

Sustainable Tourism... for Development?

Sustainable Tourism

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Not a day goes by without being confronted, one way or the other, with the multiple environmental, societal, and economic challenges that our planet faces. Because it is impossible to tackle all problems at once, the United Nations (UN) has created so-called international observances—special days, weeks, months, years, and even decades that highlight an issue of global concern. The year 2017 happens to be the “International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development” (#IY2017). The idea to use tourism as a tool for development is not new. So, why this theme, and why now?



How can large-scale tourism development projects such as this massive indoor swimming pool and beach be developed sustainably? Global Center, Chengdu, China. © Noel B. Salazar

It was the exponential growth of tourist numbers in the 1960s that put tourism on the global agenda, with 1967 being the “**International Tourist Year**” (ITY). In this positive atmosphere, in 1970 the World Tourism Organization (WTO) was established (with a name change to UNWTO in

2003). The 1970s were also the time when poorer countries dramatically expanded their external public debt burdens. Given this wider economic context, and the fact that tourism was marketed as a “clean” and labor-intensive growth industry, beneficial to all parties involved, the idea of tourism as a lever for (economic) development gained ground. The International Monetary Fund, for instance, promoted international tourism as part of structural adjustment and poverty reduction strategies imposed on heavily indebted countries. The World Bank, EU, OECD, UNCTAD, ILO, and various international development banks and bilateral development aid agencies invested in and promoted tourism as a tool for development. Meanwhile, global tourist numbers kept growing, and on September 27, 1980, the WTO celebrated its first decade with the introduction of an annual “**World Tourism Day**” (WTD).

Overemphasis on economics has little chances of leading to sustainability, because it neglects the equally important social and environmental dimensions.

Not everybody was so enthusiastic. Critics pointed out that tourism did not offer a cure-all. Anthropologists and others argued that apart from obvious and visible effects on the economy and the physical environment, tourism contributed to negative changes in value systems, traditional lifestyles, labor division, family relationships, individual behavior, community structure, ceremonies, and creative expressions. This critical attitude is represented well in the 1979 volume *Tourism: Passport to Development?*, which was the outcome of a World Bank and UNESCO sponsored seminar discussing the social and cultural impacts of tourism on developing countries. Also *Hosts and Guests* (1977, 1989), the first full-length book devoted to the anthropology of tourism, raised many issues that questioned a simplistic causal relation between tourism and development.

Anthropologists traditionally have had an adverse attitude toward tourism, something Claude Lévi-Strauss evoked masterfully in his 1955 *Tristes Tropiques*. Like most colleagues at the time, he conceived of tourism as a negative external impact that endangered already precarious indigenous cultures around the world. In his book, Lévi-Strauss depicted Western tourists pejoratively, as people nostalgically chasing for the long-vanished exotic “Other.” At the same time, he described the emotions he himself felt when traveling through the Amazon basin and the upland jungles of Brazil—places where few Westerners had ventured before—and happening upon villages where the native culture seemed relatively “untouched.” This uncomfortable overlap between the role of anthropologist and that of tourist, something many fieldworkers have experienced (but rarely written about), explains why tourism remained a neglected topic of anthropological study for so long.



The challenges of sustainability at environmentally fragile destinations. A tourism traffic jam inside Serengeti National Park, Tanzania. © Noel B. Salazar

The concerns anthropologists voiced against tourism development were legitimate, but we had to wait until the 1980s, the decade in which the idea of sustainability was popularized, for these concerns to become more widespread (the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, for example, was only founded in 1993). Despite all its negative consequences (or the lack of positive outcomes), governments, the tourism sector, and NGOs continued investing heavily in international tourism projects, yet now with a new proposal, “sustainable” tourism development. Sustainable tourism development aims at enhancing the contributions of tourism to sustainable development. However, sustainability and development are not necessarily compatible ideas. Tourism is at the forefront of the development (largely thought of as economic growth) versus sustainability debate. Sustainability in the context of tourism is often interpreted, narrowly, in terms of “carrying capacity,” reflecting the commonsense notion that a limit on resources implies a limit on the number of tourists. The term applies not only to the maximum number of tourists to be allowed access to a site, but also to the maximum rate of growth in the future.

