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# Will sustainable tourism research be sustainable in the future? An opinion piece

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development of sustainable tourism, and sustainable tourism research. It notes that sustainable tourism was created, in Central Europe, largely by academics. Now a global concept, sustainable tourism research has progressed to a Second Generation stage, with new and complex multi-disciplinary research areas exploring major holistic issues and opportunities. Twenty research areas are listed that need urgent attention for sustainable tourism to become an implemented norm. The paper goes on to examine five major challenges that could endanger that progress: its complexity, the need for new working practices to create multi-disciplinary research teams, the evolution of improved research journals, changes in the relationship of Universities to tourism research, and better links between industry, policy makers and researchers. Greater public, political and industry wide appreciation of what sustainable tourism means, offers and requires is needed: a Chair in the Public Understanding of Sustainable Tourism is needed perhaps?

## 1. In the beginning…

The concept of sustainable tourism was a child of the exciting 1970s and 1980s. It was conceived as a reaction to tourism's rapid growth (in terms of volume, and in its geographic coverage), in the post war period. It originated, not in the English speaking world, but in Central Europe, amongst German, Italian, and French speakers. It was not a child of the tourist industry, or of government policy makers, but of academics and other commentators. That was both a strength and a weakness. For German speakers, a vital reference is Krippendorf, Zimmer and Glauber (1988). English speakers should read Krippendorf (1987). They reflect different communication styles, but both are campaigning documents, seeking to make the interaction between tourism, tourists and the world – natural, man-made and cultural – a better experience for all concerned. They capture the Zeitgeist – the spirit – of the times, which indirectly owed much to the *Limits to Growth* discussion sparked by the creation of the Club of Rome in 1968 – see Meadows, Meadows, Randers and Behrens (1972). Discussion of Sustainable Development was first given full international recognition by the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987). The word sustainable/sustainability is now in common use.

But the early campaigning years lacked research findings, a problem which led the forerunners of Channel View Publications to launch the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (JOST) in 1993, to provide a platform for research into sustainable tourism. That journal rose to become one of the top 5 tourism research journals by 2009, (it had been accepted onto the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) in 2008 (see Bramwell & Lane, 2008). Many other journals also publish papers on sustainable tourism but JOST, by focussing on that subject, and because its editors adopted active management policies, became the market leader. Several thousand papers have now been submitted to JOST: across the whole journal world, approximately 2000 papers on aspects of sustainable tourism have now been published.

The early stages of sustainable tourism research saw the subject defined (Bramwell & Lane, 1993) and a series of basic topics researched and papers published by tourism academics, geographers, sociologists and economists. That first generation of sustainable tourism research was analysed by Lu and Nepal (2009) and discussed by Lane (2009). The years 2008–2018 saw research enter a second generation stage, and it is progress in that second stage which could, paradoxically, call into question the future of the subject unless there are radical developments.

Second generation sustainable tourism research moved into more sophisticated and demanding research territory. And it exposed the weaknesses of the trajectories of existing research. But it did move a little closer to suggesting solutions to tourism's problems.

## 2. The Top Twenty

At least 20 real and potential growth areas in second generation sustainable tourism research can be listed. The list below draws on the author's 25 years of editing the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, and over 50 years working as trainer, animateur and consultant with

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communities, policy makers, NGOs, and tourism based or related companies of many kinds.

## 3. The list

1. Partnership creation and management: design and implementation issues.
2. Governance Issues is Tourism ungovernable? If not – how can it be governed for sustainability?
3. Protected Areas as Sustainable Governance prototypes.
4. Destination Management.
5. Visitor Experience Planning.
6. Financial and Taxation Instruments for Sustainable Tourism.
7. Climate Change Issues.
8. Behavioural Change: is it possible, if so, how?
9. Scenario Planning and Futures.
10. Transformational Tourism, in an era of stressed and ageing people.
11. Slow Tourism Implementation.
12. City Tourism: the need for a Charter, Protocols and Best Practice.
13. Markets & Marketing: another case for a Charter, Protocols and Best Practice.
14. Data Development, and Data Handling: Big Data, Data Sources, and the various issues raised over the years by Sara Dolnicar et al. (which are too many to include in the reference list).
15. Social Media.
16. De-growth: can it work and if so, how?
17. Social Enterprise rather than Community Enterprise?
18. Indigenous Tourism: is sustainable tourism a valid tool for social and cultural conservation and regeneration
19. The unresearched roles of print and broadcast Media
20. Understanding Business and Businesses: consultancy and overcoming the academic taboos of dealing with reality.

