposed understanding of the sustainable-responsible tourism discourse follows, while the paper finishes with a section outlining conclusions and further research.

2. Methodology

In line with the standards for conceptual or review articles (Watts, 2011), this paper attempts to further expand and refine the understanding of the sustainable-responsible tourism discourse and suggests how to close the sustainable-responsible gap by using clear definition of each term, derived from theories on environmental damage and behavioural economics.

However, although primarily a conceptual paper, the paper's construction is informed by some explorative methods in theorising and conducting research. In this context, the paper applies engaged scholarship and action research methodology.

Engaged scholarship research emphasises advances in scientific and practical knowledge (Van de Ven, 2007) which fits the theoretical and practical nature of the present research. Being based on ongoing research and academic thinking on sustainable and responsible tourism development, this research engages academic knowledge. Further, by deriving from the current practices in