How to develop tourism (more) sustainably?

As can be expected, the answer to this deceptively simple question is tricky. Can we trust the **efforts undertaken by the tourism sector** itself to reduce its (mainly environmental) footprint? Is it sufficient to add local and international regulations and **codes of conduct** for both the tourism sector and tourists? Those who argue that sustainable tourism offers communities a means to escape the confines of poverty often bring **alternative forms of tourism** to the fore, claiming that these allow development to be achieved sustainably and equitably. These “alternative” forms of tourism encompass a wide range of meanings: a specific kind of tourists with particular

motivations and behaviors; a certain tourism product; targeted local, national, regional, or global policies; or novel development strategies.

While scholars and practitioners alike embraced ideas of sustainability favorably, the “social” pillar of the concept was not taken very seriously (maybe because not enough sociocultural anthropologists and other social scientists were present around the decision-making tables). More environmentally oriented concepts such as “ecotourism” thrived in this atmosphere, reaching a peak with the 2002 “[International Year of Ecotourism](#).” In this context, the 2005 *NAPA Bulletin* on “[Tourism and Applied Anthropologists](#)” offered a welcome tool to make people more aware of the relevance of anthropology for tourism. In 2007, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA) even had [tourism as the main theme](#) of its Annual Conference.



Making people aware of the importance of sustainable development. A young Indonesian boy taking part in a waste-management program organized by a local tour operator in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. © Noel B. Salazar

At the start of the new millennium, the UNWTO had taken a new step with the launch of the “[Sustainable Tourism – Eliminating Poverty](#)” (ST-EP) program at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. This program focuses on unlocking (economic) opportunities for poor communities by enabling them to benefit from tourism activities. However, ST-EP remains a relatively small initiative, run with trust funds from both the UNWTO ST-EP Foundation and participating governments. While some of the ST-EP projects seek to foster business linkages between poor producers and tourism enterprises, like other “pro-poor tourism” programs, engagement with mainstream tourism is not central to the approach. Moreover, the

overemphasis on economics has little chances of leading to sustainability, because it neglects the equally important social and environmental dimensions.

Why then does the world need special attention for sustainable tourism in 2017? The [IY2017 website](#) gives a straightforward answer: “To support a change in policies, business practices and consumer behavior towards a more sustainable tourism sector than can contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals.” In other words, there seems to be something wrong with the way tourism is organized—something [critics](#) have known all along. Since 2005, the [Critical Tourism Studies \(CTS\)](#) community organizes international conferences in which the flaws of contemporary tourism (and its study) are further analyzed and discussed. The IY2017 statement demonstrates a recognition that the alternative forms of tourism strategy has failed and that we urgently need to change tourism as-a-whole, instead of offering optional “sustainable” packages and products only to those who care. Solutions, however, are complex and require inclusive, multidisciplinary efforts to be successful.

Anthropology has a key role to play here, in multiple ways. First, given the size and importance of global tourism, we urgently need more anthropological research, particularly in the domain of mass tourism (to complement the plethora of research on more exceptional, small-scale projects and products). The knowledge and insights these studies produce need to be widely shared, both inside and outside academia. Second, anthropologists must become more actively involved in the various steps of sustainable tourism planning and development. A comprehensive anthropological approach will help policymakers as well as tourism planners and managers to pay equal attention to the social, environmental, and economic aspects of sustainability. Finally, it is high time for mainstream anthropology to become aware of the important role that the discipline’s knowledge production has historically played (and is still playing) in shaping tourism imaginaries and to reflect on what a proper reaction to this would be. Doing this would make anthropology matter... even more.

Online sources

IY2017: <http://www.tourism4development2017.org>

Sustainable Development of Tourism: <http://sdt.unwto.org>

Further readings

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