One overriding fact arises from considering the Top Twenty. Almost all of these areas are complex and demanding. Tourism in general is a complex assembly industry involving numerous independent stakeholders. Sustainable tourism is extremely complex, because it requires a holistic approach, that includes business, markets, ideologies, environments, societies, cultures and the politics of control – plus the vagaries of fast changing fashion trends. The pioneers of sustainable tourism research had little idea of the size and complexity of the subject that they were working on. Some commentators who did realise that – if only vaguely – often mocked the subject. But many of us, perhaps like the space scientists assessing the solar system(s) who will never undertake space travel, have continued the quest to understand and tame the tourism beast. It presents challenges that – if not addressed – could relegate sustainable tourism to real life irrelevance. Dwyer (2018) notes, quite independently of this paper, the pressing need for tourism paradigm change. Larry Dwyer was trained as an economist, but more importantly, as a philosopher. He makes an interesting case.

## 4. The challenges

There are five major challenge areas that future sustainable tourism researchers need to cope with, and possibly to overcome, if they are to become relevant and to survive. They need to grapple with complexity, to change their working practices, to somehow encourage changes within the journal world, to change the thinking of many Universities and to learn to work with industry and policy makers much more effectively.

### 4.1. Complexity

The increasing complexity of sustainable tourism research stems in part from the large numbers of relevant research papers now published and accessible, providing a cornucopia of evidence, opinions, theories and case studies. But the really major complexities come from the need to work with so many other disciplines from applied economics to psychology, anthropology to health studies, politics to botany and zoology, marketing to customer service, the conservation of nature and the conservation of the built environment, aeronautical engineering to heritage interpretation, media studies, and of course the many branches of tourism studies. Put the word “Polymath” into Google. And then dream? Are there many sustainable tourism researchers who are polymaths, or who even know many people from other disciplines well enough to work with them?

### 4.2. Working practices

Traditionally, social science researchers – which is what most sustainable tourism researchers probably are – worked alone or with a colleague or perhaps two colleagues. They enjoyed being lone rangers, and that had advantages: they need not compromise, they could innovate without fear of ridicule – until they came to submit their work to a peer reviewed journal. But the complexity of the subject area means that most researchers ought to work in multi-disciplinary teams. And those teams could, perhaps should, be large and multi-institutional. *E*-mail, Skype, and low cost travel, have made team working possible on a grand scale, as most science and medical researchers know. It is not, however, *easy*. There is a need for co-ordinators, mentors and goodwill. The applied biologists of Europe realised the need for multi-national, multi-experienced teams and in 2009 set up Alter-Net to assist the process of team creation. It enables institutions from 18 countries to share the goal of *integrating their research capability* in order to: assess changes in biodiversity, analyse the effect of those changes on ecosystem services and inform the public and policy makers about this at a European scale. See http://www.alter-net.info/about-alter-net. Could sustainable tourism researchers create similar organizations across the world, perhaps using sub-themes or using a series of whole continent groups?

### 4.3. The research journals

Back in the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth century, research journals were the property of learned societies or of Universities. They were amateur in some respects. By 2018, they are largely tradable commodities, the properties of large multi-national corporates, who are able to fund useful smart web sites and global distribution systems. They owe allegiance to share holders who seek high returns, rather than to high science. They have corporate goals. Their executives rarely read papers, write papers, or edit papers. Neither editors nor reviewers are trained. Editorial boards rarely if ever meet to determine policies. Editors typically do their work – for very little money – as a part time occupation, often late at night. But those editors determine which papers, and which areas of research are encouraged and developed. Editors need to be risk takers, mentors and takers of others' advice, as well as polymaths! And decision making in evolving, complex and contested subject areas like sustainable tourism is especially important.

Many of these issues are common to most subjects. But sustainable tourism is especially impacted because it is changing from being reactive to be pro-creative, and innovative. Its absence of support from the industry and public sector policy makers make it especially dependent on research journals that can be sensitive to its needs and risk-taking, not simply a processing system for academic work.

Journals are driven by download and citation statistics. High downloads justify journal purchases to librarians; high citations attract “good” and well known authors – (and many others too!). Together these metrics have a curiously conservative effect on research. Existing well researched topics tend to gain high citations, because large numbers of people work on them. Innovative subjects or methodologies by definition have fewer researchers, and so score fewer citations. Any

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